

Junto and Hamlet

Dr. Gloria C. Duffy, President and CEO

THE HOOVER INSTITUTION, the 92nd Street Y and Citizen University have started a nation-wide project called the Ben Franklin Circles. They are encouraging the formation of adult learning groups around the country that strive for self-improvement and the improvement of society through discussing and embracing Benjamin Franklin's values.

We are all familiar with Franklin's aphorisms, including "a penny saved is a penny earned"; "early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise"; "in this world nothing can be said to be certain with the exception of death and taxes"; "God helps those who help themselves"; and "honesty is the best policy."

Less well-known is the fact that in 1727 Franklin formed a mutual improvement club in Philadelphia called the Junto, whose members debated morals, politics and natural philosophy. These merchants and tradesmen, more colorfully called The Leather Apron Club, identified desirable virtues, including temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, chastity, tranquility and humility. They debated these and applied them to personal and social improvement. Among other deeds, the Junto formed the country's first subscription public library, to which they donated their own books.

The Junto inspired Hoover and the other organizations to create the current Ben Franklin Circles. They hope that circles launched in New York, Washington, South Carolina, Minnesota, Colorado, Utah, Massachusetts, California and other states will be building blocks for civic engagement and social reform. They have contacted the Club about being involved in this effort.

Their inquiry reminded me of the importance of core values, and how infrequently we focus attention on them at a time when we are bombarded with so much information and so many ideas. We don't always look below the surface to the basic values behind today's debates.

I have always found Franklin's values to be estimable, and his sayings to provide wise guidance. I also find another set of life advice worth considering, alongside Franklin's, and it comes from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Laertes, sister of Hamlet's beloved Ophelia, is leaving Denmark to attend university in France. His father, Polonius, chief counselor to the king, gives Laertes this parting advice:

Give thy thoughts no tongue, Nor any unproportioned thought his act.

Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar.

Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried, Grapple them to

thy soul with hoops of steel;

But do not dull thy palm with entertainment Of each new-hatch'd, unfledged comrade.

Beware Of entrance to a quarrel, but being in, Bear't that the opposed may beware of thee.

Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice;

Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment.

Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy, But not express'd in fancy;

rich, not gaudy; For the apparel oft proclaims the man, And they in France of the best rank and station Are of a most select and generous chief in that.

Neither a borrower nor a lender be; For loan oft loses both itself and friend, And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.

This above all: to thine ownself be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man.

It's interesting how much commonality there is between Shakespeare's advice and that of Franklin. Frugality, discretion and honesty play central roles in their values systems. And it's interesting that both were put forth as essentially secular values systems, at a time when values were mostly the province of religions.

One might ask, in this modern era of technology and rapid change, of what worth are such fundamental and simple concepts as those posed by Ben Franklin and William Shakespeare? Are they just anachronistic sayings, sometimes to be mocked as obvious truisms? Some, like Polonius' advice about dressing in as costly a manner as one can afford, because the French value this, seem a bit silly or irrelevant today.

Some of these values can also be debated. Is honesty always the best policy? For example, should a terminally ill individual always be informed of his medical status? Compassion might trump honesty, in certain circumstances. And what about compassion and caring for others, in an era when human needs are so dramatic, for those being abused, for refugees, for the homeless, for the mentally ill? Neither of our 17th and 18th century friends says much about this.

Nonetheless, many of these are important values that can inform personal choices and social reform. If more people acted on the basis of these values, the world would be a better place. So kudos to Hoover and its partners for their effort to bring Mr. Franklin's wisdom back into focus. And let's not forget Shakespeare's final advice about being true to oneself; self-awareness is as important a core value as any of Franklin's virtues.



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy