

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, SPIRITUAL ACTIVIST
(Edited excerpts from Hidden America)

Franklin and Spiritual Discipline

At an early stage of his life, Franklin gave self-analysis the form of the “Thirteen Virtues” (temperance, order, silence, resolution, etc.). These he classified according to a personal hierarchy of importance. Following this method he practiced each virtue a week at a time; in a year the whole set of virtues would be practiced exactly four times. Naively intended as a device for attaining perfection, the system became for Franklin a tool for self-awareness, showing him his weaknesses and promoting personal improvement. Through such a precise procedure, Franklin became a modern scientist in inner development, endeavoring to observe himself much like he would later observe electricity. This personal way of testing himself and acknowledging his own errors and shortcomings led Franklin to an independent view of morality. He called it “moral algebra,” a way of weighing the pros and cons of his deeds and taking time before making important decisions. Franklin was thus breaking ground for a new vision of morality, one no longer dictated by religion or external moral precepts but by individual consciousness.

Around age twenty-one Franklin returned to Philadelphia from Europe feeling that he could have fallen into an abyss. Another abyss followed, in which he almost lost his life after an attack of pleurisy. His friend and mentor, Denham, actually died from the illness they had contracted together. Of the depth of this experience we can gather some insight from his own words: “I suffered a good deal, gave up the point in my mind, and was rather disappointed when I found myself recovering; regretting in some degree that I must now some time or other have all that disagreeable [*sic*] work to do over again.” That Franklin gained a glimpse into the spiritual world is beyond doubt. The next year he composed the famous epitaph, in which he said the following about his corpse: “for it will (as he believ’d) Appear once More in a New and More Elegant Edition Revised and Corrected by the Author.” This statement reveals astonishing insight for a man of the eighteenth century, insight coming from inner conviction rather than from borrowed knowledge. This was also the time in which Franklin formed the Junto. Even before becoming a Freemason four years later, Franklin started a group that shared much of its philosophy with the Brotherhood. His later affiliation with Freemasonry formed a thread throughout his life.

Franklin—Scientist and Spiritual Activist

A glimpse at what Franklin’s mind could encompass is truly astonishing. We can look first at speculative science—witness his well-known experiments with electricity or the ease with which he could write the famous “magic squares.” Under this light his other achievements may seem of lesser importance, but they had an immediate benefit for his community and the whole of the colonies. With the press he worked his way into his fellow citizen’s minds through *Poor Richard’s Almanac*. The condensed wisdom, summed up in few words and peppered with humor, was particularly adapted to the ways of the New World. His declared intention was to “leave a strong impression on the memory of young persons.” While influencing colonial minds, Franklin worked in the

external world by elaborating new ways towards knowledge, and putting his mind to a myriad of practical applications in the social world.

His very approach towards knowledge is a radical departure from the ways of the academic world. His Leather Apron Club, or Junto, is the model of learning achieved in lively collaboration, the knowledge accessible to the leather apron man—the craftsman—and by extension to all. Franklin understood that we learn from active interchange and life as much as from academic study. It is through the agency of the Junto that the Lending Library, the City Watch, and the American Philosophical Society were born. About the improvements brought by the City Watch, Franklin said: “by preparing the minds of the people for the change, it paved the way for the law obtained a few years later, when the members of our clubs were grown into more influence.”

How much Franklin could achieve by turning to the practical and mundane may be encapsulated by taking the house as a symbol. On so many levels his ideas contributed to a better livelihood. The so-called Franklin stove allowed a more efficient use of wood. The lightning rod protected the home from a major source of fires. Moving on to a larger scale, Franklin and his Junto were instrumental in bringing about the Union Fire Company, a collaborative means for protecting the city’s houses from fire. The mature entrepreneur could formulate sixteen years later the revolutionary idea of the Union Fire Insurance Company, allowing the extension of the services of the Union Fire Company to reach a much larger part of the population.

Franklin and the Spiritual America

Franklin’s role wasn’t limited to the depth of his scientific and humanitarian work. As early as 1764, he was appropriately called the “First American.” For Franklin, America was an idea before it became a political task. What made America different from any nation until that time slowly matured in Franklin’s mind.

Over time he came to realize how entrenched were the commercial and economic interests intimately intertwined with the British Crown and Parliament. All of those he denounced cleverly or sarcastically in turn, often operating in disguise under cover of a pen name. The variety of articles, essays, and pamphlets culminated in “An Edict of the King of Prussia” and “Rules by Which A Great Empire May Be Reduced to a Small One.” The second in particular, written in 1773, can be considered a forerunner of the Declaration of Independence. In it the grievances of the colonists against the mother country were listed in twenty points. Franklin advised prudence but stood firm for American rights. Thus, it was only natural that he would assume a central role in the Continental Congress and the drafting of the Declaration of Independence. Behind the scenes he had walked in spirit the steps leading to independence.

Franklin’s idea of America evolved from a larger universal idea of empire. It was almost a world federation before it turned by necessity into a specifically American federal system. The idea of the union of different parts—a sort of world brotherhood—emanated from Franklin’s lifelong involvement with Freemasonry. After all, his spiritual brethren stretched to both sides of the ocean, as Franklin’s later participation in French Freemasonry proved.

It was as a man of the world at large that Franklin promoted the idea of America in Europe. The American diplomat knew that if America were to become a new reality in the world, it had to overcome deeply engrained cultural habits. While at home

Washington was devising new ways to fight a war of education, Franklin was fighting the diplomatic war that could win America's independence. He knew that he had to win over the French people. He also knew that he had to inaugurate a new era in international relations by trying to move away from political alliances and entanglements. He chose to focus on the arena of economic reciprocity—clearly stated mutual advantages rather than delicate balances of power at the mercy of a volatile political climate. In order to achieve this goal he had to prevail over others such as Lee and Adams who still operated within the old frame of mind.

Franklin's career reached its summit at the Constitutional Convention. There he proposed Washington for president of the Convention, a major step in creating consensus. Franklin, as the eldest participant, was respected for his wisdom. It wasn't his ideas that won the delegates over—they were often in the minority—but rather his faith in the future and his ability to reach fruitful compromises.

That Franklin's contribution was possible at all is in great part due to the vibrancy of American civil life in his times and the role that ideas played among the founding fathers. Franklin's legacy to the present lays stress on the role of culture and spirituality as the guiding forces behind social and political change. Thus, he can truly stand as an example of cultural/spiritual activist and an inspiration for present times.