Arriving at Perfection – Benjamin Franklin

Taken from: http://www.ushistory.org/franklin/autobiography/page38.htm

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 met in my reading, I found the catalogue 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 uncleanliness in body, clothes, or habitation.

11. Tranquillity. Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable.

12. Chastity. Rarely use venery but for health or offspring, never to dullness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation.


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 thro' 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 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 because 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., Conceiving, then, that, agreeably to the advice of Pythagoras in his Garden 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.

Form of the Pages

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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 every the least offense against Temperance, leaving the other virtues to 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 thro' a course complete in thirteen weeks, and four courses in a years. 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. . . .

On Ben Franklin’s Virtues – D. H. Lawrence

The Perfectibility of Man! Ah heaven, what a dreary theme! The perfectibility of the Ford
car! The perfectibility of which man? I am many men. Which of them are you going to
perfect? I am not a mechanical contrivance.

Education! Which of the various me’s do you propose to educate, and which do
you propose to suppress?

Anyhow, I defy you. I defy you, oh society, to educate me or to suppress me,
according to your dummy standards.

The ideal man! And which is he, if you please? Benjamin Franklin or Abraham
Lincoln? The ideal man! Roosevelt or Porfirio Diaz?

There are other men in me, besides this patient ass who sits here in a tweed
jacket. What am I doing, playing the patient ass in a tweed jacket? Who am I talking to?
Who are you, at the other end of this patience?

Who are you? How many selves have you? And which of these selves do you want
to be?

Is Yale College going to educate the self that is in the dark of you, or Harvard
College?

The ideal self! Oh, but I have a strange and fugitive self shut out and howling like
a wolf or a coyote under the ideal windows. See his red eyes in the dark? This is the self
who is coming into his own.

The perfectibility of man, dear God! When every man as long as he remains alive
is in himself a multitude of conflicting men. Which of these do you choose to perfect, at
the expense of every other?

Old Daddy Franklin will tell you. He’ll rig him up for you, the pattern American.
Oh, Franklin was the first downright American. He knew what he was about, the sharp
little man. He set up the first dummy American.

At the beginning of his career this cunning little Benjamin drew up for himself a
creed that should ‘satisfy the professors of every religion, but shock none’ . . .

Man is a moral animal. All right. I am a moral animal. And I’m going to remain
such. I’m not going to be turned into a virtuous little automaton as Benjamin would
have me. ‘This is good, that is bad. Turn the little handle and let the good tap flow,’ saith Benjamin, and all America with him. ‘But first of all extirpate those savages who are always turning on the bad tap.’

I am a moral animal. But I am not a moral machine. I don’t work with a little set of handles or levers. The Temperance-silence-order-resolution-frugality-industry-sincerity — justice-moderation-cleanliness-tranquillity-chastity-humility keyboard is not going to get me going. I’m really not just an automatic piano with a moral Benjamin getting tunes out of me.

Here’s my creed, against Benjamin’s. This is what I believe:

‘That I am I.’

‘That my soul is a dark forest.’

‘That my known self will never be more than a little clearing in the forest.’

‘That gods, strange gods, come forth from the forest into the clearing of my known self, and then go back.’

‘That I must have the courage to let them come and go.’

‘That I will never let mankind put anything over me, but that I will try always to recognize and submit to the gods in me and the gods in other men and women.’

There is my creed. He who runs may read. He who prefers to crawl, or to go by gasoline, can call it rot.

Then for a ‘list’. It is rather fun to play at Benjamin.

1. TEMPERANCE  Eat and carouse with Bacchus, or munch dry bread with Jesus, but don’t sit down without one of the gods.
2. SILENCE  Be still when you have nothing to say; when genuine passion moves you, say what you’ve got to say, and say it hot.
3. ORDER  Know that you are responsible to the gods inside you and to the men in whom the gods are manifest. Recognize your superiors and your inferiors, according to the gods. This is the root of all order.
4. RESOLUTION  Resolve to abide by your own deepest promptings, and to sacrifice the smaller thing to the greater. Kill when you must, and be killed the same: the must coming from the gods inside you, or from the men in whom you recognize the Holy Ghost.
5. FRUGALITY  Demand nothing; accept what you see fit. Don’t waste your pride or squander your emotion.
6. INDUSTRY  Lose no time with ideals; serve the Holy Ghost; never serve mankind.
7. SINCERITY  To be sincere is to remember that I am I, and that the other man is not me.
8. JUSTICE  The only justice is to follow the sincere intuition of the soul, angry or gentle. Anger is just, and pity is just, but judgement is never just.
9. MODERATION  Beware of absolutes. There are many gods.
10. CLEANLINESS  Don’t be too clean. It impoverishes the blood.
11. TRANQUILITY  The soul has many motions, many gods come and go. Try and find your deepest issue, in every confusion, and abide by that. Obey the man in whom you recognize the Holy Ghost; command when your honour comes to command.

12. CHASTITY  Never ‘use’ venery at all. Follow your passional impulse, if it be answered in the other being; but never have any motive in mind, neither offspring nor health nor even pleasure, nor even service. Only know that ‘venery’ is of the great gods. An offering-up of yourself to the very great gods, the dark ones, and nothing else.

13. HUMILITY  See all men and women according to the Holy Ghost that is within them. Never yield before the barren.

There’s my list. I have been trying dimly to realize it for a long time, and only America and old Benjamin have at last goaded me into trying to formulate it. . . .

ASSIGNMENT:

Type your answers to both questions. Use Times New Roman, double-spaced text. Put the MLA heading and header on your page(s).

1. Read first Benjamin Franklin’s essay, then D. H. Lawrence’s (a response to Franklin’s). In one paragraph tell which of these speaks to you more and why.

2. Then, take the same list of 13 traits, and rewrite it for yourself. Use high level language, keeping in mind diction, and make this a list that would work for your life now or as you wish your life to be in the future.

Turn in both the paragraph and the list of 13 by the first day of class, August 2013.