

Benjamin Franklin and Human Nature

by Phillip W. Weiss

Benjamin Franklin offered very sage advice. He warned against the evils of debt, sloth, laziness, and needless spending. In other words, Franklin set people up to fail. For life involves piling up debt, avoiding work, and gratifying the senses. That fact Franklin seems to ignore. Entire nations pile up debt. The alternative is higher taxes.

Work done for others is exploitation. As for spending, people want things and will spend anything to get them. They want to be served, to imbibe, to party and to carouse. It is more than coincidental that there exists a massive entertainment industry that caters to those very vices that Franklin warns against.

Every weekend millions of people flock to huge stadiums to watch men play a schoolyard game called football. That's millions of people sitting idly watching other people work. That is an immeasurably valuable source of labor going to waste. But this is what people want to do and in fact crave to do and will pay any price for it. It has always been this way. After all, as the saying says, all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. Or he who always works soon finds death knocking at the door.

Let us not forget that totalitarian nations employ labor as a form of punishment and courts routinely sentence convicts to terms of hard labor. In the United States black slaves were forced to perform labor. They derived no joy from their labor which became a badge of humiliation.

Labor is exactly what the term means, which is work. Work entails the expenditure of time and energy to do another's bidding, the refusal of which means starvation or at the minimum a future fraught with uncertainty. Apparently, Franklin did not take these facts into consideration when dispensing his advice. This is not to suggest that people should not work and have no need to spend their money wisely. Just the opposite. Without work and fiscal discipline, a society will fail. Work produces wealth and savings lead to more investments which in turn grow the economy and make possible all the goods and services that people need and want.

However, beware of that person who starts quoting Franklin. That person is using Franklin to push an anti-spending political agenda or worse, to try to shame people into stopping those very behaviors that he himself would love to do it but can't and now feels left out from the party, which is an awful feeling that can generate huge quantities of resentment. It is most likely that if asked about gaming and other seemingly frivolous activities, Franklin probably would have chuckled and asked who was dealing,

Franklin was a man of the world. He did it all. He hobnobbed with the rich and famous and with working people. He saw how people lived and what they wanted and needed to make them happy. He was not some meanspirited miscreant who sneered at others. Franklin knew and understood people and would have never used his wisdom to shame people. Instead, he would have said to do that which you must in moderation and imbibe at your pleasure knowing that life is short and he who denies oneself pleasure will go to their grave wearing a frown and wondering why.