

## SSU OLLI, Week Four: The Many Faces of Benjamin Franklin OLLI Handout

Mick Chantler, Instructor      mickchantler@gmail.com

Franklin is the one founder who does not seem to take himself too seriously. Rather, he seems to be slyly winking at us down through the corridors of time. While Washington's colleagues were reluctant to even touch the great man on the shoulder, and would never dream of addressing him by his first name, Franklin practically invites us to call him by his nickname 'Ben.' The most significant founding fathers—Adams, Jefferson, Hamilton, Madison—have often been called 'marble men,' austere, filled with patriarchal gravitas. Not Franklin; he is clearly one of us, a flesh and blood son of the working class who looks at us with twinkling eyes over the bifocals he invented. His letters and autobiography are redolent with a chatty and earthy irony, devoid of that pompous orotund rhetoric that often characterize the works of the other founders. He could almost be a contemporary man, a friend, or acquaintance from work. (Especially if you worked in a fast-paced urban environment, were upwardly mobile, and fascinated with new ventures and challenges.) He would have been right at home in today's information revolution—columnist David Brooks described him as our founding Yuppie. We can easily imagine him as one of those "techie" types, trying to figure out the latest computer program or social media application. Most of us would find him charming, enjoyable to be around, and endlessly entertaining. But perhaps we would be somewhat uneasy about sharing thoughts with someone who was always "inventing himself," refashioning his persona constantly and polishing his image in order to facilitate his rise in the world. Franklin was the quintessential man on the go, both literally and figuratively. We could never be certain that the Ben we were enjoying an after dinner drink was the same Ben who would socialize with The Boss later that night.

But no one can question the magnitude of his contributions to the early Republic. He was, without question, early America's most resourceful scientist, inventor, entrepreneur, foreign policy expert, and political philosopher. He perfected clean-burning stoves and proved that lightning was electricity. He wrote about and charted the Gulf Stream, and speculated about why colds were contagious. He was the most civic minded of all the founding fathers, organizing the nation's first lending library, a university, learned societies, and a fire department.

Perhaps the most impressive line on Franklin's resume is under the heading "Education." He is the very model of the Life Long Learner—a man who was completely self-taught, who never attended college (indeed, he only had two or three years of any formal schooling) yet was honored by an adoring public both here and in Europe as "Dr. Franklin." He is one of those

amazing and inspiring auto-didacts, like Hamilton, Washington, and Lincoln, who did not need ivy covered walls to stimulate his creativity. Such self-sufficient and self-motivated men and women deserve our undying admiration—they are the best example of the power of good old American self-determination.

Yet for all his accomplishments, Franklin's reputation has been subjected to a withering fire over the past two hundred years. Artists, writers, and romantic spiritual-seekers in particular have found Franklin's 'bourgeois' sentiments and values to be crass and materialistic. As historian and biographer Gordon Wood put it, "He is Babbitry and Main Street rolled into one." The English novelist D.H. Lawrence launched a fierce salvo during the 1920s, attacking Franklin for embodying all that was disgusting about modern America: its obsession with money-making, its vulgarity, and its dull superficiality. "I'm not going to be turned into a virtuous little automaton as Benjamin would have me," Lawrence wrote. "'This is good, that is bad. Turn the little handle and let the good tap flow,' saith Benjamin, and all America with him. Oh America! Oh Benjamin! And I just utter a long loud curse against Benjamin and the American corral." Long before Lawrence's indictment, Franklin's own countrymen had come to the same conclusion: Edgar Allen Poe, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, and Mark Twain had all condemned the practical, everyday 'get-along' philosophy of the good Doctor. Despite such denunciations, historians still rank him as one of the two or three most significant of the Founders.

It should be noted that Franklin's critics are generally intellectuals, poets, and imaginative writers. It is to be expected that creative artists would scorn such a level-headed, pragmatic, and frankly upwardly mobile outlook. But social mobility—the restless and endless efforts toward 'self-improvement'—has allowed millions of Americans to materially improve their lot through dint of hard-work, self-discipline, and, yes, sometimes some judicious apple-polishing. Is that such a bad thing? One could argue that Abraham Lincoln, Bill Clinton, and Steve Jobs are all Benjamin Franklin's step-children. Would we really want to jettison such a social ethic? I don't think so.