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If Ben Had His Way: Of Virtue, Wit, and Wisdom

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Honorable mention, *Penn Humanities Forum Essay Contest: In Honor of the 300th Anniversary of Benjamin Franklin's Birth, 2006.*

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Comments

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If Ben Had His Way: Of Virtue, Wit, and Wisdom

by Dvorit Mausner

Three hundred years after his birth and the world is still talking. We just cannot get enough of Benjamin Franklin: the inventor, the author, the political figure, “the legend.” Especially here in Philadelphia, a city indebted to Dr. Franklin for his innumerable contributions, I would say that “legend” might even be an understatement. He is at the iconic level that few ever attain. He is like Elvis or Tupac. You know, I could swear I even saw him flying a kite on College Green the other day. Frankly (no pun intended), I would not be surprised if he *was* still walking around somewhere. With all of the celebrations and memorials in his honor, it is as if he is alive and well, constantly being recreated and reinterpreted. At three hundred years old, I think it is safe to say that Dr. Franklin is now a character of epic proportions. Now, if I had *my* way, I would settle to be a character of *haiku* proportions, so he would probably be quite pleased with himself.

This summer, 2,566 copies of Dr. Franklin’s autobiography went out to the incoming class of 2009 for the Penn Reading Project. This certainly extended Dr. Franklin’s shelf life, both literally and figuratively, for another generation of eager young scholars. Although there is no guarantee that 2,566 copies were *read* by those eager young scholars, those that took the time might have been surprised. Unlike many historical figures, Dr. Franklin allows himself through his writings to be personable with the reader, vulnerable, and refreshingly witty. According to Franklin scholar David Morgan, Dr. Franklin’s goal was to appeal to the masses: the semi-literate, the under-educated, or in other words, college freshman. So, it looks like “Ben had his way” on that one.

Maybe, though, it would serve the underclassmen better to read Poor Richard’s Almanac, Dr. Franklin’s annual anthologies of information and wisdom. Perhaps best remembered are the maxims lining the margins of those almanacs- recommendations and ruminations of everyday life that sometimes seem to apply better to college life than one would expect. For example, “Beer is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy.” I think, for some, that one is a particular favorite. Whartonites, maybe, could appreciate Dr.

Franklin's verse, "Nothing but Money, is sweeter than Honey." For us undergraduates heading his advice, one maxim seems to have slipped through the cracks: "Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise." I think that one can wait until after graduation.

When reading Dr. Franklin's work, whether it be these maxims, his essays, his autobiography, or otherwise, I always get a sense that he is speaking to me, today, a current undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania. Time magazine ran a feature piece on Dr. Franklin in 2003 entitled "The Amazing Adventures of Benjamin Franklin." I would like to share a quote from that article, which hits upon exactly what I mean to say, myself:

Benjamin Franklin is the founding father who winks at us. George Washington's colleagues found it hard to imagine touching the austere general on the shoulder... Jefferson and Adams are just as intimidating. But Ben Franklin... seems made of flesh rather than of marble, addressable by nickname... with eyes that twinkle from behind those newfangled spectacles. He speaks to us... not with orotund rhetoric but with a chattiness and clever irony that is very contemporary, sometimes unnervingly so.

Dr. Franklin was absolutely doing something right. He argued that neither the politicians nor the necessarily wealthy would strengthen our country, but rather the common folk, the middle class, and the masses. As their leader, he wrote directly to them, and today, it seems as though he has written directly to us- the students and leaders of tomorrow. Dr. Franklin wanted to be understood and endured, and certainly, in that sense, Ben has "had his way."

As a student here at Penn, it is easy to see just how often Dr. Franklin enters our classrooms. I learned in class just today no less that Dr. Franklin came up with Daylight Saving Time. Thanks to him, any given Philadelphia winter, if I ever *am* early to bed and early to rise, I will miss the sunset and beat the sunrise. What a peculiar idea. At least he also gave us electricity so that when I wake up to a black sky, I can switch on the light to

read or, in my situation right now, to write about *him*! Although "Ben got his way" with the clocks, Arizona and parts of Indiana are still holdouts along with a few others. I guess Dr. Franklin could not win them all. Yet, for most of us, we have a reminder of his penchant for efficiency two times each year, predictable with or without his almanac.

Along with efficiency, Dr. Franklin decided early in life to strive to abide by quite a few virtues. One of his hardest to follow was Humility, added to the list of virtues only after a Quaker pointed out its absence. On Humility, Dr. Franklin said:

There is perhaps no one of our natural passions so hard to subdue as pride; disguise it, struggle with it, beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive and will every now and then peep out and show itself... [and] even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it, I would probably be proud of my humility.

I imagine that today, Ben would not "have his way" with being humble. We have simply made the situation too difficult for him. He is our pride and joy in Philadelphia and at Penn and we have made that clearer than bifocal lenses. Among his many memorials, we have Franklin Field right here on campus. We have the Benjamin Franklin Scholars and the Benjamin Franklin Society. Perhaps you have visited the Benjamin Franklin Room in Houston Hall or the financial hub of the University in the Franklin Building. Academics use the Franklin Library Catalogue. On top of all that and more, someone recently leaked to the press that nearby 30th Street Station may soon be known as Benjamin Franklin Station.

I can only guess what may come next, and I think the possibilities are quite humorous (another of Dr. Franklin's virtues, by which I most personally like to abide). For example, I was joking with some friends that Independence hall could now be known as Benjamin Franklin Hall. The Liberty Bell could be renamed the Benjamin Franklin Bell. The Betsy Ross House? Now the Benjamin Franklin House. The Schuylkill River becomes the Benjamin Franklin Schuylkill River. We could go all the way and rename the University of Pennsylvania the University of Benjamin Franklin. Maybe *then* we would *finally* have some name recognition! Furthermore, Chestnut Street could become

Franklin Street, Walnut Street will be called Benjamin Street, and why not rename Spruce Street Benjamin Franklin Street? What if instead of shopping at Wawa and the Fresh Grocer we bought our groceries at BenWa and the Fresh Franklin? Moreover, to push the line just one bit farther, we can say to ourselves- Philadelphia? How about Frankladelphia? At that rate, I am sure no one could maintain a shred of humility. Oh, well. Maybe some virtues are not always as worth keeping as others.

Another of Dr. Franklin's virtues was the maintenance of a free press as a tool for democracy. He felt that a free press would avoid the tyranny of unchecked power and wrote that "there would be very little printed" if everything that was published avoided offending others. It looks like this year Ben definitely "had his way" within our student press. Despite uproars over some questionable and now infamous photos taken on campus, The Daily Pennsylvanian along with other local press went ahead and printed those photos right on the front pages in the name of free press. If these papers were concerned about offending people, given the commotion the story caused, there really would have been very little printed that day. And that week. And really that whole month, come to think of it.

The University's press again took its freedom and ran with the publication of Quake, the University's "first literary erotica magazine." University funding has helped to publish an "intellectual sexual discourse" where Penn community members may openly contribute and enjoy works pertaining to all "sexual matters." Many have questioned the fine line Quake may walk with pornography and a debate has been struck whether the University should continue its support. I think Dr. Franklin would stand up for both the DP and Quake in their respective instances of de-robed subject matter. He may have been very pleased to see that the young minds of today are still engaged in freedom of speech and expression. Furthermore, perhaps he would welcome Quake's appreciation and critique of love and romance, given that some believe he was quite the ladies man, himself. And, relating both to Quake's work and the DP's reporting, Dr. Franklin would note, as he did in his autobiography, that the "hard-to-be-governed passion of youth" may often draw one into unwanted "intrigues." So, who knows what may have been "if Ben

had his way"? If he were still around today, maybe he would have picked up the latest issue of *Quake*... but would assuredly read it "just for the articles."

Tied right in with these issues of free speech was one of Dr. Franklin's most beloved virtues- tolerance. Dr. Franklin's dedication to *religious* tolerance, especially, pushed the matter right to the forefront of American thought during the creation of our country. In fact, what brought him here in the first place was his dissatisfaction with the orthodoxies of Boston. When he arrived in Philadelphia, he found Lutherans, Moravians, Quakers, Jews, and even Calvinists, all together in the City of Brotherly Love. His appreciation for this diversity led him to advocate the importance of the separation of Church and State, creating an egalitarian political space for all. Some would argue that were it not for his persistence on the matter, that separation might not have been so clearly detailed in the Constitution nor in his "Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania," which led to Penn's founding as the first non-sectarian institution of higher education. Just as the Founding Fathers had to grow to understand Dr. Franklin's ideas, today it still holds true that tolerance will only be learned through a proper education. Although the specific tolerance that he spoke of may not have encompassed all of the types of diversity that we encounter today, Dr. Franklin's convictions towards open-mindedness were so strong that they would certainly cross all boundaries between neighbors, whether they are religious, ethnic, class-based, language-oriented, or racial borders.

To that end, the University is currently debating a cross-cultural analysis requirement to be added to the College's general requirements. Some students have been advocating the addition of a United States cultural analysis to address the increasing diversity not only on an international scale but locally, as in our own West Philadelphia neighborhood. This neighborhood—and indeed the whole City—is incredibly different from when Franklin made his famous walk down Market Street. For the three years I have made Philly my home, the population and landscape has already changed, let alone in the two-hundred years since Dr. Franklin lived here. I think he would be thrilled to see that on all scales, students and faculty are insistent that tolerance be continuously instilled

through the teaching of all cultures. "If Ben had his way," he would be sure that everyone else would have his or her way, too. However, each way would be a right way, and those ways would mingle and improve each other down the path of unconditional acceptance and common-good.

Along with the education of tolerance and religious freedom, Penn does an excellent job preserving the other tenets of a liberal arts education as outlined in Dr. Franklin's "Proposal." Dr. Neil Rudenstine, President Emeritus of Harvard University, recently supported these tenets at President Gutmann's inauguration. He recalled that Penn instilled "a new conception of higher education on this continent: one that was more daring in its intellectual openness and its reach, with an extensive and adventurous curriculum that was as modern as it was classical." One tenet that was fundamental to Penn's creation was the belief that an education should be useful. Dr. Franklin wrote:

It would be well if [students] could be taught *every thing* that is useful and *every thing* that is ornamental: But art is long, and their time is short. It is therefore proposed that they learn those things that are likely to be *most useful* and *most ornamental*, regard being had to the several professions for which they are intended.

My grandfather would love this. For every biology class I take, he will want to know if I am going to put it to good use and become a doctor. For every pre-law course I attend, my grandmother will ask about its utility for when I become a lawyer. Meanwhile, I am currently more interested in the "ornaments" as I explore my free-elective options. Despite a major embedded in the hard sciences that will one day serve me well, I am also taking a seminar on the logic of collective action and another seminar all about Caribbean music. My liberal education has given me the opportunity to tutor third graders through a literacy program, to decipher formal linguistics, to improve my conversational Spanish, and to engage the culture of hip-hop. Though not necessarily applicable to traditional careers or vocations, each of these classes has generally made me a better-rounded person, "preventing... [the] consequences that would attend a general ignorance among us," Dr. Franklin had advised. Dr. Rudenstein agrees that a Penn education was founded on "an

approach to education that was concerned to encourage the practical application of knowledge for the public good, as well as to pursue the discovery of significant new knowledge, irrespective of any obvious utility that it might have."

But what of the irrationality of taking such a variety of instruction entirely at odds with my own future? Is this not at conflict with a general practicality? My grandparents may argue that my course selections are unreasonable if I am going to be the best doctor-lawyer of all time. But Dr. Franklin again comes to my rescue. We are all reasonable beings, he says, and, "So convenient a thing it is to be a *reasonable creature*, since it enables one to find or make a reason for every thing one has a mind to do." Therefore, for example, while my grandfather really detested the hip-hop culture class I took last semester, now I can reasonably say to him, "But Grandpa, if I had not taken that course, how would I have ever been able to begin this essay with a reference to Tupac?" *That* sounds like a reasonable argument to me. And if he does not buy it, that is okay. I am content knowing that my liberal education throughout my time here at Penn has been very well spent improving my intellect *both* in practical ways and ornamental ways-according to Ben's way.

As far as improvements go, Dr. Franklin, like myself, was also quite dedicated to self-improvement. With less than two years of formal schooling, and having come from a poor family, he managed to become one of the most respected, knowledgeable, and influential people in Western history. Dr. Franklin teaches us the importance of dedication and persistence as well as a belief that one can improve one's self and consequentially one's environment. This University itself exemplifies these principles so well, one might almost believe that Dr. Franklin had *founded* the place! I see Penn's efforts of self-improvement first hand over at the Penn Fund where I have worked since sophomore year. We are located, coincidentally in the aforementioned Franklin Building. My team of student callers reaches out to alumni and friends of the University to maintain contact with them and to accept pledges of support for our unrestricted undergraduate giving fund. As a team leader, my job is to be sure that our callers are doing their best to remind those on the other end all about the improvements here at

school so that they will consider contributing to the drive. The gifts we accept go towards scholarships, building renovations, student centers, college house activities and refurbishments, academic and social programming, and more. Each year, our call-center reminds people of Penn's mission to improve the quality of education and life for all undergraduates from all backgrounds. It is a tough job, to be certain. Not everyone feels as strongly about Penn's improvement as we do. For those who do support our goals and mission, they can rest assured that Dr. Franklin approves, for only through the improvement of the University itself can it then support and improve its surrounding area and the lives of all of those invested in it.

In exploring how things may have been "if Ben had his way," I feel convinced that Dr. Franklin would be very pleased with the current state of things at Penn. He is still reaching the masses—his virtues, wit, and wisdom as relevant as ever before—and is lauded for it, *despite* his humility. We continue to devote ourselves to free press, tolerance, and self-improvement within a liberal arts framework. It is strange to think that if the way things are now is still in line with "his way," we alone have been carrying on his wishes for the past 216 years since his death. That is a huge load for us to carry- but we should not be concerned nor should we abandon him now. After all, he is *the* Benjamin Franklin, "the legend." Without him, we would be just another Harvard, Yale, or Princeton (oh, my!). Instead, we are something much better! We are the University of Pennsylvania- the bearers of Dr. Franklin's traditions and values. We, the students and faculty, carry on this great institution down the path that he blazed, the way that he made; every time we come to an obstruction, we can look to his teachings and keep right on going. On the exciting occasion of his three-hundredth year, we should all remember and celebrate the man who invented, revolutionized, wrote, and theorized much of what we still find true today. We are extremely lucky to be able to claim him as our own, right here in the heart of Frankladelphia!