

Ben Franklin

In a way, this whole book is all Ben Franklin's fault. Early on, I guess during the time we lived in Midland, Texas because (everlasting thanks to my mother for this) we would go to the public library there, and I'd come out with an armload of books for the next week. An enthusiastic reader, I would frequently go through every single title of an author once I'd discovered them, and I eventually began to run through the whole fiction section. So sometime in there I started working through the biographies, where I picked up Ben Franklin's *Autobiography*, a rather thick, somewhat intimidating volume.

In the autobiography, written when Franklin was 65, he relates that he resolved early on in his life to notice things in others that he admired, and try to emulate those actions in his own life. That seemed like a real reasonable and obvious tactic for self improvement; after all, it is a key to liking yourself to admire yourself for your "virtuous" actions.

Taking on that plan for self improvement myself meant basically that I would (at least somewhat) consciously try to do things that I'd thought favorable in others. Certainly some were much more conscious models of behavior than others. Over time, I have accumulated a list of role models great and small (in effect), and that list is mostly the same as the "fathers" in this book. There may well be some I have yet to identify, but that remains to be seen.

My favorite Franklin story is the one he related in the *Autobiography*, demonstrating the pitfalls of a "perfect" plan for self improvement: he had an intricate system that charted his daily performance on a number of the boy scout type virtues, temperance, economy, etc. What he realized, much to his chagrin, was that plan of improvement, if ever actually accomplished, would result in perfection in all aspects of personal behavior. Except for one: it would also result in a lack of humility. There would be pride in the measured achievement of "perfection". At that point he abandoned the effort.

Having pride in being "perfect" is an insidious sort of personal conceit that is very seductive but ultimately betrays. Franklin understood the joke and apparently decided to give it up, and live it up some. When he was ambassador (Plenipotentiary Ambassador, which meant then that he was generally authorized to conduct any and all business for our young country) to France, he reportedly was quite the party animal, "disporting" himself amongst the lusty French women high and low, supposedly having a number of illegitimate children. He probably needed relief from the tension of the high stakes diplomacy games of the day; he was sucking up to the French in an official capacity, quite successfully, and meantime acting as broker for privateer booty which also helped to finance the war.

The young United States of America had a number of tame pirates that regularly plundered the British colonial freighters. The captured boats were then either sold on the French market or converted into pirate ships (uh, privateers that is), and sent on their way to repeat the cycle under a new flag. All in all, a sterling example of free market capitalism you could say.

The point is that even Franklin had his imperfections, and he evidently decided after due consideration, to just accept them as such, and was willing to exercise an essentially flawed tool such as the privateer system, and himself, to the greater good of the country.

I occasionally lay that story on my Christian brethren by way of saying that I think they sometimes have too much pride in being saved, being the perfect Christian, being the civic citizen presence, whatever kind of overweening, obnoxious behavior I am trying to subtly criticize. More of a stiletto than a club you might say, but still a kill. They usually get the point.

So this whole book is the semi-detailed story of my personal role models: the grandfathers, the uncles, the older male friends, and the little stories behind the "rules" that I learned from them. Some times the rule is nothing obvious, just a life well lived; in others, a tidy aphorism resulted.

I didn't at all consciously have that in mind, but it seems to have turned out that way in a funny turn of events, the kind of serendipitous happenstance you delightedly discover once in a while. It's usually true that you have to make your own mistakes to really catch on to some things in life, but my hope is that I can help out by relaying my own observations to others that the beneficial lessons I've learned from these role models will be re-learned to the profit of the person directly and perhaps to society at large indirectly. At best.

One of my own overarching principles of life is that our personal goal in life should be to make a positive contribution, to humanity, to the species, to the planet, to the gene pool, etc. Nothing new; John Kennedy said something like "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask instead what you can do for your country." He probably borrowed the idea himself and re-phrased it. There really is nothing new under the sun. We just keep doing archeology, re-inventing the wheel, re-discovering things we used to know. Oh well, it's better than being bored I suppose.

Franklin was certainly an exemplar of personal excellence who became a giant contributor in US history. Hard to say if he would have been as important if he'd not been working consciously on his own self improvement, but altogether, not a bad role model in any event.

The point is that you have to make personal improvements before you can help society; otherwise the help flows the other way, from society to you. You have to get your own stuff together before you can really spare any energy or effort for others, a lesson learned elsewhere. If you acquire enough good role models, it can't help but help you in that task.

Back in my student activist days, (Hunger Issues; we organized Food Day; CURE dealt with prison reform), I worked with mixed groups, mixed in the sense of folks from very different backgrounds and cultures who had come together for our do-gooder purpose cause. Over time, I found that some of the most eager, idealistic participants were the most apt to overcommit, and ultimately flake out on whatever you'd counted on them doing. That led to my making the crack one time: "I'd rather have a concerned conservative than a flakey liberal" when trying to get something done. The typical conservative could be a pain in some of the more philosophical discussions, but couldn't be beat for doing the bread and butter things you have to do as an activist organization (setting up a computer, mailing lists, mailing production, etc.).

That led to a realization that not only does politics make strange bedfellows, and that those coalitions are not only necessary, but a very positive thing.

So I have taken breaks in my volunteer work, and have done some things that seem relatively frivolous compared to some of the really big ticket goals, e.g., like solving world hunger. I made a lot of progress with my personal goals, things like paying off debts, getting a master's degree, writing books. The more I do, the more I discover more things I could do, so as time goes on, the choices get tougher in terms of making time for various interests or projects.

When do you do something that superficially seems to be selfish, is it still the right thing in the context of your long term goals?

I've been told I think too much; maybe so, but it seems like the answer is "it depends".

I was persuaded that it is indeed the right thing to do (at least sometimes) by a politician back in Austin, Tx.: former mayor Jeff Friedman, who I'd met while alternately covering city hall (actually I assigned myself to just observe the city council meeting every week, just to watch democracy in action -- which implicitly demonstrates my political naivete in those days -- but not actually as the "beat reporter") for the (UT Austin) student paper, the Daily Texan. Since I was there anyway and knew the drill, I wound up being the representative for the coalition of hunger groups, addressing the council from time to time on their behalf. One year we persuaded them to make Food Day an official proclaimed day in Austin, with all the usual pompous phrases "thereunto appertaining".

I went to the podium in my usual student garb of shorts and t-shirt, beard, long hair, etc., and began to harangue them about how many thousands of people were dying of hunger every day, every minute, around the world. The main point of Food Day was to raise consciousness on the issue generally, but there were other components, such as breakfast programs for poor kids, nutrition, breastfeeding, etc.)

The city really didn't have much involvement at all, so it couldn't hurt to raise THEIR consciousness some anyway, and if it came to voting for funding, might make the difference in the final vote tally. (Some cities probably fund breakfast programs directly, for instance, but there are still lots of hungry kids.)

I was put in my place by the next guy up, who took the council to task over the Armenian martyrs (some millions killed by the Turks during WW I), which to my chagrin I'd never heard of. What did he think they were going to do? Not sure, but I suppose at any rate he raised their consciousness; for sure he raised mine.

Years later, Friedman responded to some wild idea of mine that I'd proposed by mail, by saying, look, you have to get your own stuff together before you can help anybody else. As it turned out, that not only put me in my place, but ultimately assuaged whatever guilt (for a while at least) I might have felt for letting the hunger movement go for a while.

By the late '80's, I was in Dallas, and once again hooked up with a hunger movement, this time within my church. What I do is little enough, helping to feed the homeless once a month, but every little bit helps. The big difference in this effort is that there is also a distinct effort to help them spiritually, and in job skills, etc., in addition to just feeding them.

Is it enough? Never. I personally came to the conclusion early that the dictum "better to teach a man to fish than to simply give him one" is the key, so improving what are now

called “life skills” seems the best payoff. On a personal level, the issue is so broad and deep that it’s hard to do anything and keep doing it in the face of what looks like certain ultimate failure without becoming cynical, depressed or both.

In the corporate world we often try to distinguish between plans that are possible and those that are too big, too ambitious, by tagging the latter as “trying to solve world hunger”, code for “hopeless”.

In counterpoint, someone put it years ago, “we don’t have a world food problem, we have a food distribution problem”, moving the problem from the impossible list to the solvable list.

It’s still there. “Think globally, but act locally” is one of the best slogans ever, and pretty much lays out the challenge to us all. We all simply have to do what we can, and try to keep expanding the definition of what’s possible.

In many areas, that’s a lesson from Ben Franklin too. Most people, if asked, could think of a few things he is noted for: the early experiments with electricity (flying the kite in the lightning storm) or inventing the Franklin stove. Actually the list of remarkable achievements is so long that it truly is altogether amazing; some are well known: he started the first fire departments, the first public libraries, invented bifocals, published Poor Richard’s Almanac, etc.

Others are more obscure: one of the more interesting ones is that he essentially invented the idea of paper money, starting with the idea that the young United States, though poor in liquid money (i.e., gold and silver), had a whole lot of real estate, which could be used to underwrite paper money. It actually took many more years for the US to go off the gold standard, but the basis for today’s paper currency is still arguably the same as Franklin’s original idea. Giving the land away in the massive homesteading of the frontier effectively got all that money in motion, ultimately made it liquid before long, effectively proving the point.

He came up with Daylight Savings time as a pure energy conservation tactic, rooted in his early family’s enterprise of candlemaking, simply by figuring out that you would burn fewer candles if the (arbitrary) notion of the hour were shifted during the spring and summer months since it would be light “later in the day” automatically.

My own suspicion is that he was a much more major contributor to the country’s early documents, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, etc., than is generally credited to him, preferring to let Jefferson take the limelight in the interests of unity and harmony. Similarly, the great compromise over representation (e.g., the Senators two per state, the House proportional on population) is altogether Franklinesque in cleverness.

Of course, he was very old by then, globally admired, and really didn’t need the praise nor more fame, and would never run for president. Nonetheless, it’s still instructive that he didn’t let his ego get in the way of acting for the good of the country. His personal altruism, coupled with an extraordinary energy and wisdom is an example for everyone to emulate.