Editorial/Opinion

Some Sunny Subjects

Center Of Attention

The universe was a curious place before Nicolaus Copernicus: The earth stood still and around it revolved the sun, the planets, and all the stars. No one doubted that man lived at the center of creation.

Next Friday, February 19, marks the 509th anniversary of the birth of the Polish astronomer who challenged these ancient assumptions. Other leading astronomers of the time, such as Tycho Brahe, found it difficult to believe that the earth could move about the sun. "How could the fat and lazy earth be capable of motions ascribed to it by Copernicus?" Brahe asked.

Bertrand Russell wrote in History of Western Philosophy (1945) that Copernicus' theory--for which the astronomer offered no hard proof--had a "revolutionary effect on the cosmic imagination." It was an era of great discovery in many fields. Copernicus was 20 years old when Columbus discovered America, 25 when Vasco da Gama sailed around Africa to reach India, and 49 when Magellan's last ship returned from a voyage around the world, dispelling forever the notion that the earth was flat.

Today, Copernicus is hailed as a leading figure of the Renaissance. In addition to being an astronomer, he was a physician, a cartographer, and an expert on the circulation of money. He received most of his education in Italy, where he studied canon law, mathematics, medicine, and astronomy. The Ptolemaic doctrines of the day soon began to conflict with Copernicus' own observations.

From 1513 to 1530, Copernicus compiled his findings and refined the theory toward which they led. The result was his study, titled "On the Revolution of the Heavenly Bodies." It began by praising the "godlike circular movements of the world, the course of the stars, their magnitudes, distances, risings and settings, and the causes of other celestial phenomena..."

But it was not until March 1543 that this treatise--privately circulated for years in manuscript form--appeared in print in Nuremberg. A copy reportedly reached the aged astronomer as he lay on his deathbed.

Copernicus' work was dedicated to Pope Paul III (1534-1550), and at first it escaped pontifical condemnation. Protestant leaders, however, jumped on it immediately. John Calvin asked, "Who will venture to place the authority of Copernicus above that of the Holy Spirit?" Martin Luther thundered, "This fool *will turn the art of astronomy upside down,* but the Scripture shows and tells another lesson, where Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, and not the earth." Even after proof to the contrary by Galileo Galilei in 1616, the Vatican judged the views of Copernicus to be "foolish and absurd, philosophically false and formally heretical." Copernicus' book remained on the Papal Index of forbidden literature until 1835.

By replacing the earth with the sun as the focus of the solar system, Copernicus laid the foundations of modern science. Not only astronomy, but physics and philosophy were transformed by the new order of the universe. Half a millenium later, on his 509th birthday, it is beyond dispute that Copernicus speeded the transition from the religiosity of the Middle Ages to the rationalism and modern science of today.

--William J. Neil

Overshadowing Mr. Groundhog

Except for residents of bona fide snow country, winter is a season to be endured, not enjoyed. But the suffering need not last three full months; when winter is halfway, it is permissible to dream of spring.

That, certainly, is one purpose of Groundhog Day, observed annually on February 2. Legend has it that winter will continue for six more weeks if the groundhog, or woodchuck, sees his shadow and scurries back to hibernate. If he doesn't, we can all look forward to a mild tailing off of winter and an early spring.

Actually, though, it is a rare groundhog that is up and about in early February of any year. The species usually goes underground in September and hibernates until March. But the original American colonists didn't know that when they chose the woodchuck as a substitute for the European hedgehog, which was up and about in early February, and which did its shadow-casting on Candelmas Day, February 2. The hedgehog is a lighter sleeper and may venture from his burrow on any unseasonably warm winter day.

But perhaps the most heartfelt mid-winter observance of them all takes place in the Arctic region of Norway. Last Monday, February 8, the town of Narvik mounted its annual Sun Pageant to mark the sun's reappearance in the far-northern skies after two months of total darkness. From that day forward the period of light will gradually increase until, in midsummer, there will be 24 hours a day of sunshine.

Area residents would be well-advised to keep our Norwegian friends in mind as we bundle up and prepare for yet another month or so of frosty conditions. Because while we are often quick to complain of the biting winds, bitter temperatures, and annoying snowfalls which frequent the area, we are often just as quick to overlook that one great gift of spiritual and emotional warmth which we take for granted nearly every day of the year--the sun.

For no matter how dismal or bleak the winter season may seem to us Pennsylvanians, its dreariness would be intensified thousandfold if we had to endure it in a cold, uninterrupted darkness which descended upon us for half the year.

--William J. Neil

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