

D. H. Lawrence on Benjamin Franklin

In *Studies in Classic American Literature*, the English writer D. H. Lawrence offered his idiosyncratic comments on a number of American writers, including Benjamin Franklin. While Lawrence acknowledged Franklin's contributions as inventor, scientists, and statesman, he strongly criticized Franklin's moral philosophy, which he found repugnantly repressive. As an apostle of the irrational and advocate of following one's passions wherever they might lead, Lawrence found Franklin's insistence on moderation, reason, and control not only unacceptable, but even unthinkable. The excerpt below focuses on Franklin's famous list of 13 virtues.

Who knows what will come out of the soul of man?
The soul of man is a dark vast forest, with wild life in it. Think of Benjamin fencing it off!

Oh, but Benjamin fenced a little tract that he called the soul of man, and proceeded to get it into cultivation. Providence, forsooth! And they think that bit of barbed wire is going to keep us in pound for ever? More fools they.

This is Benjamin's barbed wire fence. He made himself a list of virtues, which he trotted inside like a grey nag in a paddock.

1. TEMPERANCE

Eat not to fulness; 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 action.

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 as 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

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

13. HUMILITY

Imitate Jesus and Socrates.

A Quaker friend told Franklin that he, Benjamin, was generally considered proud, so Benjamin put in the Humility touch as an afterthought. The amusing part is the sort of humility it displays. 'Imitate Jesus and Socrates,' and mind you don't outshine either of these two. One can just imagine Socrates and Alcibiades roaring in their cups over Philadelphian Benjamin, and Jesus looking at him a little puzzled, and murmuring: 'Aren't you wise in your own conceit, Ben?' Henceforth be masterless,' retorts Ben. 'Be ye each one his own master unto himself, and don't let even the Lord put His spoke in.' 'Each man his own master' is but a puffing up of masterlessness.

Well, the first of Americans practiced this enticing list with assiduity, setting a national example. He had the virtues in columns, and gave himself good and bad marks according as he thought his behaviour deserved. Pity these conduct charts are lost to us. He only remarks that Order was his stumbling block. He could not learn to be neat and tidy.

Isn't it nice to have nothing worse to confess?

He was a little model, was Benjamin. Doctor Franklin. Snuff-coloured little man! Immortal soul and all!

The immortal soul part was a sort of cheap insurance policy.

Benjamin had no concern, really, with the immortal soul. He was too busy with social man.

(1) He swept and lighted the streets of young Philadelphia.

- (2) He invented electrical appliances.
- (3) He was the centre of a moralizing club in Philadelphia, and he wrote the moral humorisms of Poor Richard.
- (4) He was a member of all the important councils of Philadelphia, and then of the American colonies.
- (5) He won the cause of American Independence at the French Court, and was the economic father of the United States.

Now what more can you want of a man? And yet he is *infra dig.*, even in Philadelphia.

I admire him. I admire his sturdy courage first of all, then his sagacity, then his glimpsing into the thunders of electricity, then his common-sense humour. All the qualities of a great man, and never more than a great citizen. Middle-sized, sturdy, snuff-coloured Doctor Franklin, one of the soundest citizens that ever trod or 'used venery'.

I do not like him.

And, by the way, I always thought books of Venery were about hunting deer....

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 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.

Published on unknown date in unknown journal
<http://www2.sunysuffolk.edu/lewiss/lawrence.htm>.