Project of Moral Perfection: Benjamin Franklin’s List of Virtues and Purpose

• **Compelling Question**
  o How can being virtuous help you to achieve your purpose?

• **Virtue**
  • **Purpose**
  • **Definition** – Purpose is my answer to the question “why do I exist?” It is the reason for which I exist; it is my goal, that thing to which my actions are directed. It is our answer to the question “what are you for?”

• **Lesson Overview**
  o In this lesson, students will learn about how Benjamin Franklin purposefully tried to be virtuous throughout his life.

• **Objectives**
  o Students will analyze Benjamin Franklin’s attempts to be virtuous in his life.
  o Students will examine how Franklin was purposeful in the way that he lived.
  o Students will apply their knowledge about purpose to their own lives.

• **Background**
  o In 1706, Benjamin Franklin was born in Boston and heard a great deal about morality and religion in the Puritan society. As a young man, however, he rebelled against authority, including as a printer’s apprentice under his brother James, and questioned all accepted wisdom. Indeed, he liked to argue and was seen as disputatious and a bit of a gadfly.

Realizing that he was rubbing people the wrong way and making as many enemies as friends, Franklin thought about reforming his character. His first attempt at improving himself was to stop being so argumentative and trying to win every debate. He learned an important lesson in moderation and prudence.

After running away to Philadelphia, he set up a printer’s shop and began making something of himself as an adult. He started a plan to practice virtue. He also took part in civic life in Philadelphia, beginning with creating a subscription library, and spent the next few decades creating civic institutions including a volunteer fire department, a system of night watchmen, and educational academies. He would enter politics and serve as a member of the Continental Congress, a diplomat to France, and a delegate to the Constitutional Convention.

• **Vocabulary**
  o Puritan
  o Disputatious
  o Gadfly
  o Temperance
  o Silence
  o Order
  o Resolution
  o Frugality
  o Industry
  o Sincerity
  o Justice
  o Moderation
  o Cleanliness
  o Tranquility
  o Chastity
  o Quaker
  o Aristotle
  o Enlightenment
  o Philosophers
  o Vice
  o Habitude
  o Mastery
  o Fleeting
- Harmonious
- Diplomat
- Statesman
- Utility
- Endeavor
- Cultivated
- Amiability
- Civility
- Affability
- Vignettes
- Infallibility

- **Introduce Text**
  - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.

- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
  - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
    - What challenges are you facing?
    - What fears or concerns might you have?
    - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?

- **Observation Questions**
  - What was Benjamin Franklin's identity?
  - What was Franklin's purpose in developing his plan for moral perfection?
  - How did Franklin attempt to achieve moral perfection? Did he succeed? Why or why not?
  - How did Benjamin Franklin’s purposeful life help to advance freedom for himself as well as for others?

- **Discussion Questions**
  - Discuss the following questions with your students.
    - What is the historical context of the narrative?
    - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
    - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
    - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
    - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
    - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
    - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
    - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?

- **Additional Resources**
Handout A: Project of Moral Perfection: Benjamin Franklin’s List of Virtues and Purpose

Background

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Realizing that he was rubbing people the wrong way and making as many enemies as friends, Franklin thought about reforming his character. His first attempt at improving himself was to stop being so argumentative and trying to win every debate. He learned an important lesson in moderation and prudence.

After running away to Philadelphia, he set up a printer’s shop and began making something of himself as an adult. He started a plan to practice virtue. He also took part in civic life in Philadelphia, beginning with creating a subscription library, and spent the next few decades creating civic institutions including a volunteer fire department, a system of night watchmen, and educational academies. He would enter politics and serve as a member of the Continental Congress, a diplomat to France, and a delegate to the Constitutional Convention.

Narrative

In the late 1720s, a young Philadelphia printer sat down at a table by candlelight and opened up a small leather book with clean ivory pages. Benjamin Franklin was sitting down to plan a “bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection” as he called it. He was not a struggling person who was trying to turn his life around after a series of bad decisions. Indeed, Franklin was recently married and was a successful printer who was committed to serving the community as an emerging civic leader and had recently started a subscription library. With a few fits and starts, he jotted down twelve virtues that he would try to follow.

Franklin’s list included temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, and chastity. When he shared his list with a Quaker friend of his, Franklin was rankled to learn that many people thought him proud. As a result, he added humility to the list. His plan was to fix his attention on one virtue at a time so that he could “be Master of that” before moving on to the practice of another virtue. He would spend a week on each virtue and then go down the list in thirteen weeks before starting over again. He would thus be able to cycle through the list four times a year as he set out to mold his character. He thought this would be a prudent approach rather than tackling all his vices at once: “Like him who having a Garden to weed, does not attempt to eradicate all the bad Herbs at once, which would exceed his Reach and his Strength, but works on one of the Beds at a time, and having accomplish’d the first proceeds to a second.”

Franklin’s plan of moral perfection was not original and stretched back to Aristotle and the Ancient Greeks, Roman philosophers, the Bible, and Enlightenment philosophers. These sources agreed that good character is formed by the practice of virtue and bad character by the practice of vice. Over time, the practice of virtue or vice becomes ingrained in one’s habits, which are hard to break, and in one’s character. “My intention being to acquire the Habitude of all these Virtues,” he wrote, with an emphasis on habit. Franklin attempted to gain mastery over his vices and passions as he governed himself. This self-mastery would lead to Franklin’s true happiness rather than the fleeting happiness and unfortunate consequences of excess pleasures. This was important in a self-governing society such as the American colonies since representative government would only work with a good and virtuous citizenry. It also demonstrated Franklin’s civility and made for a more harmonious society.

So, Franklin began his plan supported by his friends and his wife, Deborah. He was diligent about launching his project and kept track of his failures in his book. He was a little disappointed by what he discovered about himself. “I was surpris’d to find myself so much fuller of Faults than I had imagined,” he wrote. This feeling was outweighed by “the Satisfaction of seeing them diminish.” Franklin was tripped up most by his failures to achieve order especially in his business as he juggled printing, meeting with customers, and organizing all his paperwork. However, he kept at his project and worked hard to improve his character for his own happiness and to help create a better society in Philadelphia.
While Franklin later admitted that in time he only went through the list of virtues once per year and then only once every few years because of his significant public responsibilities as a diplomat and statesman, he defended the utility of his plan of moral perfection and thought it very worthwhile. In his *Autobiography*, he stated that he “never arrived at the Perfection I had been so ambitious of obtaining,” and, indeed, “fell far short of it.” But, that was not really the point. Franklin had learned a valuable lesson about character at a relatively young age. The endeavor was a great success because it made him “a better and happier Man than I otherwise should have been, if I had not attempted it.”

Whether or not Franklin marked down his failures and successes in the practice of virtue in a little book, he had launched a lifelong project of moral perfection and carefully cultivated his character. This sense of purpose reaped excellent rewards for Franklin as he became one of the most highly respected and successful diplomats and statesmen of the Founding era. He was well-liked for his amiability, moderation, and civility, and he translated this into getting things done.

Franklin's character made him an especially effective diplomat in France during the 1770s and 1780s as he won a treaty of alliance and then a final peace treaty from Great Britain. The French people adored him and put his image on Chinaware, medallions, and prints. Whereas John Adams struggled in his diplomatic mission in France because of his combativeness, Franklin was more successful because of his affability.

Franklin's character even helped to shape the Constitutional Convention. He counseled moderation when the delegates were heatedly deadlocked and when he told vignettes in his garden. One story warned of a two-headed snake that was caught up on a stick and could not move because neither one wanted to compromise. On the last day of the Convention, Franklin urged each of his fellow delegates to sign the Constitution and “doubt a little of his own infallibility.” He called for humility in the face of the monumental task before them.

When he died in 1790, Franklin had achieved the purpose he sought. He was not perfect, but he had lived a life trying to achieve moral perfection. The plan he conceived in his early twenties had served a noble purpose: it made him a better person, helped him be successful as a statesman during the American Founding, and had helped contribute to making the world a better place.