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Advice from the 16th Century: What Copernicus Can Teach Us Today

Bestselling author Dava Sobel shares insights from her most recent subject as part of the President's Distinguished Speakers Series



March 28, 2012 | Brian E. Clark

It's no stretch to draw a parallel between the story of writer Dava Sobel and that of her most recent subject, Renaissance astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus.

Having developed his paradigm-shifting theory that the sun –not the earth, as widely believed – was in fact the center of the universe at an early age, Copernicus held back on sharing his epiphany until late in life, plagued by a fear that his contemporaries would laugh.

Early in her own 40-year career as a science journalist, Sobel devised a plan to tell the story of the circumstances that pushed Copernicus to publish shortly before his death in 1543 in the form of a dramatic play. But immersed in a line of work in which “making things up was frowned upon,” she lacked the courage to use fictional dialogue as her mechanism of choice.

Some 30 years later, Sobel willed herself to write the play, which many revisions later formed the basis for her 2011 bestseller, “A More Perfect Heaven.” On Tuesday evening, the author shared that story as part of the President's Distinguished Speakers Series at Roger Williams University.

“We all think today, ‘Everybody knows the earth goes around the sun, of course,’” Sobel said. “But Copernicus was the person who turned the universe inside out. And that ability to see the world a different way, at the time he saw it that way, is a stunning achievement.”

Since Sobel published her first book, “Longitude,” in 1995, she, too, has been lauded for her ability to relate the intricacies of science and history in a style that captivates mainstream readers. She followed up with “Galileo’s Daughter” in 1999 and subsequently, “The Planets” in 2005.

More than her own talents, Sobel credits her passion for science and her focus on finding new stories to tell and new ways to tell them as the biggest factors in her far-reaching career.

“Just being interested is your passport to extraordinary resources,” Sobel said. “Call up a world expert and if you are really interested in what that person does, you might get hours of that person’s time, willingly. Your interest can welcome you to places you never thought you’d be.”

The Distinguished Speakers presentation followed a full day on campus for Sobel, who conducted a series of master classes with communications students studying feature writing and digital journalism, among other topics. She shared insights on everything from the haphazardness of her own career trajectory to her disdain for Twitter to embracing the feedback and criticism that finds its way to all writers.

And, of course, pushing the boundaries of her comfort zone – just like Copernicus, centuries ago.

“Copernicus is often blamed for taking us out of the center – that he somehow made the earth and humanity somehow less important,” Sobel said. “But the center was really not the best place to be; it was a sinkhole of change and death and decay. Now we know that we’re not even made of the stuff that constitutes most of the universe. So is that the ultimate diminishment? Or does it make us really special for being rare?”

“It’s all in the way you look at it, isn’t it?”

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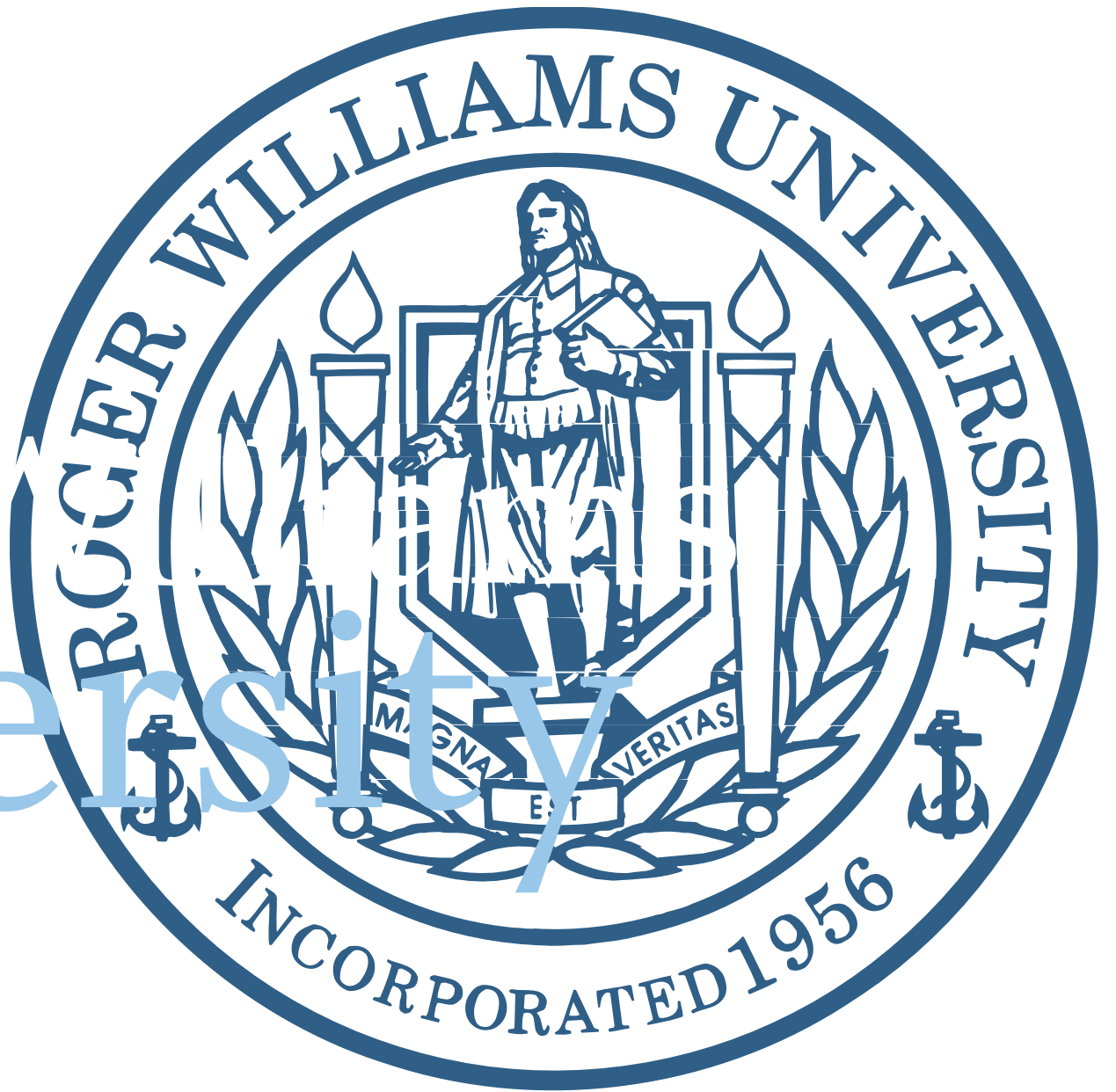
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