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When he was sixty-five, Franklin, already internationally famous, began writing his autobiography. An **autobiography** is the story of a person's life told by the person who lived it; Franklin told his story in the form of a letter to his son. Franklin never completed his autobiography, never reaching his account of the Declaration of Independence. Yet Franklin was able to make clear that he enjoyed creating in himself "the American, this new man."

## *Benjamin Franklin*

### from **The Autobiography**

My Brother had in 1720 or 21, begun to print a Newspaper. It was the second that appeared in America, and was called the *New England Courant*. The only one before it was the *Boston News Letter*. I remember his being dissuaded by some of his Friends from the Undertaking, as not likely to succeed, one Newspaper being in their Judgment enough for America. At this time (1771) there are not less than five and twenty. He went on, however, with the Undertaking, and after having worked in composing the Types and printing off the Sheets, I was employed to carry the Papers through the Streets to the Customers. He had some ingenious Men among his Friends who amused themselves by writing little Pieces for this Paper, which gained it Credit, and made it more in Demand; and these Gentlemen often visited us. Hearing their Conversations, and their Accounts of the Approbation<sup>1</sup> their Papers were received with, I was excited to try my Hand among them. But being still a Boy, and suspecting that my Brother would object to printing any Thing of mine in his Paper if he knew it to be mine, I contrived to disguise my Hand, and writing an anonymous Paper, I put it in at Night under the Door of the Printing House. It was found in the Morning and communicated to his Writing Friends when they called in as

usual. They read it, commented on it in my Hearing, and I had the exquisite Pleasure of finding it met with their Approbation, and that in their different Guesses at the Author none were named but Men of some Character among us for Learning and Ingenuity.

I suppose now that I was rather lucky in my Judges: And that perhaps they were not really so very good ones as I then esteemed them. Encouraged, however, by this, I wrote and conveyed in the same Way to the Press several more Papers,<sup>2</sup> which were equally approved, and I kept my Secret till my small Fund of Sense for such Performances was pretty well exhausted, and then I discovered<sup>3</sup> it; when I began to be considered a little more by my Brother's Acquaintance, and in a manner that did not quite please him, as he thought, probably with reason, that it tended to make me too vain. . . .

One of the Pieces in our Newspaper, on some political Point which I have now forgotten, gave Offense to the Assembly. He was taken up, censured and imprisoned for a Month by the Speaker's Warrant, I suppose because he would not discover his Author. I too was taken up and examined before the Council; but though I did not give them any satisfaction, they contented themselves with admonishing

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1. **Approbation:** approval.

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2. **Papers:** articles.

3. **discovered:** revealed.

me, and dismissed me; considering me perhaps as an Apprentice who was bound to keep his Master's Secrets. During my Brother's Confinement, which I resented a good deal, notwithstanding our private Differences, I had the Management of the Paper, and I made bold to give our Rulers some Rubs in it, which my Brother took very kindly, while others began to consider me in an unfavorable Light, as a young Genius that had a Turn for Libeling and Satyr.<sup>4</sup> My Brother's Discharge was accompanied with an Order of the House (a very odd one) *that James Franklin should no longer print the Paper called the New England Courant*. There was a Consultation held in our Printing House among his Friends what he should do in this Case. Some proposed to evade the Order by changing the Name of the Paper; but my Brother seeing Inconveniences in that, it was finally concluded on as a better Way, to let it be printed for the future under the Name of *Benjamin Franklin*. And to avoid the Censure of the Assembly that might fall on him, as still printing it by his Apprentice, the Contrivance was that my old Indenture<sup>5</sup> should be returned to me with a full Discharge on the Back of it, to be shown on Occasion; but to secure to him the Benefit of my Service, I was to sign new Indentures for the Remainder of the Term, which were to be kept private. A very flimsy Scheme it was, but, however, it was immediately executed, and the Paper went on accordingly under my Name for several Months. At length a fresh Difference arising between my Brother and me, I took upon me to assert my Freedom, presuming that he would not venture to produce the new Indentures. It was not fair in me to take this Advantage, and this I therefore reckon one of the first Errata<sup>6</sup> of my Life: But the Unfairness of it weighed little with me, when under the Impressions of Resentment for the Blows his Passion too often urged him to bestow upon me. Though he was

4. **Satyr** [sat'ir]: satire.

5. **Indenture**: contract that binds one person to work for another, sometimes as an apprentice.

6. **Errata** [ə rā'tə]: errors.

otherwise not an ill-natured Man: Perhaps I was too saucy<sup>7</sup> and provoking.

When he found I would leave him, he took care to prevent my getting Employment in any other Printing House of the Town, by going round and speaking to every Master, who accordingly refused to give me Work. I then thought of going to New York as the nearest Place where there was a Printer; and I was the rather inclined to leave Boston when I reflected that I had already made myself a little obnoxious to the governing Party; and from the arbitrary Proceedings of the Assembly in my Brother's Case it was likely I might if I stayed soon bring myself into Scrapes. . . .

*Selling some of his books to raise money, Franklin journeys first to New York, and then to Philadelphia. After sailing through a storm, walking about fifty miles, and finally rowing a small boat, he arrives on a Sunday morning in October 1723.*

I was in my Working Dress, my best Clothes being to come round by Sea. I was dirty from my Journey; my Pockets were stuffed out with Shirts and Stockings; I knew no Soul, nor where to look for Lodging. I was fatigued with Traveling, Rowing and Want of Rest. I was very hungry, and my whole Stock of Cash consisted of a Dutch Dollar<sup>8</sup> and about a Shilling<sup>9</sup> in Copper. The latter I gave the People of the Boat for my Passage, who at first refused it on Account of my Rowing; but I insisted on their taking it, a Man being sometimes more generous when he has but a little Money than when he has plenty, perhaps through Fear of being thought to have but little.

Then I walked up the Street, gazing about, till near the Market House I met a Boy with Bread. I had made many a Meal on Bread, and inquiring where he got it, I went immediately to the Baker's he directed me to in Second

7. **saucy**: disrespectful.

8. **Dutch Dollar**: unit of currency in circulation before the U.S. dollar was established.

9. **Shilling**: British coin equal to one-twentieth of a pound.

Street; and asked for Biscuit, intending such as we had in Boston, but they it seems were not made in Philadelphia; then I asked for a three-penny Loaf, and was told they had none such; so not considering or knowing the Difference of Money and the greater Cheapness nor the Names of his Bread, I bade him give me three-penny worth of any sort. He gave me accordingly three great Puffy Rolls. I was surprised at the Quantity, but took it, and having no room in my Pockets, walked off, with a Roll under each Arm, and eating the other. Thus I went up Market Street as far as Fourth Street, passing by the Door of Mr. Read, my future Wife's Father, when she standing at the Door saw me, and thought I made, as I certainly did, a most awkward ridiculous Appearance. Then I turned and went down Chestnut Street and part of Walnut Street, eating my Roll all the Way, and coming round, found my self again at Market Street Wharf, near the Boat I came in, to which I went for a Draft<sup>10</sup> of the River Water, and being filled with one of my Rolls, gave the other two to a Woman and her Child that came down the River in the Boat with us and were waiting to go farther. Thus refreshed, I walked again up the Street, which by this time had many clean dressed People in it who were all walking the same Way; I joined them, and thereby was led into the great Meetinghouse of the Quakers<sup>11</sup> near the Market. I sat down among them, and after looking round a while and hearing nothing said,<sup>12</sup> being very drowsy through Labor and want of Rest the preceding Night, I fell fast asleep, and continued so till the Meeting broke up, when one was kind enough to rouse me. This was therefore the first House I was in or slept in, in Philadelphia. . . .

*During the next several years Franklin becomes a successful printer and businessman.*

10. **Draft:** drink.

11. **Quakers:** the Society of Friends, a Christian religious group founded in the seventeenth century.

12. **hearing . . . said:** Quaker religious meetings include long periods of silence.

*In the following section of his Autobiography, he tells how he put his practical instincts to work to achieve spiritual "success" as well.*

It was about this time that 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 Attention was taken up 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 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,<sup>13</sup> which fully expressed the Extent I gave to its Meaning.

13. **Precept:** rule.

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 Uncleaness in Body, Clothes or Habitation.

11. TRANQUILITY

Be not disturbed at Trifles or at Accidents common or unavoidable.

12. CHASTITY

13. HUMILITY

Imitate Jesus and Socrates.<sup>14</sup>

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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.

TEMPERANCE							
	S	M	T	W	T	F	S
T							
S	••	•		•		•	
O	•	•	•		•	•	•
R			•			•	
F		•			•		
I			•				
S							
J							
M							
Cl.							
T							
Ch.							
H							

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 through a Course complete in Thirteen Weeks, and four Courses in a

14. Socrates [sok'ra tēz]: Greek philosopher and teacher (470?-399 B.C.).

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 address <i>Powerful Goodness</i> ;
		6	
		7	
		8	
		9	
		10	
		11	
		12	
		1	
		2	
		3	
Evening Question, What Good have I done today?	}	4	Put Things in their Places, Supper, Music, or Diversion, or Conversation, Examination of the Day.
		5	
		6	
		7	
		8	
		9	
		10	
		11	
		12	
		1	
		2	
	}	3	Sleep.
		4	
		5	
		6	

I entered upon the Execution of this Plan for Self-Examination, and continued it with occasional Intermissions for some time. I was sur-

prised 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 afterwards 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,<sup>15</sup> 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 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 *Method*, and having an exceeding good Memory, I was not so sensible of the Inconvenience attending Want of Method. This Article therefore cost me much painful Attention, and my Faults in it vexed me. . . .

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.

15. **Journeyman Printer:** worker who has completed an apprenticeship and works for a master printer.