

from The Autobiography • from Poor Richard's Almanack



Benjamin Franklin

(1706–1790)

From his teen years until his retirement at forty-two, Benjamin Franklin worked as a printer. Franklin got his start as an apprentice to his brother,

James Franklin, a Boston printer. By the time he was sixteen, he was not only printing, but writing parts of his brother's newspaper. Using the name "Silence Dogood," Franklin satirized daily life and politics in Boston.

When he was seventeen, Franklin left Boston and traveled to Philadelphia, intending to open his own print shop. This move gave birth to one of Franklin's most popular and enduring contributions to American culture, *Poor Richard's Almanack*. This annual publication, which Franklin published from 1732 to 1757, contained information, observations, and advice and was very popular with readers of his day.

The "Write Reputation" Just as he had signed "Silence Dogood" to the letters he wrote for his brother's paper, Franklin created for the *Almanack* a fictitious author/editor, the chatty Richard Saunders (and his wife, Bridget). Although *Poor Richard's* early appearances in the *Almanack* present him as a dull and foolish astronomer, his character developed over the years, becoming more thoughtful, pious, and humorous. Despite the fact that Franklin published under a pseudonym, the *Almanack* earned him a reputation as a talented writer.

Secret to Success Like most almanacs, Franklin's contained practical information about the calendar, the sun and moon, and the weather. *Poor Richard's Almanack* also featured a

wealth of homespun sayings and observations, many of which are still quoted today. It was these aphorisms, with their characteristic moral overtones, that made the *Almanack* a bestseller. Franklin put an aphorism at the top or bottom of most pages of his almanacs. The wit and brevity of these sayings allowed Franklin to include many moral messages in very little space, while also entertaining his readers.

Man of Science When Franklin was forty-two, he retired from the printing business to devote himself to science. He proved to be as successful a scientist as he had been a printer. Over the course of his lifetime, Franklin was responsible for inventing the lightning rod, bifocals, and a new type of stove; confirming the laws of electricity; and contributing to the scientific understanding of earthquakes and ocean currents. In spite of all these achievements, Franklin is best remembered for his career in politics.

Statesman and Diplomat Franklin played an important role in drafting the Declaration of Independence, enlisting French support during the Revolutionary War, negotiating a peace treaty with Britain, and drafting the United States Constitution. In his later years, he was ambassador first to England and then to France. Even before George Washington, Franklin was considered to be "the father of his country."

The Story Behind the Story Franklin wrote the first section of *The Autobiography* in 1771 at the age of sixty-five. At the urging of friends, he wrote three more sections—the last shortly before his death—but succeeded in bringing the account of his life only to the years 1757 to 1759. Though never completed, his *Autobiography*, filled with his opinions and suggestions, provides not only a record of his achievements but also an understanding of his character.

from *The Autobiography*

Benjamin Franklin

Background Benjamin Franklin arrived in the city of Philadelphia in 1723 at the age of 17. He knew no one, and he had little money and fewer possessions. However, his accomplishments shaped the city in ways that are still visible today. He helped establish Philadelphia's public library and fire department, as well as its first college. In addition, through his efforts, Philadelphia became the first city in the colonies to have street lights. While Franklin was a brilliant man, some of his success can be attributed to sheer self-discipline, which is evident in this excerpt from *The Autobiography*.



Quaker Meeting, Unidentified Artist, Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

▲ Critical Viewing Relate this picture to *The Autobiography*. What does each suggest about discipline and order? [Draw Conclusions]

It was about this time I conceived the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wished to live without committing any fault at any time; I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into. As I knew, or thought I knew, what was right and wrong, I did not see why I might not always do the one and avoid the other. But I soon found I had undertaken a task of more difficulty than I had imagined. While my care was employed in guarding against one fault, I was often surprised by another; habit took the advantage of inattention; inclination was sometimes too strong for reason. I concluded, at length, that the mere speculative conviction that it was our interest to be completely virtuous was not sufficient to prevent our slipping; and that the contrary habits must be broken, and good ones acquired and established, before we can have any dependence on a steady, uniform rectitude of conduct. For this purpose I therefore contrived the following method.

In the various enumerations of the moral virtues I had met with in my reading, I found the catalog more or less numerous, as different writers included more or fewer ideas under the same name. Temperance, for example, was by some confined to eating and drinking, while by others it was extended to mean the moderating every other pleasure, appetite, inclination, or passion, bodily or mental, even to our avarice and ambition. I proposed to myself, for the sake of clearness, to use rather more names, with fewer ideas annexed to each, than a few names with more ideas; and I included under thirteen names of virtues all that at that time occurred to me as necessary or desirable, and annexed to each a short precept, which fully expressed the extent I gave to its meaning.

These names of virtues, with their precepts, were:

1. **TEMPERANCE** Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.
2. **SILENCE** Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself; avoid trifling conversation.
3. **ORDER** Let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time.
4. **RESOLUTION** Resolve to perform what you ought; perform without fail what you resolve.
5. **FRUGALITY** Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself; i.e., waste nothing.
6. **INDUSTRY** Lose no time; be always employed in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions.
7. **SINCERITY** Use no hurtful deceit; think innocently and justly, and, if you speak, speak accordingly.
8. **JUSTICE** Wrong none by doing injuries, or omitting the benefits that are your duty.
9. **MODERATION** Avoid extremes; forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve.
10. **CLEANLINESS** Tolerate no uncleanness in body, clothes, or habitation.

Vocabulary Builder

arduous (är' jōō es) *adj.*
difficult

Literary Analysis

Autobiography What does Franklin's goal of moral "perfection" suggest about the values of the time period?

Vocabulary Builder

avarice (av' ə ris) *n.* greed

Reading Check

What prompts Franklin to make his list?

11. **TRANQUILLITY** Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable.
12. **CHASTITY**
13. **HUMILITY** Imitate Jesus and Socrates*.

My intention being to acquire the *habitude* of all these virtues, I judged it would be well not to distract my attention by attempting the whole at once but to fix it on one of them at a time; and, when I should be master of that, then to proceed to another, and so on, till I should have gone through the thirteen; and, as the previous acquisition of some might facilitate the acquisition of certain others, I arranged them with that view, as they stand above. *Temperance* first, as it tends to procure that coolness and clearness of head, which is so necessary where constant vigilance was to be kept up, and guard maintained against the unremitting attraction of ancient habits and the force of perpetual temptations. This being acquired and established, *Silence* would be more easy; and my desire being to gain knowledge at the same time that I improved in virtue, and considering that in conversation it was obtained rather by the use of the ears than of the tongue, and therefore wishing to break a habit I was getting into of prattling, punning, and joking, which only made me acceptable to trifling company, I gave *Silence* the second place. This and the next, *Order*, I expected would allow me more time for attending to my project and my studies. *Resolution*, once become habitual, would keep me firm in my endeavors to obtain all the subsequent virtues; *Frugality* and *Industry* freeing me from my remaining debt and producing affluence and independence, would make more easy the practice of *Sincerity* and *Justice*, etc., etc. Conceiving then, that, agreeably to the advice of Pythagoras¹ in his *Golden Verses*, daily examination would be necessary, I contrived the following method for conducting that examination.

I made a little book, in which I allotted a page for each of the virtues. I ruled each page with red ink, so as to have seven columns, one for each day of the week, marking each column with a letter for the day. I crossed these columns with thirteen red lines, marking the beginning of each line with the first letter of one of the virtues, on which line and in its proper column I might mark, by a little black spot, every fault I found upon examination to have been committed respecting that virtue upon that day.

I determined to give a week's strict attention to each of the virtues successively. Thus, in the first week, my great guard was to avoid every² the least offense against *Temperance*, leaving the other virtues to

1. **Pythagoras** (pi thag' ə ras) Greek philosopher and mathematician who lived in the sixth century B.C.
2. every even.

Literature in Context

History Connection

◆ Socrates

A Greek philosopher and teacher who lived in the fifth century B.C., Socrates pioneered the kind of self-reflection that Benjamin Franklin undertakes with his moral improvement plan. Socrates believed that only through self-knowledge can people achieve virtue. Though he led many Athenians in searching for truth and defining rules for moral conduct, Socrates' criticism of the government resulted in his execution.



Connect to the Literature

Do you see any humor or irony in Franklin's plan for achieving humility—namely, by imitating Jesus and Socrates? Explain.

Vocabulary Builder

vigilance (vij' ə ləns) *n.*
watchfulness

Reading Strategy

Drawing Conclusions
What does Franklin's methodical approach, described in this passage, suggest about his dedication to his plan for self-improvement?

their ordinary chance, only marking every evening the faults of the day. Thus, if in the first week I could keep my first line, marked T. clear of spots, I supposed the habit of that virtue so much strengthened, and its opposite weakened, that I might venture extending my attention to include the next, and for the following week keep both lines clear of spots. Proceeding thus to the last, I could go through a course complete in thirteen weeks, and four courses in a year. And like him who, having a garden to weed, does not attempt to eradicate all the bad herbs at once, which would exceed his reach and his strength, but works on one of the beds at a time, and, having accomplished the first, proceeds to a second, so I should have, I hoped, the encouraging pleasure of seeing on my pages the progress I made in virtue, by clearing successively my lines of their spots, till in the end, by a number of courses, I should be happy in viewing a clean book, after a thirteen weeks' daily examination. . . .

The precept of *Order* requiring that *every part of my business should have its allotted time*, one page in my little book contained the following scheme of employment for the twenty-four hours of a natural day.

THE MORNING.

Question. What good shall I do this day?

- 5 Rise, wash, and
- 6 address *Powerful Goodness!* Contrive day's business, and take the resolution of the day;
- 7 prosecute the present study, and breakfast.

8

9 Work.

10

11

NOON.

- 12 Read, or overlook my accounts, and dine.

2

3 Work.

4

5

EVENING.

Question. What good have I done today?

- 6 Put things in their places. Supper.
- 7 Music or diversion, or conversation.
- 8 Conversation. Examination of
- 9 the day.

10

11

12

NIGHT.


- 1 Sleep.

2

3

4

Literary Analysis
Autobiography What insight into Franklin's character does this list provide?

 **Reading Check**
 Which virtue did Franklin hope to achieve by planning each day's activities?

I entered upon the execution of this plan for self-examination, and continued it with occasional intermissions for some time. I was surprised to find myself so much fuller of faults than I had imagined; but I had the satisfaction of seeing them diminish. To avoid the trouble of renewing now and then my little book, which, by scraping out the marks on the paper of old faults to make room for new ones in a new course, became full of holes, I transferred my tables and precepts to the ivory leaves of a memorandum book, on which the lines were drawn with red ink that made a durable stain, and on those lines I marked my faults with a black-lead pencil, which marks I could easily wipe out with a wet sponge. After a while I went through one course only in a year, and afterward only one in several years, till at length I omitted them entirely, being employed in voyages and business abroad, with a multiplicity of affairs that interfered; but I always carried my little book with me.

My scheme of *Order* gave me the most trouble; and I found that, though it might be practicable where a man's business was such as to leave him the disposition of his time, that of a journeyman printer, for instance, it was not possible to be exactly observed by a master, who must mix with the world and often receive people of business at their own hours. *Order*, too, with regard to places for things, papers, etc., I found extremely difficult to acquire. I had not been early accustomed to it, and, having an exceeding good memory, I was not so sensible of the inconvenience attending want of method. This article, therefore, cost me so much painful attention, and my faults in it vexed me so much, and I made so little progress in amendment, and had such frequent relapses, that I was almost ready to give up the attempt, and content myself with a faulty character in that respect, like the man who, in



Benjamin Franklin as a Young Printer in Philadelphia, The Granger Collection, New York

▲ Critical Viewing

What does the expression on Franklin's face suggest about his personality? [Infer]

Vocabulary Builder

disposition (dis' pə zish' ən)
n. management

buying an ax of a smith, my neighbor, desired to have the whole of its surface as bright as the edge. The smith consented to grind it bright for him if he would turn the wheel; he turned, while the smith pressed the broad face of the ax hard and heavily on the stone, which made the turning of it very fatiguing. The man came every now and then from the wheel to see how the work went on, and at length would take his ax as it was, without farther grinding. "No," said the smith, "turn on, turn on; we shall have it bright by and by; as yet, it is only speckled." "Yes," says the man, "but I think I like a speckled ax best." And I believe this may have been the case with many, who, having, for want of some such means as I employed, found the difficulty of obtaining good and breaking bad habits in other points of vice and virtue, have given up the struggle, and concluded that "a speckled ax was best"; for something, that pretended to be reason, was every now and then suggesting to me that such extreme nicety as I exacted of myself might be a kind of foppery in morals, which, if it were known, would make me ridiculous; that a perfect character might be attended with the inconvenience of being envied and hated; and that a benevolent man should allow a few faults in himself, to keep his friends in countenance.

In truth, I found myself incorrigible with respect to *Order*; and now I am grown old, and my memory bad, I feel very sensibly the want of it. But, on the whole, though I never arrived at the perfection I had been so ambitious of obtaining, but fell far short of it, yet I was, by the endeavor, a better and a happier man than I otherwise should have been if I had not attempted it; as those who aim at perfect writing by imitating the engraved copies, though they never reached the wished-for excellence of those copies, their hand is mended by the endeavor, and is tolerable while it continues fair and legible.

It may be well my posterity should be informed that to this little artifice, with the blessing of God, their ancestor owed the constant felicity of his life, down to his seventy-ninth year in which this is written. What reverses may attend the remainder is in the hand of Providence; but, if they arrive, the reflection on past happiness enjoyed ought to help his bearing them with more resignation. To *Temperance* he ascribes his long-continued health, and what is still left to him of a good constitution; to *Industry* and *Frugality*, the early easiness of his circumstances and acquisition of his fortune, with all that knowledge that enabled him to be a useful citizen, and obtained for him some degree of reputation among the learned; to *Sincerity* and *Justice*, the confidence of his country, and the honorable employs it conferred upon him; and to the joint influence of the whole mass of the virtues, even in the imperfect state he was able to acquire them, all that evenness of temper, and that cheerfulness in conversation, which makes his company still sought for, and agreeable even to his younger acquaintance. I hope, therefore, that some of my descendants may follow the example and reap the benefit.

Literary Analysis

Autobiography What does this anecdote about the man with the ax reveal about Franklin's sense of humor?

Vocabulary Builder

foppery (fəp'ər ē) *n.*
foolishness

Vocabulary Builder

felicity (fə'lɪs'ɪtē) *n.*
happiness; bliss

✓ Reading Check

Did Franklin consider his moral improvement plan successful? Explain.