

*The Autobiography of
Benjamin Franklin*

Penn Reading Project Edition

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

Edited by Peter Conn

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PENN

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Preface

The Power of Values

AMY GUTMANN

“Why should I care?” “What difference does it make?” Some such question may be at the back of your mind as you pick up this special edition of the *Autobiography* of Benjamin Franklin, published especially for the Penn Reading Project by the University of Pennsylvania Press.

Your participation in PRP carries no grade. No one will take roll. After you discuss Franklin’s *Autobiography* on Sunday, September 4, 2005 with fellow first-year students and a Penn faculty member, you may never again pick up the *Autobiography*.

So why bother?

Because Franklin is very much alive at Penn.

His famous personality and notable charisma helped to define a uniquely engaged American style and character, exemplified by many people you will meet at Penn. Franklin was not just a scientist (one of the world’s first). He was not only an educational theorist (breaking with the classical curriculum of his day). Franklin loved learning. But he also applied his theoretical knowledge to the practical tasks of invention and civic improvement, founding the school that became the University of Pennsylvania. In his times, he was a media mogul and business entrepreneur. He created a chain of print shops throughout the Colonies that would be the envy of any Penn Wharton graduate. In the ideas and the values that he put into practice, Franklin exemplified the life of an engaged and successful public intellectual.

Franklin’s ideas and values have shaped the *modern* University of Pennsylvania more profoundly than have the founders of any major college or university in the United States. The Penn Compact—“From Excellence to Eminence”—is inspired by values that Franklin held dear: increasing access to education, integrating knowledge, and engaging with communities locally and globally, informed by broad-based knowledge. Franklin’s ideas are clearly *alive* here at Penn in ways that really are quite remarkable. *Your* challenge in the next few months—and

throughout the next four years—is to figure out how these values, and all that Penn is and strives to be in fulfilling them, can help you shape your own life to come. There's no better starting place for that journey than Franklin's *Autobiography*.

Were Franklin to walk into my office in College Hall today, he would understand most of the topics he would hear discussed: the nature of the undergraduate educational experience; the challenge of integrating knowledge from the liberal arts and the professions to understand today's most difficult problems; the need to translate faculty and student research into real applications that will improve human lives; the important civic role of the University as Philadelphia's largest private employer and a powerhouse of urban revitalization; the need to raise new funds to ensure that no qualified student is ever deprived of a Penn education merely because he or she cannot afford it; and the importance of engaging communities here at home and around the world. All these and many more issues of our day would be immediately familiar to Franklin. They embody and express the values and ideas to which he was committed and which inspired his *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania* (1749), included in this volume, and the founding of what became the University of Pennsylvania.

Most important, Franklin would recognize the commitment to personal *excellence*—and to the ambition that drives the excellent to seek *eminence*—which is so characteristic of Penn today and of its faculty, students, staff, and alumni. All these are values that guided Franklin throughout his life, and they are as relevant to your life and your choices as they were to his.

The Value-Driven Life

Reason was Franklin's guide in life, making him an exemplar of the Enlightenment values and spirit that would characterize the young American Republic. But Reason was not Franklin's sole value. Utility, honesty, service, knowledge, and creativity—these were also among Franklin's core values. They shaped his life, and the *Autobiography* is the story of that shaping. "His *Autobiography* is in many ways," Michael Zuckerman observes, "an account of the means by which he cultivated his own benevolence."

This formative role that values played in Franklin's life is evident across the spectrum of his activities, but most especially in his interpersonal relations. Paul Guyer argues that, in Franklin's phrase, "*truth, sincerity and integrity* in dealings between man and man" guided Franklin's dealings with others in business, civic life, government, diplomacy, and his personal life.

Some historians have argued that this picture of Franklin as virtuous and self-critical is merely an image that he labored consciously and assiduously to fabricate during his lifetime. There can be little doubt that self-promotion and personal reinvention were among Franklin's strongest skills. Yet are these faults, if employed for public purposes? Nothing was more central to the Enlightenment values of Reason and individual self-determination than that all individuals *freely choose for themselves* that which they would become. Depending on the direction such self-determination takes, we will admire or criticize individual examples of personal invention and reinvention. As Franklin noted with his characteristically pointed wit, "A man wrapped up in himself makes a very small bundle."

Throughout his life, Franklin carried on a rich, consequential, and increasingly frank dialogue with himself concerning his own successes and mistakes. His is a life that models the kind of self-questioning and self-creation that goes on in Penn's classrooms, College Houses, and coffeehouses, day in and day out. His is the kind of self-criticism and self-understanding that is at the core of socially responsible and creative living.

Choice, Challenge, and Commitment

One of the most remarkable and admirable features of Franklin, which distinguishes him from both moralizers and practitioners of his day and ours, was that he understood that *choosing* an admirable future is not enough. After the choice, the hard work begins. This, too, is an experience that awaits you here at Penn and in later life.

Franklin understood that the distance between good intentions and reality is the measure of one's life. It is not easy to commit yourself to this or that system of values. Yet how much harder is it to act effectively in accord with your values over the course of your lifetime? As early as age twenty, Franklin made periodic self-evaluation and self-criticism a regular feature of his life, so much so that Walter Isaacson calls him "the patron saint of self-improvement guides." Franklin measured his progress against his earlier choices, reconfirmed or modified those choices, and redoubled his efforts to act in accordance with his values.

As Franklin's university, Penn institutionally engages in a similar process. We set strategic goals. We dedicate our best efforts to reaching them. We periodically measure our progress and critically examine our results. We correct our course, and recommit ourselves to our most basic ideals. We do this as individuals, as scholars and scientists, as a university, and as a community. We try never to let our failures dissuade us from our values—nothing worth doing is done easily. Above all, we resist becom-

ing complacent with success. Whether facing short-term failure or success, there is always *much* more to be done.

Franklin played the game of chess throughout his life, and he saw it as a useful model from which to learn foresight, circumspection, and caution, but above all persistence: “And, *lastly*, we learn by chess the habit of *not being discouraged by present* bad appearances in the state of our affairs, the habit of hoping for a favorable change, and that of persevering.”

True Merit

Franklin’s lifelong effort at self-improvement aimed not only at successful self-presentation, but also at the ideal of true merit or virtue. This ideal is precisely the goal that Franklin enunciated for a Penn education. “*True merit*,” Franklin wrote, consists in “an *inclination* join’d with an *ability* to serve mankind, one’s country, friends and family; which *ability* is (with the Blessing of God) to be acquir’d or greatly increas’d by *true learning*; and should indeed be the great *aim* and *end* of all learning.”

True merit is, in the spirit of the Penn Compact, the continuing task of this University and all who work, study, and live within its confines. I welcome you with the utmost of pleasure and the highest of expectations to our Penn fellowship of learning, self-improvement, and worldly success. And I invite you to begin your personal journey here, in the *Autobiography* of Benjamin Franklin.