

from The Autobiography

Benjamin Franklin

You probably know Benjamin Franklin as a statesman and a signer of the Declaration of Independence. This selection shows a more personal side of Franklin. Franklin describes his carefully planned project to achieve moral perfection.

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 had met with in my reading, I found the catalog 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.

Vocabulary Development: **arduous** (AHR joo wuhs) *adj.* difficult
avarice (AV uhr is) *n.* greed



Activate Prior Knowledge

Many people take time to make New Year's resolutions every year. As you read this selection, remind yourself of any plans or resolutions you have made. As you read, think about how they are like or unlike Franklin's project to achieve moral perfection.

Literary Analysis

This selection is a form of nonfiction called **autobiography**. In an autobiography, a person tells the story of his or her own life, using the pronoun I. In the first paragraph, circle the pronoun I every time it appears.

Reading Strategy

Read this selection slowly, one sentence at a time. As you read, **make inferences**, or read between the lines for information. For example, what inferences can you make about Franklin's character from reading the bracketed sentence in the first paragraph?

TAKE NOTES

Reading Strategy

How many virtues does Franklin commit himself to?

Reading Strategy

As you read, you often encounter **words with multiple meanings**—that is, words that mean different things in different situations or contexts. Franklin uses the word *industry*, for example, to mean working hard and wasting no time. Use a dictionary to find another meaning for the word *industry* and write the meaning below.

Reading Check

Franklin decides to work on his virtues one at a time. Why does he start with temperance? Circle the sentence that answers this question and write the answer below in your own words.

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 uncleanness in body, clothes, or habitation.
11. **TRANQUILLITY** Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable.
12. **CHASTITY**
13. **HUMILITY** Imitate Jesus and Socrates.¹

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 through 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 of 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 become 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., etc. Conceiving then, that,

Vocabulary Development: **vigilance** (VIJ uh luhns) n.
watchfulness

1. **Socrates** (SAHK ruh teez) Greek philosopher and teacher (470?–399 B.C.).

agreeably to the advice of Pythagoras² in his *Golden 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.

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 every³ 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 through a course complete in thirteen weeks, and four courses in a year. 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. . . .

The precept of *Order* requiring that *every part of my business should have its allotted time*, one page in my little book contained the following scheme of employment for the twenty-four hours of a natural day.

THE MORNING.

Question. What good shall I do this day?

- 5 Rise, wash, and
- 6 address *Powerful Goodness!* Contrive day's business, and take the resolution of the
- 7 day; prosecute the present study, and breakfast.

8

2. **Pythagoras** (pi THAG uh ruhs) Greek philosopher and mathematician who lived in the sixth century B.C.

3. **every** even.



Reading Strategy

Continue to **make inferences**, or read between the lines for information. What additional inferences can you make about Franklin now that you have read his list of virtues and his explanation of each one?

Reading Strategy

Reread the bracketed paragraph. Choose one of Franklin's virtues. On a blank sheet of paper, make a page for that virtue, using Franklin's description of his "little book." You will need a red pen or pencil. Now **make an inference** about why this "little book" is a good way for Franklin to keep track of his progress.

Reading Strategy

Making inferences as you read helps you **draw conclusions** about what you are reading, or make general statements based on details from what you've read. What conclusion can you draw about Franklin at this point?

TAKE NOTES

Reading Check

Why does Franklin choose to work on the virtues one at a time?

Literary Analysis

Because this selection is an **autobiography**, Franklin is giving information about himself and his daily life. He even gives you a schedule for a usual day in his life. What are the similarities between Franklin's day and yours? What are the differences?

Reading Strategy

Reread the bracketed paragraph. **Draw** one or two **conclusions** about Franklin based on the fact that Franklin eventually stops his plan for acquiring the virtues.

NOON.

EVENING.
Question. What good have I done today?

NIGHT.

- 9 Work.
- 10
- 11
- 12 Read, or overlook
1 my accounts, and
dine.
- 2
- 3 Work.
- 4
- 5
- 6 Put things in
7 their places.
- 8 Supper. Music or
9 diversion, or
conversation.
Examination of the
day.
- 10
- 11
- 12
- 1 Sleep.
- 2
- 3
- 4

I entered upon the execution of this plan for self-examination, and continued it with occasional intermissions for some time. I was surprised to find myself so much fuller of faults than I had imagined; but I had the satisfaction of seeing them diminish. To avoid the trouble of renewing now and then my little book, which, by scraping out the marks on the paper of old faults to make room for new ones in a new course, became full of holes, I transferred my tables and precepts to the ivory leaves of a memorandum book, on which the lines were drawn with red ink that made a durable stain, and on those lines I marked my faults with a black-lead pencil, which marks I could easily wipe out with a wet sponge. After a while I went through one course only in a year, and afterward only one in several years, till at length I omitted them entirely, being employed in voyages and business abroad, with a multiplicity of affairs that interfered; but I always carried my little book with me.

My scheme of *Order* gave me the most trouble; and I found that, though it might be practicable where a man's business was such as to leave him the disposition of his time, that of a journeyman printer, for instance, it was not possible to be exactly observed by a master, who must mix with the world and often receive people of business at their

Vocabulary Development: **disposition** (dis puh ZISH uhn) *n.*
management

own hours. *Order*, too, with regard to places for things, papers, etc., I found extremely difficult to acquire. I had not been early accustomed to it, and, having an exceeding good memory, I was not so sensible of the inconvenience attending want of method. This article, therefore, cost me so much painful attention, and my faults in it vexed me so much, and I made so little progress in amendment, and had such frequent relapses, that I was almost ready to give up the attempt, and content myself with a faulty character in that respect, like the man who, in buying an ax of a smith, my neighbor, desired to have the whole of its surface as bright as the edge. The smith consented to grind it bright for him if he would turn the wheel; he turned, while the smith pressed the broad face of the ax hard and heavily on the stone, which made the turning of it very fatiguing. The man came every now and then from the wheel to see how the work went on, and at length would take his ax as it was, without farther grinding. "No," said the smith, "turn on, turn on; we shall have it bright by and by; as yet, it is only speckled." "Yes," says the man, "*but I think I like a speckled ax best.*" And I believe this may have been the case with many, who, having, for want of some such means as I employed, found the difficulty of obtaining good and breaking bad habits in other points of vice and virtue, have given up the struggle, and concluded that "*a speckled ax was best*"; for something, that pretended to be reason, was every now and then suggesting to me that such extreme nicety as I exacted of myself might be a kind of foppery in morals, which, if it were known, would make me ridiculous; that a perfect character might be attended with the inconvenience of being envied and hated; and that a benevolent man should allow a few faults in himself, to keep his friends in countenance.

In truth, I found myself incorrigible with respect to *Order*; and now I am grown old, and my memory bad, I feel very sensibly the want of it. But, on the whole, though I never arrived at the perfection I had been so ambitious of obtaining, but fell far short of it, yet I was, by the endeavor, a better and a happier man than I otherwise should have been if I had not attempted it; as those who aim at perfect writing by imitating the engraved copies, though they never reached the wished-for excellence of those copies, their hand is mended by the endeavor, and is tolerable while it continues fair and legible.

Vocabulary Development: *foppery* (FAHP uhr ee) *n.* foolishness



Stop to Reflect

Franklin begins his project to acquire virtues with energy and good intentions. He does well with the project for several years, but eventually he goes through his course less often. Finally he stops doing it at all. Think about a project you began with high energy and positive intentions, like keeping your room neat or learning to play the piano. How long were you able to continue? Why do you think people often have trouble keeping their projects going over time?

Reading Check

Why is Franklin tempted to give up his efforts to acquire the virtue of Order?

Reading Strategy

Reread the bracketed paragraph slowly. **Draw a conclusion** about the connection between the grinding of the ax and Franklin's problems with Order. You can reach your conclusion by **making inferences** as you read each sentence.

TAKE NOTES

Reading Strategy

Notice the word *best*, used several times in this paragraph. *Best* is the superlative form of *good*. It is an example of an **irregular comparison of adjectives and adverbs**. *Good* is the positive form, *better* is the comparative form, and *best* is the superlative form. Other examples of irregular comparisons include *well*, *bad*, and *little*. Write the comparative and superlative forms of *well*, *bad*, and *little* below.

Reading Check

Why does Franklin think trying for perfection is worth it, even though he does not completely succeed?

Reading Check

Franklin feels that many of the good things in his life have come from trying to reach moral perfection. List three positive aspects of Franklin's life for which he credits his pursuit of virtue.

1.

2.

3.

It may be well my posterity should be informed that to this little artifice, with the blessing of God, their ancestor owed the constant felicity of his life, down to his seventy-ninth year in which this is written. What reverses may attend the remainder is in the hand of Providence; but, if they arrive, the reflection on past happiness enjoyed ought to help his bearing them with more resignation. To *Temperance* he ascribes his long-continued health, and what is still left to him of a good constitution; to *Industry* and *Frugality*, the early easiness of his circumstances and acquisition of his fortune, with all that knowledge that enabled him to be a useful citizen, and obtained for him some degree of reputation among the learned; to *Sincerity* and *Justice*, the confidence of his country, and the honorable employs it conferred upon him; and to the joint influence of the whole mass of the virtues, even in the imperfect state he was able to acquire them, all that evenness of temper, and that cheerfulness in conversation, which makes his company still sought for, and agreeable even to his younger acquaintance. I hope, therefore, that some of my descendants may follow the example and reap the benefit.

Vocabulary Development: **felicity** (fuh LIS uh tee) *n.* happiness; bliss

Reader's Response: Franklin has most of his problems with the virtue of Order. Which of Franklin's thirteen virtues do you think you would have the most trouble with? Why?

Thinking About the Skill: How will **making inferences** and **drawing conclusions** help you read other nonfiction and fiction selections?
