Playing Well with Others

The world being what it is and we being what we are, cooperation is necessary to ensure that our needs are met. The challenge is that, the world being what it is and we being what we are, this cooperation isn’t always easy. Resources are limited and desires are conflicting, so it makes good sense to teach our children some basic rules that, if generally followed, will tend to make interpersonal interactions maximally helpful and minimally hurtful. “Share your toys,” “Say ‘Please’ and ‘Thank you,’” and “Try to make up if you’ve made someone cry” are sound pieces of advice, and most of us have seen how badly things can go wrong if these pieces of advice aren’t followed. It’s always important to play well with others because, if we don’t, our interactions with other people won’t effectively do what those interactions are supposed to do; they won’t foster the cooperation and fellow-feeling essential to our physical survival and psychological health.

Benjamin Franklin, in his Autobiography, makes similar points about conversations. They are designed, he maintains, to advance specific ends; and unless they are conducted according to some general rules, they simply won’t serve their purpose. Franklin gives us some advice about how to think well with others. In this short discussion, we’ll consider his advice.

Thinking Well with Others

According to Franklin, the purpose of conversation is “giving or receiving information or pleasure” (page 11), the attainment of truth or enjoyment. A conversation, in short, is not a debate and conversational partners are not opponents to be pummeled into submission. This is such an important point for Franklin that he repeatedly notes how pernicious the habit of disputation can become. Recalling an early friendship, Franklin writes

We sometimes disputed, and very fond we were of argument, and very desirous of confuting one another, which disputatious turn, by the way, is apt to become a very bad habit, making people often extremely disagreeable in company by the contradiction that is necessary to bring it into practice; and thence, besides souring and spoiling the conversation, is productive of disgusts and, perhaps enmities where you may have occasion for friendship. (Page 9)

This theme re-emerges in Franklin’s reflections about subsequent acquaintances. Of a local government official, Franklin writes

1 All page numbers refer to the copy of Franklin’s Autobiography included with this lesson.
In my journey to Boston … I met at New York with our new governor, Mr. Morris, just arriv'd there from England, with whom I had been before intimately acquainted. He brought a commission to supersede Mr. Hamilton, who, tir'd with the disputes his proprietary instructions subjected him to, had resign'd. Mr. Morris ask'd me if I thought he must expect as uncomfortable an administration. I said, "No; you may, on the contrary, have a very comfortable one, if you will only take care not to enter into any dispute with the Assembly." "My dear friend," says he, pleasantly, "how can you advise my avoiding disputes? You know I love disputing; it is one of my greatest pleasures; however, to show the regard I have for your counsel, I promise you I will, if possible, avoid them." He had some reason for loving to dispute, being eloquent, an acute sophister, and, therefore, generally successful in argumentative conversation. He had been brought up to it from a boy, his father, as I have heard, accustoming his children to dispute with one another for his diversion, while sitting at table after dinner; but I think the practice was not wise; for, in the course of my observation, these disputing, contradicting, and confuting people are generally unfortunate in their affairs. They get victory sometimes, but they never get good will, which would be of more use to them.

Franklin was so committed to the principle that truth and enjoyment, rather than competition and debate, are the proper guiding ends of conversation, that he wrote this principle into the rules for the Junto, a discussion group that he founded and that endured for over forty years. Conversations in the Junto, Franklin stipulated, were “to be conducted in the sincere spirit of inquiry after truth, without fondness for dispute, or desire of victory” (page 35).

When conversation is viewed as a road to truth and enjoyment and not as a way to impress or score debating points, it’s easy to perceive the importance of humility. As Franklin writes,

My list of virtues contain’d at first but twelve; but a Quaker friend having kindly informed me that I was generally thought proud; that my pride show’d itself frequently in conversation; that I was not content with being in the right when discussing any point, but was overbearing, and rather insolent, of which he convinc'd me by mentioning several instances; I determined endeavouring to cure myself, if I could, of this vice or folly … and I added Humility to my list… (page 49)

Pride, or the desire to be perceived as right regardless of the facts or the pain to which one must put those who disagree, is obviously not conducive to the attainment of truth or pleasure. Humility is a necessary means to our conversational ends, and Franklin discusses its multiple facets.

First, a humble attitude will encourage us to learn from others. “[I]n conversation,” Franklin writes, “[v]irtue is] obtain'd rather by the use of the ears than of the tongue” (page 48), and so he urges us to listen well, to bracket our own preconceptions in order to understand what the other person really thinks.

Franklin maintains that when we do speak, expressing opinions too strongly runs counter to the ends of giving and receiving information or pleasure. As he writes
...if you would inform, a positive and dogmatical manner in advancing your sentiments may provoke contradiction and prevent a candid attention. If you wish information and improvement from the knowledge of others, and yet at the same time express yourself as firmly fix'd in your present opinions, modest, sensible men, who do not love disputation, will probably leave you undisturbed in the possession of your error. And by such a manner, you can seldom hope to recommend yourself in pleasing your hearers, or to persuade those whose concurrence you desire. (page 11)

Instead of using terms like “certainly,” and “unquestionably,” Franklin urges us to employ expressions such as “I believe,” “I think,” and “It seems to me.” “[I] dropt my abrupt contradiction and positive argumentation,” Franklin writes of his own self-reformation, “and put on the humble inquirer and doubter” (page 10). In short, Franklin recommends that we express our own beliefs modestly, in a way that acknowledges their possible falsehood.

Ideally, of course, we should honestly acknowledge to ourselves that our beliefs can be mistaken, and Franklin sites with approval the attitude of a religious group that was loath to commit its doctrines to writing, lest this publication effectively fix those beliefs for all time and discourage any subsequent correction or revision. “This modesty in a sect,” Franklin writes, “is perhaps a singular instance in the history of mankind, every other sect supposing itself in possession of all truth, and that those who differ are so far in the wrong; like a man traveling in foggy weather, those at some distance before him on the road he sees wrapped up in the fog, as well as those behind him, and also the people in the fields on each side, but near him all appears clear, tho' in truth he is as much in the fog as any of them” (page 69).

The importance of sincerity notwithstanding, if we find it difficult to believe we could be wrong Franklin encourages us to at least pretend to do so. As he himself admitted, “I cannot boast of much success in acquiring the reality of this virtue, but I had a good deal with regard to the appearance of it” (page 54). And the appearance is warranted by the effects it produces. “The modest way in which I propos'd my opinions,” Franklin notes, “procur'd 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 with me when I happened to be in the right” (pages 54-55).

When we must disagree with somebody’s beliefs, because we think that these beliefs are really false, it’s both more pleasant and more aligned with truth to find something that’s right in the views of others before we note the respects in which those views might be mistaken. As Franklin writes

When another asserted something that I thought an error, I deny'd myself the pleasure of contradicting him abruptly, and of showing immediately some absurdity in his proposition; and in answering I began by observing that in certain cases or circumstances his opinion would be right, but in the present case there appear'd or seem'd to me some difference, etc. I soon found the advantage of this change in my manner; the conversations I engag'd in went on more pleasantly. (page 54)
In summary, then, Franklin encourages us to adhere to the following principles when engaged in the process of thinking with others:

1. Remember that the purpose of conversation is the attainment of truth or pleasure; conversations aren’t debates to be won.
2. Humility is essential if our conversations are to give us truth or pleasure.
3. Listen well, putting aside our own assumptions in order to understand what the other person really thinks.
4. Express our own beliefs in a way that acknowledges their possible falsehood.
5. Find some element of truth in the views of others before noting the respects in which those views might be mistaken.

Where Next?

I encourage you to watch the salesman training video, *Selling America*, that’s included with this lesson. It’s a quirky little film from 1938 in which Ben Franklin travels through time to give advice to a modern salesman. Of course, the film assumes that the purpose of conversation is “making the sale,” not “seeking the truth,” so you’ll note that the emphasis is different. Nevertheless, much of the advice set forth in this training film is similar to what we’ve studied here, so watching this short movie will give you the opportunity to see some of these principles in action. Besides, it’s just fun.

If you care to read excerpts from Franklin’s autobiography, or even the entire book, that’s included with this lesson too.

I hope that you enjoyed this presentation and that you’ll find Franklin’s advice for thinking well with others to be helpful in your everyday life.