

Welcome to another edition of *Self*, a podcast where you join me, Jacob Craig, as I research the areas of self-improvement and self-discovery. I am a researcher and author and my mission with this podcast is to simply share what I am learning in hopes you get as much value as I do. This podcast covers several topics, including health, fitness, motivation, personality types, self-worth, and more so that we can develop ourselves into who we strive to be and reach new heights both personally and professionally.

This episode will be covering lessons from the one and only Benjamin Franklin through what I learned from reading Walter Isaacson's book, *Benjamin Franklin – An American Life*. I will give a summary of the book while doing my best to cover the most significant parts of Franklin's life and follow it by discussing important principles that Franklin had throughout his life. There are many lessons to be learned from him and so this episode will be *filled* with value.

On that note, let's get started...

Before I delve into *Benjamin Franklin – An American Life*, I'd like to briefly talk about the author, Walter Isaacson. As I read this book, I fell in love with his writing style. He has a way of making you feel like you are there with Ben Franklin and provides us with what feels like such a clear image of not only who he was but the times that he lived in and the role he played. Walter Isaacson is most known for books on who Ray Dalio would call "Shapers" – people who have great ideas and build them out continuously – so along with Ben Franklin, he has also written autobiographies on Albert Einstein, Leonardo Da Vinci, Steve Jobs, and more.

From digging into Isaacson while reading Benjamin Franklin, I also found out that he was a writer for Time Magazine, former CEO of CNN, former CEO of the Aspen Institute (a wonderful place where people share ideas and inspiration), and also podcast creator & host of *Trailblazers with Walter Isaacson*. Trailblazers is an incredible work and worth checking out as well – Isaacson takes us through the history of specific things like cinema, AI, and space exploration while interviewing people but putting it together as a story. I used to struggle with staying interested in history classes but Isaacson makes me think that most history books from school or that I've read in the past were just too dull – I needed someone like Isaacson to tell a story rather than just lay out facts.

Now as I discuss the book, I will start with a summary of Franklin's life and follow it with a handful of insights that display principles that Franklin had in his work and life...

Benjamin Franklin – An American Life is really an extraordinary book overall. Isaacson takes you chronologically through Franklin's 84 years between 1706 and 1790 and, as I mentioned before, it truly feels like you are with him on his journey. He went from growing up in Boston, then moving to Philadelphia with very little except his skill as a printer, then later journeying back and forth from London, and then to Paris... and with each place he went, his lifestyle and his mission would completely change. This book is near 500 pages but it is just crammed full of history and insights from Franklin - excerpts from his letters, his autobiography, and accounts from the people who knew him best. While I won't be able to capture everything, I will do my best to discuss many of the larger lessons that reveal to us how Franklin influenced American culture and key parts to his character.

Ben Franklin really was a complex character who wore many different hats. Up until he was about 40, his main focus was his skill in the business of printing. After helping his brother as an apprentice in his printing shop in Boston, he had traveled to Philadelphia on his own when he was 17 and simply helped out where he could. He then was persuaded by the Pennsylvania governor to relocate to London in order to learn more about type so that he would be better off starting his own business in the trade when he returned to Philadelphia. When he came back, Franklin proved himself industrious and had a long road to success. He became the first person in America to manufacture type, he would work late nights to make sure mistakes were fixed and projects got finished on time, and even when he could have afforded a lending hand, he chose to do the work himself and would show it off, even literally carting rolls of paper through the city to his shop while he was very successful.

Throughout his years, Franklin was always a writer and when he created his *Poor Richard's Almanac*, his shop really started to develop and he was able to expand his business into an empire, selling thousands of copies and setting up shops out of state. At the age of 42, Franklin decided to retire from printing so that he could focus on other things. Along with being a writer, he also had always been a reader of science and philosophy and by this time he had shown himself as an inventor, creating a fireplace that would prevent smoke from spreading through the house. Since this was a major issue at the time, he had assisted many in Philadelphia personally and shared this invention through his publications.

Now that he was retired, he was able to focus on science and inventions. Here is a list of just some:

1. His most popular inventions were involving electricity – being able to generate static electricity as well as a way to capture electricity in leyden jars, developing the first battery, creating the lightning rod (which ended up being tested and utilized not only in the colonies but also throughout Great Britain), and more. An interesting fact that I did not know until reading this was what that he even created the terminology of “positive” and “negative” charges.
2. He created an instrument called the glass armonica, which consisted of a series of glass bowls of various sizes put together on a spindle that would create tones by pressing down on them with your finger. There was a foot pedal, which rotated the bowls continuously and added water so that the tones could be created. Franklin would use this instrument to simply entertain guests

but it caught on in Italian music for a time and even had pieces written and played by Mozart and Beethoven.

3. When his brother was in need of a catheter, they still used metal at the time so he was the first to design the plastic catheter.

These three examples really show the range of projects Franklin involved himself in and this doesn't cover the experiments he would create to test theories. He seemed to have a fascination with water and theorized weather, the speed of boats, and more by testing the temperatures and depths of waters as he traveled across the Atlantic. He also studied animals, human behavior, the common cold, and farts. He wrote about how wonderful it would be to have something you could consume that would make your farts smell pleasant rather than putrid. Above all, when it came to Franklin and the sciences, he believed it was best to approach science and inventions with curiosity and then make them practical if able.

An interesting fact about Franklin and his inventions is that he decided not to patent any of them and preferred to share them openly. For example, after he declined a lucrative patent offered by the governor of Pennsylvania for the fireplace that he invented, he stated, "As we enjoy great advantages from the inventions of others, we should be glad of an opportunity to serve others, we should be glad of an opportunity to serve others by any invention of ours, and this we should do freely and generously."

With this mindset, it's difficult to make sense of patents and copyrights – are we helping ourselves and our society or are we limiting it?

(Pause)

So as you can tell, for most of his life, Franklin kept himself busy. One of his mottos was that, "Lost time is never found again." Even while inventing and theorizing, Franklin also played an incredible role in Philadelphia's community: with starting the first subscription-based lending library in the colonies, assembling a fire corps, as well as founding and developing the principles for a school that would eventually become the University of Pennsylvania – just to name a few ways.

Between his civic improvement projects, his inventions, and his work with the *Poor Richard's Almanac*, Franklin was able to form strong relationships, get involved in politics, and be held in high regards in both the colonies and Great Britain. When he was 45, he was voted into a seat on the Pennsylvania Assembly and would be sent on missions to improve the colonies' international relationships and be the voice of the colonies in London and then later in France.

While Franklin was in London between the ages of 65 and 69, the tension between the colonies and Great Britain rose more and more. Franklin's intentions at the beginning of his journey were to negotiate with Britain but as Britain started to reinforce taxes and tariffs, the colonies grew more radical against their rule until it was decided they needed to fight for their independence. After living much of his life in both the colonies and London, and after creating strong ties with leaders from both, to see the ties he was negotiating for be broken was difficult for him. To describe this, I'll use Walter Isaacson's words as this period of his life ended:

"[Franklin] spent his last day in London with his old friend and scientific partner Joseph Priestley. People who did not know Franklin, Priestly wrote, sometimes found him reserved, even cold. But that day, as they discussed the looming war and read from the newspapers, he grew very emotional. For a while, the tears in his eyes made it impossible for him to read."

Franklin was not back home in Philadelphia long before he was sent on his mission to France at the age of 70. There, he quickly adopted the French lifestyle and stopped worrying so much about not wasting any of his time and working late day after day. Instead, he would welcome the women and children who came to visit him and join them for dinners regularly or stay up late playing chess and cribbage with friends. His role in diplomacy was a strong one even though he took more of a passive approach than some diplomats of the time like John Adams, who had joined him for the majority of these years. I found this a very interesting time to learn about, with how careful Franklin had to be in order to get the French to assist the colonies in the revolution and how critical this was to our victory over Great Britain.

One fact about Franklin that shows the amount of influence that he had in the forming of the United States of America is that he was the only person to sign all four documents that were involved:

1. The Declaration of Independence
2. The Treaty of Alliance, Amity, and Commerce with France
3. The Treaty of Paris Between England, France, and the United States
4. The Constitution

He also developed what was his Albany Plan in 1754 and his Articles of Confederation in 1775. Out of all of these documents, Franklin's involvement in The Constitution is by far the most significant and one could say it was his last major contribution.

At the Constitutional Convention, he was possibly the person who argued most for democracy. Many of the others thought that the concept of democracy was dangerous. And as Walter Isaacson states, Franklin "held true to a fundamental ideal with unwavering and at times heroic fortitude: a faith in the wisdom of the common citizen that was manifest in an appreciation for democracy and an opposition to

all forms of tyranny.” He had such a strong faith in the culture that was being created in the colonies and in the fact that the common people could build a strong society.

Franklin had some ideas that almost no other founding fathers agreed on, including government officials not having salaries, believing the character of government officials would be better without motives of money involved. While he knew arguments would hold almost no ground, he felt it important to lay out all of his opinions and encouraged others to do the same. Eventually, this brought the Convention to become an exhausting battle of views – Franklin compared it to a two-headed snake approaching a twig, unable to decide to go left or right and he brought to light that everyone in the room would need to compromise. Isaacson states at multiple points how Franklin saw compromise not only as a practical approach but also a moral one, being able to respect all opinions.

To show the impact that Franklin had on the Constitution, I will read an excerpt from the book which includes his final remarks as well as some words from Walter Isaacson:

****Read end of p. 457-start of p.458****

So this concludes my brief summary of Benjamin Franklin’s life based on *Benjamin Franklin – An American Life* by Walter Isaacson. You got to know his general involvement in the printing industry, in science and technology, and in politics and diplomacy. Much is missed in this summary, which is why I’d like to include some additional points that show his principles and character on a deeper level.

The three additional points I will discuss are:

1. Franklin’s influence on the American character by recommending we be industrious and useful.
2. Franklin’s admiration of the Native American culture and his defense against the hatred shown towards them.
3. Franklin’s beliefs on the importance of religious tolerance.

To the first point, perhaps the strongest part of Franklin’s character that shined through was his belief that in order to be successful in the States, one has to be diligent and useful. Throughout his life, he encouraged and showed by example how important middle-class virtues were to the strength of the colonies as well as the respect of the individual.

To best describe this, Walter Isaacson stated how Franklin believed “policies that encouraged hard work were good, but not because they led to great accumulations of private wealth; they were good because they increased the total well-being of a community and the dignity of every aspiring individual.”

Even when Franklin was very successful, he would practice frugality and encourage his family and friends to do the same. For example, he was very close to his grandchildren but when one of his grandsons had wrote him asking for a golden watch, Franklin replied “You should not tease me for expensive things that can be of little or no service to you.” Later, Franklin also defended his view that there should be higher taxes on luxury items than other goods.

He truly saw these middle-class virtues as being the backbone for America in order to become and remain strong and independent. In his times in Europe, he spent 3 months between Ireland and Scotland, which he had hoped would serve as models for the colonies’ relationship with Britain if agreements could be negotiated. What he had witnessed was that Irish farmers were being taken advantage of, working hard in horrible conditions compared to those in the colonies. This is what a culture made up of middle-class virtues has over a culture made up of upper-class leisure and likely why Franklin was such a strong advocate, especially in his later years.

At the age of 78, after being asked by many in Europe if they should move to America, he had written an essay titled “*Information for Those Who Would Remove to America.*” This essay discusses how many people had ignorant and mistaken views on what was in America – they thought of it as a land where one can easily become rich, as we’ve all heard, people talked about the roads literally being paved with gold. They may not have actually thought that was true but they did have the impression that one could easily purchase land, hire servants, and live on a great plantation. Franklin shuts down these ideas, stating that one needs to have an honest profession, calling, trade, or farm in order to live well. He also discusses in this essay how if those in America who live on plantations off the backs of servants were to look back at their ancestor’s occupations from the past ten generations, they would find artisans of all types (ploughmen, smiths, carpenters, weavers, shoemakers, etc.) and that these people are essentially good for nothing since they are not useful members of society in the same sense as their ancestors were. This was Franklin’s main point against slavery in his younger years but when he was older, he stated that it was Congress’s job to ensure people of all races have equal opportunities.

If you’d like to read the full essay titled *Information for “Those Who Would Remove to America,”* I was able to find it on founders.archive.gov and will post a link in the show notes.

This brings me to my second discussion point; something that Franklin showed interest in and defended throughout his life, the life and culture of the American Indian.

One note before I begin discussing this subject is that American Indian culture is something that I’ve always found interesting. I plan to educate myself more on Indian culture so there will likely be an

episode on that sooner or later, after I dive in and read a couple books so that I can come back with topics worth discussing.

To describe Franklins' feelings and observations of the Indian culture, here is a short passage from the book:

****read from p. 153****

Right here I feel the need to add a sidenote because just reading this passage reminds me of something meaningful for me. A few years back, one of my uncles had past away. He was the uncle at big family get-togethers who would make it a point to pull all of the children aside and have a meaningful conversation with them about their future, whether they were entering high school, starting their first job, entering college, or what-have-you he would have valuable advice that would reinforce your work ethic and attitude to whatever challenge was ahead. He had such a love for family and showed every single one of us that he cared deeply.

Well, one of the last conversations I had with him before he past ended with him saying, "The Indians had it right." And just to get the full picture out of him, I asked him what exactly he meant. His response was, "The way they lived in their tribes and were always surrounded by family."

I will never forget this. It makes me think of how nowadays when times change, families get further and further apart and that no matter what, we must keep close ties with our family, otherwise we lose sight of what life is all about.

(Pause)

Back to Franklin, when much of the nation didn't understand the Indians or seem to care to, Franklin spoke up against those that murdered them. When a group of Pennsylvanian frontiersmen called the Paxton Boys murdered 20 Indians, including men, women, and children, Franklin worked hard with the governor for justice to somehow be achieved and for the murdering to stop.

And I quote - "If an Indian injures me, does it follow that I may revenge that injury on all Indians?" Franklin asked. "The only crime of these poor wretches seems to have been that they had a reddish brown skin and black hair."

Then he goes on to say, “Should any man with a freckled face and red hair kill a wife or child of mine, [by this reasoning] it would be right for me to revenge it by killing all the freckled red-haired men, women, and children I could afterwards anywhere meet.”

To push his point, he also stated, “The guilt will lie on the whole land till justice is done on the murderers.”

I don't think I've ever heard such a powerful quote to describe the mentality we should have of any heinous act like this. Money, land, religion, politics, or what-have-you should not blind us from hateful acts of racism. “The guilt will lie on the whole land till justice is done on the murderers.”

What is most disturbing about this situation is that the governor decided to side with the Paxton boys by putting bounties on Indian scalps, male or female following the dispute. Sadly, the American government and the people didn't defend against racism as strong as they do today but obviously, people like Franklin have been outspoken or the people have voted in ways to allow for change to happen in order to create the beautiful melting pot we have today in our land of opportunity. This tangent could easily be a whole podcast in itself so I will stop there and move on to my third discussion point, moving from his principle of respecting people despite of their race to respecting people despite of religion.

No religious sect was ever a large part of Benjamin Franklin's personal life. He seemed to fill his time educating himself on ethics and practical matters and didn't invest his time in spiritual ones. That being said, there were certain preachers he admired and later in his life, he would admit to believing in one almighty being and had acknowledged the system of morals given by Jesus to be “the best the world ever saw or is likely to see.”

With all of this said, one of his principles that he preached was the need for religious tolerance. His words for atheists were, “You yourself may find it easy to live a virtuous life without the assistance afforded by religion but think how great a proportion of mankind consists of weak and ignorant men and women, and of inexperienced and inconsiderate youth of both sexes, who have need of the motives of religion to restrain them from vice.” Another profound quote. Put another way, if someone finds peace through faith, then who are you to judge simply because you did not need religion to find that same peace.

To explain this point further, I will discuss 2 parables that Franklin would recite to explain his view on this matter.

The first is called “A Parable Against Persecution” and it is a biblical parable that Franklin created when he was 54. The story is about Abraham, who is spending the night in his tent when he notices an old man under a tree. He asks the man to stay the night in his tent, where they first sit down to have dinner together. When they break bread, he notices the old man does not give thanks to God and this led to an altercation, where Abraham forces the man out of his tent violently. God comes to Abraham soon after, listens to Abraham after asking what had happened, and then responds saying, “Have I born with him these hundred ninety and eight Years, and nourished him, and cloathed him, notwithstanding his Rebellion against me, and couldst not thou, that art thyself a Sinner, bear him one Night?”

Once Abraham understands why God would be upset by this and that he had sinned, he returns to the old man, brings him back into his tent for the night, and gives the man gifts as he leaves the next day – and for this, God forgives the sin Abraham had committed.

What a short but insightful story. And if we think about the fact that Franklin took it upon himself to write a biblical parable – why don’t more people do this? If we treat biblical works as finished works, this is where trouble seems to brew since parts are taken literally even though they will completely contradict other parts of the scripture. If we were to allow changes in order to create a modernized scripture or to allow ourselves to develop our own parables, describing our families’ principles, how profound would that be? I know these questions would come with lots of argument but it is worth contemplating.

If you would like to read “A Parable Against Persecution” for yourself, I will leave a link in the show notes to where I was able to locate it on founders.archive.gov.

For Franklin’s second parable, I will read another brief passage from Walter Isaacson’s book:

****Read bottom of Page 371****

These two parables have a similar meaning but I decided to include both because of how important this idea was to Franklin. He would state how all religions have the same basic principles and he was quoted saying, “The best service to God is doing good to men.”

And with that, I’m going to conclude this episode on Benjamin Franklin. I hope that you were able to take away some valuable insights from him as I did after reading Walter Isaacson’s book and reading some of Franklin’s works. It is just incredible how much he was able to accomplish during his time – from his business to civic improvements to science to politics and everything else... And this is just a bird’s eye view of it! So I highly recommend you check out Walter Isaacson’s book titled *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* as well as Isaacson’s other works. Everything I’ve discussed in this episode

and more valuable references will be in the show notes if you want to dig down your own rabbit hole after listening to this.

I sincerely hope that you enjoyed this episode. I really find it valuable to go back through important books like this and take notes and I love having the ability to share it with you! That is why I do this. This is a very small part of the research I'm doing in order to better myself and I can say that this book is making me assess my personal principles and pursuits because our time here is certainly valuable.

Anyways thank you for listening. If you enjoyed this episode, here are three ways that you can help this podcast grow:

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And if you want to connect with me, my email is jake@inspiringleaderscollective.com and I am open to any comments or questions.

Thank you again, I hope you have an awesome day – let's go crush it and think about what we can do to be just a bit better than we were yesterday.

Alright, I'm out.