

The Amazing Legacy of Benjamin Franklin

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

The Rev. Alison Wohler

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While conversing with some friends at a local Philadelphia tavern, Benjamin Franklin was accosted by a drunken man who had overheard him discussing the Declaration of Independence. Slandering the document, the young fellow shouted at Franklin: “Aw, them words don’t mean nothing at all. Where’s all the happiness the document says it guarantees us?” The quick-witted statesman sympathetically replied, “My friend, the Declaration of Independence only guarantees the American people the right to pursue happiness. You have to catch it yourself!” (<http://library.thingquest.org/22254/frwit&h.htm>)

Franklin understood the nuances of the new innovation in government he and the other founding fathers were creating at the end of the 18th century. I think he also understood human nature.

The more I read in my research for this sermon, the more impressed I was with this man about whom I had only known the most common of facts. I would venture to say that history might have played out differently for this country if Benjamin Franklin had not been the person he was. It’s entirely possible that the formation of this unique republic might never have happened without the quiet intervention and enlightened ideas that Franklin brought to play. In some parallel universe, there is no United States of America. His life and legacy are entirely worth our attention, and perhaps especially so in our context as Unitarian Universalists. Let us adventure into the life of Benjamin Franklin, beyond the (dare I say) mere wit and wisdom of this morning’s Chalice Lighting quotations.

Ben Franklin was born on January 17, 1706, which means he was 70 years old when he signed the Declaration of Independence. He is the first of the founding fathers to turn 300.

Franklin grew up in Boston, one of the 20 children his father fathered among his various wives. Money was scarce. His formal education ended, of necessity, when he was 10, and at 12 he was apprenticed to his older brother’s printing business. There is an interesting story about this time in his life that portends of his canny and prodigious wisdom. It seems that his brother would not allow Ben, at age 15, to submit items to the newspaper he had started, so Benjamin invented a certain Mrs. Silence Dogood who was ostensibly a middle-age widow, and under whose name he wrote. “The letters were published in the paper and became a subject of conversation around town. Neither James (Ben’s brother and publisher) nor the [paper’s] readers were aware of the ruse” – for a while anyway. Interesting name: Mrs. Silence Dogood. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benjamin_Franklin)

At 17, Franklin ran away to Philadelphia where he worked in various printing shops until he was able to set up a printing house of his own and by age 24 became the publisher of a newspaper called The Pennsylvania Gazette. My Wikipedia source says that he “contrived” his way to this position and indicated that it was a combination of his commentary and “a great deal of savvy about cultivating a positive image of an industrious and intellectual young man” that helped him get so far so fast.

He was a very savvy player, it is clear, but I can hardly believe that Franklin was not, in reality, a very industrious and intellectual young man. That he did so much with his life is remarkable considering his lack of formal education. Apparently he made up for it with reading. It is said he became a vegetarian at one point in his young life so that the money saved not buying meat could be used to buy books instead. (John Templeton Foundation Newsletter, Dec. 2005) Benjamin Franklin was what is commonly known as a polymath – that is, a person who is well educated in a wide variety of subjects and has an encyclopedic knowledge in many of those areas. This description puts him in excellent company as Leonardo daVinci, for example, was also considered a polymath.

Benjamin Franklin was rich, although it is not for his money that we remember him. To his mother he wrote “I would rather have it be said, ‘He lived usefully,’ than, ‘He died rich.’” Most of his wealth came from his prodigious publications, among them *Poor Richard’s Almanac*, of which he sold about ten thousand copies a year. At the age of 42 he retired from printing but maintained a business agreement with his partner that continued to provide him with half the shop’s profits for 18 years. This gave him the time for study and travel, inventions, and of course, politics! Even back then getting into politics was easier if you were wealthy enough not to have to “work” for a living. I don’t think society today would so readily allow for a life such as his.

We know that Ben Franklin was a signatory of both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. What is lesser known is that he was the only person to sign all four of the essential documents leading to the independence and formation of our country. The other two were crucial treaties with France that enabled our independence from Britain. Ben Franklin was the author of those treaties. Visions of that unhappy parallel universe are swirling in my head at the thought of what would have happened if not for the specific efforts of Franklin.

But it is not just for his part in the formation of our country that we should honor this man. Franklin was, according to a recent PBS documentary, the most famous American of his time and from him came much that helped form what we now call the American character. Listen to these words, from a letter to the *Pennsylvania Journal* in 1775, signed by “An American Guesser,” but later attributed to Franklin. How many of these characteristics and virtues are in play (or not!) today in our current foreign affairs? Franklin was writing about the marine motto, placed under a rattlesnake, that read Don’t Tread On Me.

I recollected that [the eyes of the Rattle-Snake] excelled in brightness, that of any other animal, and that she has no eye-lids. She may therefore be esteemed an emblem of vigilance. She never begins an attack, nor, when engaged, ever surrenders: She is therefore an emblem of magnanimity and true courage..... She never wounds ‘till she has generously given notice, even to her enemy, and cautioned him against the danger of treading on her.

Was I wrong, Sir, in thinking this a strong picture of the temper and conduct of America?
(<http://sln.fi.edu/qu99/musing3/indes.html>)

Franklin is also known for his disdain of the Bald Eagle as our eventual national bird, and his opinion that the Turkey would have been better.

In addition to helping to shape our national character, the maxims and pithy wise sayings coined by Ben Franklin have helped to shape our personal characters for almost 300 years now. The early bird gets the worm. A penny saved is a penny earned. Haste makes waste. Honesty is the best policy. I grew up with these. Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today. They were, in the absence of a god that was watching my every move, one of my sources of ethics and morality. I suggest that the influence of this one man is far greater than many of us might have previously imagined. Sir John Templeton, in a recently authored book entitled *Worldwide Laws of Life* cites such phrases and maxims, specifically Franklin's, as classic sources of character education. (John Templeton Foundation Newsletter, Milestones, Dec. 2005) We, as Unitarian Universalists, might go so far as to call it religious education.

What makes a person who they are? What guides our lives and our actions? Most basically, we are what we believe. Our spirituality, our religious understandings, help form both our outward and inward character. What was the religious foundation that formed the character of Benjamin Franklin? Was he a Unitarian????

On the UU web page devoted to famous Unitarian Universalists of history, Ben Franklin is listed under American Political Figures. But this is more for his beliefs as we see them in retrospect than for his official membership status in any church. As with other pre-1820s figures, we have to look at their theology and what actual congregations they attended. Franklin attended, but never joined, both the Unitarian congregation led by Joseph Priestley in Philadelphia and the first openly Unitarian church in England, led by Theophilus Lindsey.

Here are Franklin's own words about religion, which he did not readily share, but spoke about only when asked:

I believe in one God, Creator of the Universe. That He governs it by his Providence. That he ought to be worshipped. That the most acceptable Service we can render to him is doing Good to his other Children. That the Soul of Man is immortal, and will be treated with Justice in another Life respecting its Conduct in this.

These are, according to Franklin and the other rational Deists of his time like Adams and Jefferson, the fundamental principles of all sound religion. By the 18th century, people in America were familiar with at the very least Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, Deism, Unitarianism, Islam, Hinduism, and Native American spirituality. Franklin did, however, have these words to say about the trappings of organized religion, specifically Christianity.

As to Jesus of Nazareth, my Opinion of whom you particularly desire, 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: tho' it is a Question I do not dogmatize upon. (Carl Van Doren. Benjamin Franklin. New York: The Viking Press 1938, p. 777 – Wikipedia/Benjamin Franklin)

[Christianity] has doubtless its use in the world. I do not desire to see it diminished, but I wish it were more productive of good works than I have generally seen it. I mean real good works, works of kindness, charity, mercy, and public spirit, not holy-day keeping, sermon-hearing, and

reading, performing church ceremonies, or making long prayers. (from a letter written to the Rev. George Whitefield, 1753, in Franklin's Works, Vol. vii, p. 75) Franklin was very much aligned with today's UU emphasis on social justice and good works. His life is exemplary in this regard and I will list some of those good works shortly.

He sought to cultivate his character by a plan of thirteen virtues, which he developed at age 20 and continued to practice in some form for the rest of his life. These were temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, and humility. On this last virtue he elaborated: Imitate Jesus and Socrates. (Wikipedia)

“Like most enlightened intellectuals of his time, Franklin separated virtue, morality, and faith from organized religion, although he felt that if religion in general grew weaker, morality, virtue, and society in general would also decline. He was a proponent of all religions. He prayed to ‘Powerful Goodness’ and referred to God as the ‘INFINITE.’ John Adams noted that Franklin was a mirror in which people saw their own religion.” Everyone thought he was one of them. (Wikipedia)

It is interesting to note that in one letter to a friend on the subject of his religious beliefs, he adds in post script: *I [ask] that you will not expose me to Criticism and Censure by publishing any part of this Communication to you. I have ever let others enjoy their religious Sentiments, without reflecting on them for those that appeared to me insupportable and even absurd. All Sects, here, and we have a great Variety, have experienced my Good will in assisting them with Subscriptions for building their new Places of Worship, and as I have never opposed any of their Doctrines I hope to go out of the World in Peace with them all.* (in a letter to Frank Stiles, <http://positiveliberty.com/2007/01/unitarian-whigs.html>) I see his interfaith acceptance as also very in line with UUism.

The reason for his request was that “because of the legal and social entrenchment that orthodox Christianity had not just in England but also in the colonies and then the newly formed United States (at the state level), one could still have one's reputation ruined if one wore one's infidelity on one's sleeve (as Thomas Paine did). Therefore prudent public figures kept religious secrets.” (<http://positiveliberty.com/2007/01/unitarian-whigs.html>) Benjamin Franklin was a closet Unitarian, but nonetheless, totally in sympathy with the tenets of our own developing tradition. I believe there are many things in common between the original tenets of our country and the simultaneous emergence of Unitarianism and Universalist. How amazing the timing that brought Franklin and the other like minded founding fathers to the political processes of our country's beginnings. It could have been otherwise.

Here is a brief list of some of Franklin's more important contributions to our world and our society and our everyday lives:

He invented bifocals, swim fins, the lightning rod, the glass harmonica, the Franklin stove, and the flexible urinary catheter. He never patented any of his inventions.

He discovered many of the properties of electricity such as the existence of positive and negative charges, and proved that lightning was identical to electricity.

He founded the American Philosophical Society.

His observations on the weather were important to the study of meteorology. His observations about refrigeration were so important that to this day the frozen food industry gives an award in his name.

He was instrumental in the creation of what became the University of Pennsylvania and Franklin and Marshall College.

He created the first volunteer firefighting company, the first fire insurance company, and the first public lending library.

And here is one of my favorites: He managed to chart the Gulf Stream by taking water temperatures on each of his eight voyages across the Atlantic. What wonderful curiosity!

And on top of it all, he was funny. *Beer*, he said, *is living proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy*. I don't know for sure, but perhaps this statement can be found in one of the more humorously titled books about Franklin: *Fart Proudly: Writings of Benjamin Franklin You Never Read in School*.

But seriously, for the most part, what a positive roll model to have in the history of our country, and in the history of our own faith tradition. We can be proud that many of the principles that guide us as Unitarian Universalists are the same ones that influenced Benjamin Franklin to be the person he was, write the words that he wrote, and do, invent, create, initiate, publish, and encourage, the things that he did.

Here are the two maxims by which I think Benjamin Franklin lived his whole life:

But dost thou love life, then do not squander Time, for that's the stuff life is made of.

If you would not be forgotten, as soon as you are dead and rotten, either write things worth reading, or do things worth the writing.

The life and accomplishments of Ben Franklin are surely worth the writing. He is an inspiration to us all.