

Behind Ben Franklin's project for achieving moral perfection lies what seems to be a common human impulse—the need to simplify life, to get at the root of what's fundamental to us. In 1986, Robert Fulghum (fool'jum) published some thoughts of his own about how to live a full and happy life, in a best-selling book called *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*.



from *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*

Robert Fulghum

Each spring, for many years, I have set myself the task of writing a personal statement of belief: a Credo. When I was younger, the statement ran for many pages, trying to cover every base, with no loose ends. It sounded like a Supreme Court brief, as if words could resolve all conflicts about the meaning of existence.

The Credo has grown shorter in recent years—sometimes cynical, sometimes comical, sometimes bland—but I keep working at it. Recently I set out to get the statement of personal belief down to one page in simple terms, fully understanding the naïve idealism that implied. . . .

I realized then that I already know most of what's necessary to live a meaningful life—that it isn't all that complicated. *I know it.* And have known it for a long, long time. Living it—well, that's another matter, yes? Here's my Credo:

All I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate-school mountain, but there in the sandpile at Sunday School. These are the things I learned:

- Share everything.
- Play fair.
- Don't hit people.
- Put things back where you found them.
- Clean up your own mess.
- Don't take things that aren't yours.
- Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.
- Wash your hands before you eat.
- Flush.
- Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.
- Live a balanced life—learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.
- Take a nap every afternoon.
- When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.
- Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the Styrofoam cup: The roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that.
- Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the Styrofoam cup—they all die. So do we.
- And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned—the biggest word of all—LOOK.

. . . Think what a better world it would be if we all—the whole world—had cookies and milk about three o'clock every afternoon and then lay down with our blankies for a nap. Or if all governments had as a basic policy to always put things back where they found them and to clean up their own mess.

And it is still true, no matter how old you are—when you go out into the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together.

MAKING MEANINGS

First Thoughts

1. If you had to name one character trait that you think made Franklin a success, what would it be? Review the chart you made in your Reader's Log to help you decide.

Shaping Interpretations

2. Franklin examines his actions and motives, discussing them at length throughout the *Autobiography*. Yet many of his personality traits are revealed through his actions, not through direct statements. What does the difficult journey from Boston to Philadelphia reveal about the character of young Franklin?
3. What does Franklin's project for moral perfection reveal about his views of human nature and his attitudes toward education? Do you agree or disagree with his views?
4. Franklin ends his list of virtues with "humility." Did you find evidence of pride—the opposite of humility—in his history? If so, where?
5. Which virtue on Franklin's list do you think is most important? least important? Why?

Connecting with the Text

6. Franklin resolves to acquire certain virtues through which he believes he will improve himself. Think of one of your own past resolutions, perhaps one you made on a New Year's Eve.

Reviewing the Text

- a. Why did Franklin decide to leave Boston secretly? How did he raise money for the journey from Boston to New York?
- b. Today the trip from Boston to Philadelphia on a comfortable train takes five hours. Trace the stages of Franklin's journey to Philadelphia.
- c. What was Franklin's condition in life when he arrived in Philadelphia?
- d. What virtue does Franklin place first on his list for achieving moral perfection? Why?

Were you able to keep it? Do you think making a resolution, as Franklin did, is a productive way of improving oneself? Explain.

Extending the Text

7. Compare Robert Fulghum's list of things learned in kindergarten (Connections, page 96) to Franklin's list of virtues and their precepts. Which list, in general, do you think would apply more broadly to people today? In general, how does Franklin's scheme for arriving at moral perfection compare with self-help books available today?

Challenging the Text

8. Reactions to Franklin's *Autobiography* have sometimes been negative. Read the following comment by Mark Twain. Based on Twain's tone, how does Twain feel about Franklin? Do you agree or disagree with Twain's assessment? Why?

[Franklin had] a malevolence which is without parallel in history; he would work all day and then sit up nights and let on to be studying algebra by the light of a smoldering fire, so that all the boys might have to do that also, or else have Benjamin Franklin thrown upon them. Not satisfied with these proceedings, he had a fashion of living wholly on bread and water, and studying astronomy at mealtime—a thing which has brought affliction to millions of boys since, whose fathers had read Franklin's pernicious biography.

—Mark Twain

9. As we read any **autobiography**, we have to ask ourselves if the writer is creating a character called "Myself," the same way that a novelist creates a fictional character. Has Franklin, the great inventor, invented an idealized version of himself in his autobiography? In other words, is he trying to make himself look good? Or do you think he is presenting himself just as he really was, warts and all? Explain and justify your opinion.