Dear New College Students,

When I was asked to share with you a book that influenced my life and academic career, I had to go back not only to a specific book but to an event as well. The book was *The Diary of a Young Girl* written by Anne Frank during the two years her family was in hiding during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. I probably would not have read the book then had it not been for an event that took place a couple years earlier and which would come to mark much of my life and my decision to become a historian. In 1985, just a few days after my tenth birthday, the remains of Josef Mengele were found in Brazil, my home country. Mengele was a German SS officer and physician at the Auschwitz concentration camp during the Second World War, where he performed deadly experiments on prisoners. As you can imagine, this discovery was frontpage news in Brazil for weeks; every newspaper and magazine had in-depth articles about the horrors of the Holocaust in general and Auschwitz in particular. As a ten year-old girl sheltered from war and violence, I was mesmerized and tried to read it all. I did not ask questions to my parents because I was afraid they would confiscate my newspapers and tell me it was not information suitable for my age. So I tried to find answers on my own.

It was in that context that I came across Anne Frank’s diary. It is difficult to describe how I felt about a book that I read nearly 30 years ago. I related to Anne - I was about the same age and I also wrote a diary. I wondered how I would behave if I found myself in the same situation as Anne. I learned that Anne and her family had to hide because they were Jews and that the Nazis were rounding up all the Jews and sending them to concentration camps such as the camp in which Josef Mengele performed experiments and decided who lived or died. None of it made any sense to me. It was perhaps my first real awareness of history. It was also when I realized that history was not static, simply something that happened in the past and that we must recall. I realized that history was created and that we did not have all the answers. Every book or new piece of information I read about the Holocaust contributed one piece of the puzzle but none of them, in themselves, provided the single answer to the question that most consumed me: why? Why would neighbours suddenly turn against each other?

My search for those answers led me further and further back in time. More specifically, it led me to the Middle Ages and one of its most multicultural corners: the Iberian Peninsula. I have spent the last thirteen years researching relations between Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula. I’m still pulling the threads of that first encounter with terror at 10 years old. I have looked at moments in which Christians, Jews, and Muslims engaged peacefully in the business of everyday life and I have looked at moments in which this peace was broken by violence. Perhaps because my first experience with history was through the lives of Josef Mengele and Anne Frank, history has always been for me about human beings and their fears and desires. I have found that the answers we seek do not come from a single source.

My main advice to you as you embark on your own journey through higher education is to allow yourself to be curious and to follow your own curiosity. Your questions will be different from mine. The events that shape your life will be different from those that shaped my life. You may not find all the answers you seek but you will discover that the answers you seek are seldom simple, which is an important lesson for the twenty-first century.

All the best,

Alexandra Guerson