



Ben Franklin: What Good Have I Done Today?

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Cool Ben Franklin

I've shared a couple of earlier pieces by Maira Kalman that are a part of her *And the Pursuit of*



Happiness series in *The Washington Post*. Her [most recent one](#) is about Benjamin Franklin and America's can-do spirit of creativity and invention. Franklin truly was an amazing character. Kalman recounts many of his accomplishments, but they are even more impressive when you realize that Franklin was entirely self-made. He was the youngest of *seventeen* children—his father was a Boston candle maker—and he was an indentured servant to his older brother's newspaper. He ran away illegally to Philadelphia. He had only two years of formal schooling, but he managed to teach himself French, Latin, Italian, Spanish, math, and science. He was focused on doing good—note the chart in Kalman's piece that shows his evening question to himself: What good have I done today? Franklin also was a key figure in the creation of the United States. According to Jay Winik in *The Great Upheaval—America and the Birth of the Modern World 1788-1800* (a wonderful book that I am reading and highly recommend), Franklin was the only Founding Father to sign all four decisive documents of the republic. "He helped write the Declaration of Independence; he secured the alliance with France; he assisted in negotiating the peace with England; and he sat in the conference that drafted the Constitution."

Most of the Declaration of Independence was Thomas Jefferson's work, however, and he apparently was miserable when other members of the Continental Congress debated the draft and cut at least one-fourth of his original work and amended many other passages. According to David McCullough in his book, *John Adams*, Franklin was seated beside Jefferson during the debates and consoled him with the following story. He "had once known a hatter who wished to have a sign made saying, *John Thompson, Hatter, Makes and Sells Hats for Ready Money*, this to be accompanied by a picture of a hat. But the man had chosen to ask the opinion of friends, with the result that one word after another was removed as superfluous and redundant, until at last the sign was reduced to Thompson's name and the picture of a hat." I doubt that it made Jefferson feel any better.