

Faith of a Modern Man

On President's Day, Americans remember the founders and framers of our nation, but seldom give thought to the greatest of them all, because he never occupied the White House, More's the pity. Though he was almost forty years older than Thomas Jefferson and John Adams when the three sat down together to write the Declaration of Independence, Ben Franklin seems younger and a little more hip than either one. George Washington seemed austere even to his contemporaries, usually addressed formally as "Your Excellency." In contrast, the avuncular Franklin went by nicknames, just plain Ben or even, as Adams called him with rueful affection, "the Old Conjuror."

A lifelong tinkerer and inventor, Franklin would have been equally amused and amazed at the smartl phones and other gadgets that are so much a part of the twenty-first century. No prude, he had a matter-of-fact attitude toward sexuality that would have made him right at home in these free-wheeling times. Celebrated by his contemporaries as a revolutionary who "stole lightning from the skies and the scepter from tyrants," he wore his greatness with a casual air that never forgot its humble origins. He was equally comfortable with commoners and kings, less a man of the eighteenth century than a man for the ages.

The name Franklin came from a Middle English word that meant "freeman." The term applied to the middling classes that established themselves in the late Middle Ages, neither serfs nor titled aristocracy, but independent tradesmen and artisans who were able to acquire a bit of property and eventually a share of political power through their own native talent and their own hard toil. His distant ancestors were ardent Protestants, who during the Catholic reign of Queen Mary kept a banned English Bible tied to the underside of a stool, where it could be turned over on one's lap and read aloud when the coast was clear, then instantly hidden if necessary. By Ben's times, the family's zeal had cooled considerably, however. Though Franklin claimed in his Autobiography that it was "a desire to exercise their religion with freedom" that drew his ancestors to America, economic motives also played a role. Wages were two or three times higher in the New World than in England, and Josiah Franklin, Ben's father, went to work in Boston as a tallow chandler, rendering fat into soap and candles, profitable enough to enable him to raise seventeen children, but still not lucrative enough to take all his sons into the family business.

The original plan was to educate young Benjamin for the ministry. He was enrolled at the Boston Latin School to prepare him for Harvard and eventual

ordination. But either the cost of a Harvard degree proved too expensive, or more likely Josiah decided his son was insufficiently pious for his intended vocation. He may have noticed that young Ben found the long prayers at mealtime rather tedious, for example, for one fall day after his father had finished salting a barrel of provisions for the winter, his son had some practical advice. "I think, Father, if you were to say Grace over the whole cask--all at once--it would be a vast savings of time." Not long after, with only two years of formal schooling, it was decided that Benjamin should go to work as an apprentice with his older brother James, who'd set up shop as a printer.

Ben had been given a chance to apprentice in other trades. With his father, he'd walked through town, watching the silversmiths and barrel-makers and cutlers grinding their knives to see which line of work he liked best, and Franklin never lost his sense of kinship with the laboring classes--people who could make things with their hands or knew how to use tools. He appreciated skilled workmanship. It appealed to his practical side and laid the groundwork for the technological innovations that later came out of his own home workshop--the first electrical battery, bifocal spectacles and the Franklin stove. But young Benjamin settled on printing as a vocation, probably because of his love of books. Years later, a town in Massachusetts named itself after Franklin and asked him to donate a bell for the local church. The famous philanthropist told them to abandon the steeple and build a library instead, sending them "books instead of a bell, sense being preferable to sound."

Besides access to the written word, running a printing press gave Ben a chance to try his hand at composition, since printers in those days doubled as authors and journalists, not to mention pundits and publicists, caught up in all the fray of political debate. He taught himself to write, dissecting the works of essayists like Jonathan Swift and Joseph Addison, then trying his own hand on the same topic and learning from the results. Usually, he deemed his efforts poor in comparison with the originals. "But I sometimes had the pleasure of fancying that in certain particulars of small import I had been lucky enough to improve the method or the language, and this encouraged me to think that I might possibly in time come to be a tolerable English writer."

Not only was he tolerable. From his first appearances in print as Silence Dogood, writing as a sixteen year old boy under the assumed identity of a middle-aged matron, commenting in a gossipy way on the manners of her Massachusetts neighbors, on up through the 145 editions of *Poor Richard's Almanac* that appeared during his lifetime, Franklin became the most popular writer of his day,

developing a wry, folksy style of humor that became an American trademark. “Fish and visitors stink in three days,” was one of his adages. “Three can keep a secret if two of them are dead,” was another. His wit could be sharp or lighthearted by turns. While Jonathan Edwards, his exact contemporary, was writing sermons on “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” Franklin was composing mock scientific articles on the intelligent design of the human elbow. Had the Almighty placed the joint farther down the forearm, or farther up, it would be so difficult to lift a wineglass to our lips! Clearly the Creator approved of tipping, Franklin concluded with tongue-in-cheek.

He was not religious in the conventional sense. Attending one church, he was disgusted with the tone of the preaching whose aim seemed “rather to make us good Presbyterians than good citizens.” Such doctrinal disputations left him chilled. Sabbath observance was never a priority, although he did attend Unitarian services from time to time. In 1774, he was present at the founding of the Essex Street Chapel, London’s first Unitarian congregation. And when his friend and fellow scientist the Rev. Joseph Priestly was forced to flee Britain for the colonies, Franklin was an occasional worshiper at the Unitarian church that Priestly founded in Philadelphia. He himself was not averse to formal prayers. When the Constitutional Convention seemed close to breaking down into bickering in 1787, an elderly Franklin restored civility and gave a sense of gravitas to the gathering by invoking the “Father of Lights” to illuminate the proceedings. But he always believed that God was better served by good works than by any amount of intercessions or incantations. His was a practical creed and a simple one.

In a letter to Reverend Ezra Stiles of Yale near the end of his life, Franklin stated that “I believe in one God, Creator of the Universe. That he governs it by his providence. That he ought to be worshiped. That the most acceptable service we render to him is doing good to his other children.” These tenets he felt were essential to all religions; everything else was optional. As to Jesus, he commented,

I think the system of morals and his religion, as he left them to us, the best the world ever saw or is likely to see; but I apprehend it has received various corrupting changes, and I have, with most of the present dissenters in England, some doubts as to his divinity, though it is a question I do not dogmatize upon, having never studied it, and think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I expect soon an opportunity of knowing the truth with less trouble.

Franklin seemed little interested in metaphysical mysteries when there were so many more fascinating questions to be answered here on earth. As a young man, on his first trip across the Atlantic at the age of twenty, he'd studied the behavior of dolphins and calculated the ship's position using a lunar eclipse. He also made medical investigations and was one of the first to suggest that flu "may possibly be spread by contagion," anticipating the germ theory of disease. He can fairly be credited with founding the science of weather prediction, being the first to theorize that warm air rising in the south might create low pressure systems drawing winds from the north. Other minor researches ranged from charting the Gulf Stream to figuring the orbit of comets.

But of course it is for his discoveries regarding electricity that he is best remembered. Up until then, electricity had been thought to involve two types of fluids, vitreous and resinous. But Franklin unified the understanding of electrical phenomena, suggesting it could better be analyzed in terms of positive and negative charge, famously suggesting that lightning was no different from the flashing sparks that experimenters were beginning to generate by rubbing glass tubes in their laboratories. It was an enormous breakthrough.

Thunderbolts had plagued humankind time out of mind, and lightning was generally considered an expression of divine displeasure. Church bells pealed at the approach of clouds to placate danger, but the tolling wasn't at all effective. Belfries were blasted on a regular basis and bell-ringers were electrocuted by the hundreds. "The lightning seems to strike steeples of choice and at the very time the bells are ringing," Franklin noted, "yet still they continue to bless the new bells and jangle the old ones whenever it thunders. One would think it was now time to try some other trick."

Franklin never patented the lightning rod, nor did he expect to profit from any of his other creations. "As we enjoy great advantages from the invention of others, we should be glad of an opportunity to serve others by any invention of ours," he said sincerely. It was a sentiment in keeping with a long career of public service. The good that people can do singly is small in comparison to what they can do collectively, he always held. And so his greatest achievements were in organizing disparate individuals around a common purpose. Early on, he helped to establish the first circulating library in the New World. Not long after, he founded the University of Pennsylvania, the first non-sectarian institution of higher learning in America. He organized fire brigades and plans for lighting the city streets right down to the design of street lamps that would be cheap and easy to maintain. A

better street light might be a small convenience, he granted, but it was often through such little increments that human happiness progressed.

Good government was not least among the improvements that made for human felicity. And the better part of Franklin's life was spent in statecraft. Thanks to his up-by-the-bootstraps background, he was among the most egalitarian and least elitist of America's founders. He seldom wore the powdered wigs that were the fashion among highborn gentlemen, preferring instead the rustic fur cap of the backwoodsman. When his daughter, Sally, sent him a newspaper clipping about the Order of Cincinnati, a heredity title for officers of the American Revolution to be passed on to their descendants, Franklin ridiculed the idea. He favored direct elections, and by the end of his life had become a fierce opponent of slavery; his last public act was sponsoring a petition to Congress calling for abolition. He believed excessive wealth ought to be heavily taxed and put to work for the common good; a man had right to whatever possessions were necessary for his own maintenance, but beyond that, "all Property superfluous to such purposes is the Property of the Publick." Though he did as much as any man to gain the nation's independence by winning French support at the crucial moment, he regarded his role in brokering an end to the conflict with Britain as even more important, coining a phrase when he wrote that "there never was a good war or a bad peace."

He was a mediator, adept in the arts of reconciliation, a master of compromise, able to use charm and flattery to bring antagonists together to parley. For that, some called him a manipulator. But it was a style he had cultivated since his youth. Achieving his aims by indirection, he found, was the way to get things done.

He accomplished more than most men during his eighty-four years on earth. And though his faith in eternity might have seemed nebulous to some, it was enough to bring him comfort. So when his final illness struck, he was ready to depart. His daughter expressed the dutiful hope that he might recover and live many more years, but Franklin calmly replied, "I hope not," and his wish was quickly granted, his children and grandchildren nearby.

As a young man of little more than twenty-one, when he was just starting out in the world, Franklin had written his own epitaph. The words reflected the mixture of amusement and irony with which he approached most matters of faith:

The body of

**B. Franklin, Printer;
(Like the cover of an old book,
Its contents worn out,
and stripped of its lettering and gilding)
Lies here, food for worms.
But the work shall not be lost:
For it will, (as he believed) appear once more,
In a new and more elegant edition,
Revised and corrected
By the Author.**

But while Franklin acknowledged his divine author, he was also very much the author of his own life. Among his many inventions, the most amazing was himself. He was a first edition, an American original.