

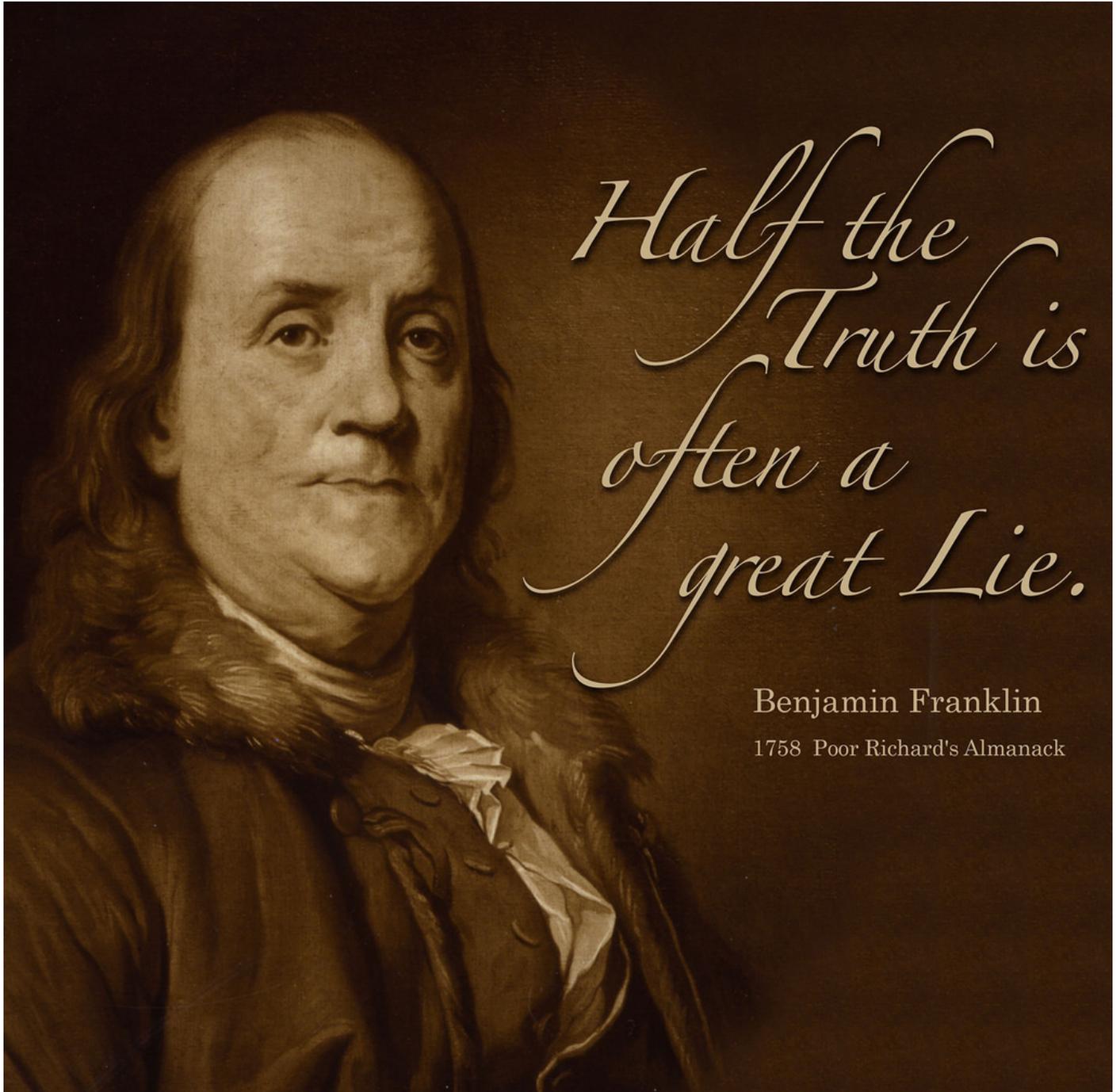
The Spirit of Community: A Ben Franklin Circle in Weaverville, NC

Author : John Stephens

Categories : [Civic Education](#), [Dialogue & Deliberation](#), [Social Justice](#)

Tagged as : [Ben Franklin Circle](#), [Community Engagement](#), [drawing topics from a hat](#), [JUNTO](#), [quality conversations](#), [quality of conversation](#), [self-improvement](#), [shared leadership](#), [spirit of community](#), [virtues](#)

Date : June 12, 2018



How do individual virtues relate to community action? Can we follow in the footsteps of Ben Franklin and work to improve ourselves and our communities?

I'm glad to re-post a nice reflection from Victoria Fann which first appeared [here](#) and I learned about it via the [NCDD blog](#).

A bit of background: "Ben Franklin Circles are about bringing people together, face-to-face, to

improve ourselves and the world around us,” per their [mission statement](#). Victoria first attended a couple meetings of a Ben Franklin Circle (BFC) in Asheville starting in September, 2017. Her circle has 8-10 people and meets monthly, Saturday mornings, rotating among people’s homes.

The circles discuss 13 virtues -- similar to Franklin’s own circle of friends -- to learn and support each other to be more virtuous. The [thirteen virtues](#) include silence, sincerity, humility, frugality and justice.

Here is Victoria’s post:

My Ben Franklin Circle in Weaverville, NC has been meeting since November 2017. Since I have been facilitating groups of various kinds since 1989, stepping into the role of facilitator for this group was easy for me. We met for the first four months with me asking most of the questions, reading the quotes and gently steering the conversation if we strayed away from the topic.

This seemed to work well, but something was missing. I had a gnawing feeling that there was a better way to structure our little group. Based on some words from his autobiography, I knew that Ben Franklin would heartily agree. For example, he writes, “Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.”

Involvement was precisely what we needed!

The first small step in this direction took place at our February meeting. Instead of discussing the virtues in the order listed on the Ben Franklin Circle website, I decided to write each one of the remaining virtues on small slips of paper and fold them up. I brought those papers to the meeting and placed them in a hat. At the end of our discussion, I asked a member to draw out one of the slips of paper, saying that we would discuss whatever virtue was chosen.

This felt good—so good, in fact, that at the March meeting, I decided to take this idea a step further. Prior to the meeting, I wrote out that month’s virtue questions and quotes provided by the Ben Franklin Circle website onto small slips of paper, folded them and placed them into a bowl at our host’s house. I then invited members to draw one out and read it aloud to the group to prompt our discussion. I also encouraged members to add their own questions.

Franklin’s very own group, on which the BF Circles are based, encouraged a similar involvement from the members of the group as he writes here: “I should have mentioned before, that, in the autumn of the preceding year, I had form’d most of my ingenious acquaintance into a club of mutual improvement, which we called the JUNTO; we met on Friday evenings. The rules that I drew up required that every member, in his turn, should produce one or more queries on any point of Morals, Politics, or Natural Philosophy, to be discuss’d by the company; and once in three months produce and read an essay of his own writing, on any subject he pleased. Our debates were to be under the direction of a president, and to be conducted in the sincere spirit of inquiry

after truth, without fondness for dispute, or desire of victory; and, to prevent warmth, all expressions of positiveness in opinions, or direct contradiction, were after some time made contraband, and prohibited under small pecuniary penalties.”

What we discovered during that meeting was that having the members chose the questions at random and read them to the group led to a much deeper level of conversation. I suspect this was because the playing field had been leveled and everyone felt more engaged and involved than when I was the one asking most of the questions. My leadership role softened as I yielded to this more community-based approach. Our trust of each other and our willingness to explore the outer edges of the virtue increased exponentially. Plus, there was almost a palpable feeling of relief among all of us once we shifted into this more egalitarian way of relating to each other. It was clear we'd been seeking it all along.

The lesson for me was a reminder of how important it is to tune into the specific needs of a situation without assumptions, agendas or formulas, but rather an open mind and a willingness to learn.

Though initially my “expertise” proved to be a hindrance, the group process itself became the catalyst that allowed the solution to emerge effortlessly.

Thank you, Ben Franklin.

[Victoria Fann](#) is a writer, transformational coach, group facilitator and workshop leader. She hosts her own Ben Franklin Circle in Weaverville, NC each month.

= = =

My P.S.: There are about 40 Ben Franklin circles and their locations are shown [here](#).