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The Relevance of Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* in Modern Self-Help Literature

The pursuit of happiness is a long treasured value in the United States and an inalienable right included in the Declaration of Independence. This pursuit was something Benjamin Franklin strived for throughout his entire life. He was a self-made man devoted to improving all aspects of his life and through a meticulous process, was quite successful. The idea of self-improvement is something that many Americans are obsessed with even today and it has turned into a multi-billion dollar industry. Self-help instructions can be found in almost any platform including books, newspaper and magazine articles, conferences, seminars, and even videos on YouTube made by “lifestyle” content creators. Though the day-to-day life of an American looks very different now than it did in 1784 when Franklin wrote part two of his *Autobiography*, the tactics of self-improvement he describes are still relevant and similar methods are often found in the modern formats utilized by the self-help industry.

Since the United States declared independence in 1776, the pursuit of happiness has been an unalienable right for all Americans and has become a very visible part of life in American society. Puritan settlers built this nation on their traditions and ideals of “hard work, education, the need for self-examination, discipline, and frugality” (Effing 147). Naturally, the idea of self-help, which is taking action to improve one’s own life in any or all aspects, has become essential to many people as it feeds the American hunger for self-identity and commanding one’s

own destiny (Effing 127). In accordance with American ideals, the capitalist economy has taken advantage of this obsession with self-help and turned it into what Neda Semani claims is an industry worth over eleven billion dollars. This industry includes newspaper and magazine articles, conferences, seminars, YouTube “lifestyle” content, and most historically popular, literature. Self-help literature typically consists of two paths which a reader might follow: “the path of endless effort and the path of absolute effortlessness” (McGee 142). The first being the constant reaching for something greater and the evaluation and modification of one’s actions to create change, and the latter being the idea that relaxing, being mindful, and taking life as it comes will make one a better and happier person.

Benjamin Franklin followed the path of endless effort in his “bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral perfection” (Franklin 300) which he detailed in part two of his *Autobiography*. The United States, at the time *Autobiography* was published, still held on to many Puritan ideals and “although educated as a Presbyterian, “Franklin is seminal in self-help literature because he disregarded any religious conception that we were naturally good or bad people, he saw us rather as blank slates designed for success.”” (qtd. in Effing 128). It is generally accepted in the self-help industry that Benjamin Franklin was among the first to publish self-help literature in the eighteenth century and is regarded as the father of self-help (Effing 128). In *Autobiography*, Franklin meticulously details his methods of improving himself and his life in the aspects of mental and physical health, productivity, and financial responsibility among others and he does so in a way that seems accessible and reasonable for the reader and inspires them to do the same in their own life. Tom Anderson states that “by reading this incredibly specific and actionable advice, the reader could make similar improvements to his own life.” Franklin has not only

inspired millions of readers with his approach to self-help, but he has also inspired many authors including Stephen R. Covey and his co-authors, A. Roger Merrill and Rebecca R. Merrill who write about the same strategies of constant evaluation and effort as a method of achieving happiness through self-improvement (McGee 143).

On his journey of self-help, Franklin came up with a detailed plan and strict regimen in which he focused on thirteen different virtues: temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, and humility. He would spend one week focusing on each one of these virtues and track his progress in a journal, attempting to perfect it by the end of the week. After completing one thirteen week cycle, he would start over again with the first virtue. Franklin also set strict daily schedules for himself and spent most of his day either working or educating himself while also including some time for reflection or meditation and for social interaction. Franklin also made efforts to stay physically fit and went on daily walks, which he describes in *Autobiography*, and was an avid swimmer. Franklin understood then that being physically healthy and fit improves one's happiness and makes success more easily attainable (McGee 154). Franklin's methods of pursuing happiness through self-help were ahead of their time. "Centuries before it became fashionable, Ben Franklin somehow understood the importance of a holistic approach to the self. His self-styled methods of personal improvement made an important connection between the mind, body and spirit." ("Wit and Wisdom"). The virtues he focused on improving on truly blanket parts of one's life and his method of focusing on one at a time, but working intently on that virtue, provides a workable and effective method that still inspires readers and authors and his strategies of constant self-evaluation and hard work are in agreement with the Puritan values of American

society at the time and have proven to be timeless as they are still used in the modern self-help industry. Modern self-help literature is not always one solid, cohesive genre. Many types of self-help methods co-exist and sometimes compete, though they all still seem to follow the Puritan values that were so important at the time of the publication of *Autobiography* and that Franklin bases his self-help strategies on (Effing 129).

The self-help literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries tend to focus on a few main themes, including self-awareness, physical fitness, productivity at work and in one's personal life, and financial responsibility. There are works of self-help that discuss these topics and there are many that focus on each one specifically, breaking them down and giving the "secrets" of how to be the best in each one. These are all aspects of life that Franklin was focused on improving in and the methods he used are seen in modern settings. McGee writes, "Echoing Benjamin Franklin's daybook and book of virtues in which he organized days around cultivating various virtues, [Stephen] Covey's time management system updates the old-fashioned notion of "virtues" with the more modern idea of "priorities.'" (153). The utilization of Franklin's methods of teaching self-help to the reader is not uncommon and systems of tracking daily habits as Franklin did are found in books such as *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* which includes a daily and weekly scheduling worksheet with areas to journal about how one feels at different points in the day and places to list one's daily priorities (Covey 166-67). Franklin planners, which consist of similar charts and named after the father of self-help, are marketed as a way to organize one's life and thus achieve peace of mind and happiness. These are all ways to constantly self-evaluate which Franklin preached in his *Autobiography*. Modern self-help insists

that this constant self-scrutiny leads to a happier life and better relationships with others. McGee writes,

“Endless mindfulness is also proposed by M. Scott Peck in his spiritual roadmap: “The third thing that a life of total dedication to the truth means , therefore, is a life of total honesty. It means a continuous and never-ending process of self monitoring to ensure that our communications--not only the words we say, but also the way we say them-- invariably reflect as accurately as humanly possible the truth or reality as we know it...”

(143)

This endless evaluation, though, is not limited to how one feels and much like Franklin constantly practiced self-help by educating himself, one common strategy in twentieth and twenty-first century self-help literature is improving one’s writing. This includes anything from making up narratives, writing reflections on one’s day, practicing sentence completion, and writing mission statements (McGee 155-56). Modern self-help often times instructs readers to spend time each day reflecting on these mission statements and other parts of life, just as Franklin reserved time for reflection twice a day. Authors such as Tony Robbins suggest spending time each morning setting goals for the day and recognizing what one is thankful for as well as what makes them happy (McGee 144).

The whole premise of self-help is to make changes in one’s life in order to see results and become a happier, better person. Not long after beginning his practice, Franklin started to notice results similar to those promised in the modern self-help literature. He stated, “The conversations I engag’d in went on more pleasantly. The modest way in which I propos’d my Opinions, procured them a reader Reception and less Contradiction; I had less Mortification when I was

found to be in the wrong, and I more easily prevail'd with others to give up their mistakes and join me when I happened to be in the right." (308). In other words, his interactions with those around him became easier, he seemed to become more likeable and sociable, and he overall became a happier and more successful person. These are exactly the results people practicing self-help strive to see. Self-help literature promises that readers will become more successful in their relationships, more financially secure, more physically fit or healthy, and, most importantly, will become happier people if they practice the methods described in the work.

Franklin's relevance in modern self-help literature has been debated as some view his methods as old-fashioned or outdated. The strategies of daily tracking and reflection are very personal and private which some authors argue is counter productive when trying to improve relationships, become more successful, and be happier. Ruth Whippen claims, "The absolute most important thing is to spend quality, present time with your family and friends... This is another reason why... mindfulness... can't make us happy. Those practices are all about... having a private experience." She also believes that it is unrealistic to think that an individual can remain focused on one virtue for a sustained period of time (qtd. in Semani). However, many people who practice strict daily regimens, constantly self-evaluate, and address the issues they find have experienced the results they were hoping to achieve. The methods of effort, practiced by Franklin, and effortlessness, praised by Whippen, both have their place and may both be effective, however Franklin's method has stood the test of time and seems to remain popular and relevant, even having been written over two hundred fifty years ago.

Since the United States declared independence in 1776, the pursuit of happiness has been major player in American society. Benjamin Franklin constantly sought happiness in his life by

means of following daily routines and focusing on thirteen virtues. When he published his methods in his *Autobiography*, he became the father of self-help literature, a now booming industry in the United States. His strategies have been updated and modernized to fit the needs of the twenty-first century American, but they are still widely used among self-help authors. Much like Franklin did, the people who follow these instructions seem to see positive changes in their lives and arguably become happier, more successful individuals in at least some aspect. Though Franklin's *Autobiography* was written over a quarter of a millenia ago, the methods of self-help contained in it remain widely praised, used, and relevant in the modern industry.

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