Our point of departure is the Benjamin Franklin known to history: a man with a studied familiarity, albeit with an aura suggesting that he observes more than he reports; someone who seems like one of us, but also stands apart; a keen spectator taking in the human comedy.

In our effort to take his measure—or at least unravel some of the mystery in which he wrapped himself—we can turn to his earliest creation, looking for plausible origins of things to come. That creature, Silence Dogood, poses conundrums of her own. We can try to reconstruct her mental universe in the hope that certain character traits and political stances (and perhaps even principles) will emerge that point back to the youth whose magic conjured her up out of plain air and forward to the new and better world that the mature man sought to help bring into being.

The name “Silence Dogood” ought to call to mind one of the finest products of the American comic imagination. That she should have emerged full-blown from the head of a 16-year-old seems as miraculous as Minerva’s emerging full-grown and armed from the brow of Jove—indeed, even more so, since there is authentic documentary evidence of young Benjamin’s miracle in the form of 14 Dogood letters published in the New-England Courant in 1722. The details of her life (she tells much but suggests more), the critical judgments of men and manners she shares (whatever else she may be, this woman is not silent), and the principles she articulates (frankness is her hallmark)—all these

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stamp her as someone whose company and conversation one might enjoy, albeit warily.

Mrs. Dogood’s letters have not escaped scholarly attention. Usually the concern has been to detect traces of stylistic borrowings from some of Franklin’s acknowledged literary models, or to identify the social and political controversies that were roiling Boston at that time and which the Couranteers delighted in satirizing and spoofing. Such inquiries, however, have the effect of diverting attention from the words and opinions of Silence Dogood herself. Perhaps her letters are merely the effusions of a precocious teenager. Perhaps they are projections of the hopes and anxieties of their author. Perhaps they are prefigurations of a world that an older Franklin would later labor to shape and promote. In any event, it is to this extraordinary creature and her letters that we turn.

FOUNDED MOTHER

Of Silence’s family we know next to nothing. She was born on the high seas on a ship traveling from London to Boston. What impelled her parents to emigrate—whether flight from persecution or a search for better opportunities—remains unknown.

She does tell us—indeed, she says the thought preys on her—that on the very day her mother brought her into the world, her father was swept away by a wave crashing upon the ship’s deck. Her unfortunate mother thus disembarked in a new world as a new widow and a single mother. Silence, born as it were suspended between two worlds, arrived in the New World as a newborn without a past, only a present, and an uncertain future. She spent her childhood in some rustic setting, carefree and idle, living as an orphan in all but name. Meanwhile her mother, alternately described as disconsolate, indigent, and indulgent, “was put to hard Shifts for a Living.” (These letters are studded with innuendoes.) At some point, the mother unburdened herself of caring for her child by contracting for Silence to serve as an apprentice to a young bachelor country minister. Although the details of this apprenticeship are unspecified, this new arrangement marked the beginning of the girl’s formation as a distinctive and memorable human being. Misfortune was replaced by good fortune—at least for a while.

True to his pious calling, this master/minister labored mightily to instill “vertuous and godly Principles” into his ward’s tender soul. Further, he arranged for her to be instructed in all the knowledge, learning, and
arts deemed necessary to her sex and condition. Yet his greatest contribution to the making of the Silence Dogood whom we get to meet lay not in what he preached, but in what he made accessible to her: free use of his “small, yet...well chose” library.

Again, details are lacking. But if this collection is justly characterized as designed “to inform the Understanding rightly, and enable the Mind to frame great and noble Ideas,” then a hypothetical shelf list lies at hand. It might well approximate the course of reading and study Franklin recommended in his 1751 proposal, “Idea of the English School.” “The best English Authors” prescribed then—Milton, Locke, Addison, Pope, Swift, and others—were the very authors whose writings young Benjamin had devoured by the time he was imagining Silence Dogood. They would neatly fit and support the kind of education in independence of mind that Silence secured for herself in her master’s house.

In concluding the first of her two introductory letters, Silence assures her readers that she does not mean to displease, knows that it is impossible to please all, asks for their forbearance, but concludes with this parting shot: “and for those who will take Offence where none is intended, they are beneath the Notice of Your Humble Servant, SILENCE DOGOOD.” If her reverend master had hoped to instill in her something resembling Christian humility, it must be said he failed.

Continuing to tell the story of her “Adventures,” however tersely, Silence manages to display a surprisingly detailed self-portrait. Her bachelor master, “after much Meditation on the Eighteenth verse of the Second Chapter of Genesis,” concludes that God was correct in saying that it is not good for man to be alone, and so he resolves to marry. Alas, his earnest “Attempts on the more topping Sort of our Sex” prove fruitless and tiring, so he turns “unexpectedly” to the young woman who has been living in his house. It is easy to believe that this change in focus was indeed a surprise to this newly declared swain—but beyond that? Silence reports having burst into “unmannerly Laughter” at this awkward attempt at courtship. But then she claims to have apologized and “with much ado compos’d [her] Countenance,” promising to take his proposal seriously and “speedily [give] him an Answer.”

Of course, Silence didn’t have to dither about how to respond. She hadn’t been studying only books all those years, but human nature as well. The brief paragraph in which she shares her thought processes
already anticipates prominent Franklinian themes— including the mixed motives at work in our choices and decisions, and the artfulness needed to persuade a particular audience:

As he had been a great Benefactor (and in a Manner a Father to me) I could not well deny his Request, when I once perceived he was in earnest. Whether it was Love, or Gratitude, or Pride, or all Three that made me consent, I know not; but it is certain, he found it no hard Matter, by the Help of his Rhetorick, to conquer my Heart, and persuade me to marry him.

In fact, Silence was very persuadable and entered a loving and congenial marriage that produced three promising children. Seven years of happiness were ended abruptly by her husband’s sudden death, but being a widow didn’t suit Mrs. Dogood. “I am apt to fancy that I could be easily persuaded to marry again,” she writes, before lamenting that a good man is hard to find and reporting she has given up all such expectations.

Although surely distressed by her loss, Widow Dogood is by no means down. She enjoys conversing with her neighbor Rusticus and his family or with the town’s minister who (surprise!) is now her boarder. This Harvard man, Clericus, is helpful to his landlady by finding Latin tags with which she can beautify her writings, “which will not only be fashionable, and pleasing to those who do not understand it, but will likewise be very ornamental.” Author and reader can thus indulge in harmless displays of vanity.

Before turning to her substantive essays, observations, and critiques, Silence informs her readers of the “Method” she means to follow. Pleasing all readers at once is simply out of the question, given the number and diverse tastes of her audience. She settles instead on offering something for everyone—a varied diet of themes “merry and diverting...solid and serious...sharp and satyrical...sober and religious.” Sooner or later every reader should find something that suits his or her fancy. In sharing some portion of her stock of “useful and desireable Knowledge, especially such as tends to improve the Mind, and enlarge the Understanding,” Silence performs a civic duty. She is hopeful that what was beneficial to her may in turn be helpful to others. The missiles this Great Reprover has ready to hurl at Boston’s establishment follow in swift order.
The onslaught begins innocently enough. While discoursing over dinner with her reverend boarder on the subject of the education of children, Silence seeks advice that comes closer to home. Would Clericus recommend that she bestow “Academical Learning” on her young son William? This mother, at least, does not dismiss out of hand alternatives to attending college. Clericus responds decisively and at length, answering her objections, and re-assuring Silence that “the Lad would take his Learning very well, and not idle away his Time as too many there now-a-days do.” These latter words prompt Silence’s curiosity. Immediately after dinner, she walks alone in her orchard, “ruminating on Clericus’s Discourse with much Consideration.” Ultimately, she falls asleep under her great apple tree and has a dream filled with her waking thoughts. This woman, awake or asleep, is not one to accept on someone else’s authority something that should be discovered by oneself.

The upshot of her dream is a withering exposé of the vanity, pretense, and uselessness that characterize the famous Temple of Learning itself (“our College,” that is, Harvard) and the deluded parents who consult their purses rather than their children’s capacities and persist in sending their beloved “Dunces and Blockheads” on a fool’s errand. What, she wonders, happens to those who are at last marched out to make room for another entering class: “Some I perceiv’d took to Merchandizing, others to Travelling, some to one Thing, some to another, and some to Nothing.” But the majority followed a beaten path to the Temple of Theology, attracted by Pecunia (the goddess of money) and abetted by Plagius (plagiarism).

Parents would have spent their money more wisely had they recognized that their sons lacked a suitable genius for genuine learning. They were entering college as dullards and emerging “as great Blockheads as ever, only more proud and self-conceited.” For less trouble and a fraction of the cost, the skills learned at college (“how to carry themselves handsomely, and enter a Room genteely”) might have been acquired at a dancing school.

Silence is roused from these unpleasant reflections when Clericus, walking under the trees, his nose in a book, accidentally wakes her. When she relates the dream with all its details, he interprets it for her—“without much Study”—and assures her that “it was a lively Representation of HARVARD COLLEGE.” To the end, Clericus is heedless of the implications of his words for his earlier recommendation.
In her fifth contribution to the *New-England Courant*, Silence introduces a critical letter from one Ephraim Censorious who takes exception to her blaming men for instigating the vices of women. She has it backward, he asserts, and it behooves her rather to direct her barbs first to women. After doing so, reforming men would be much easier because “Women are the prime Causes of a great many Male Enormities.”

Ephraim’s dissent seems to have touched a raw nerve, suggesting that Silence takes disagreement, however politely put, as deserving of a full-throated counterattack. She devotes two letters to addressing the charge that women are idle, ignorant, foolish, and extravagantly proud. Silence argues consecutively that women are not vicious in these respects, that men are more so, and that if women do exhibit such vices, men are to blame. Before she has finished, Silence has moved the argument from the fact to the fault. And in a final flare-up of humble officiousness, she exhorts “both [men and women] to amend, where both are culpable, otherwise they may expect to be severely handled by *Sir, Your Humble Servant*.” A postscript announces that Mrs. Dogood has left her rural seat to spend the summer in Boston “in order to compleat her Observations of the present reigning Vices of the Town.”

Readers are given a further insight into Mrs. Dogood’s thinking by her increased use of quotations from the writings of others. She does so in six of the letters she addresses to “the Author of the New-England Courant.” In no case does she name the author being quoted, but in all cases she characterizes him as “ingenious.” The authors are easily identified and pose no surprises: Daniel Defoe (whose *Essay on Projects*, as Franklin recalled 50 years later, “perhaps gave me a Turn of Thinking that had an Influence on some of the principal future Events of my Life”); Thomas Gordon (who, along with John Trenchard, wrote the popular and radical “Cato’s Letters”); Joseph Addison (“whose writings have contributed more to the improvement of the minds of the British nation, and polishing their manners, than those of any other English pen whatever”); and Richard Steele (co-author with Addison of the *Spectator* essays that served young Benjamin as a model of excellent writing).

She adopts the words and judgment of Defoe in decrying the miseducation of women and urging the formation of mutual-aid societies for the relief of impoverished widows. She echoes “Cato” in defense of freedom of thought and speech, and in presuming hypocrisy when evaluating a religious man in power. And she joins Addison and
Steele in attacking zealotry in all its forms. In all these respects, Silence Dogood hoists the true colors of her cause. She adopts and promotes the sensibility of a new world in the making. The same is true no less of the young fellow behind her mask.

This sensibility is much on display in her promised report on the reigning vices of Boston. Her motivation, as she reports it, does not smack of a crusader bent on exposing and extirpating wickedness in all its forms. And it is surely not propelled by the voyeuristic search for pleasure exhibited by Antony and Cleopatra slumming in the stews of Alexandria. No, Silence needs some relief from her mental exertions, having been “intensely fix’d on more substantial Subjects.” She wandered abroad, later and farther than usual, on a pleasant moonlit night in search of refreshment and was “pleas’d beyond Expectation” by what she encountered. She observes and, rather than being outraged by lewd talk and lewd behavior, is amused. She overhears a mixed group of non-stop babblers exchanging fictitious gossip about her—“the common Fate of Listeners (who bear no good of themselves)” —but is undismayed and even enjoys their nonsense better than flattery. (Is celebrity of any kind better than being ignored, as that tireless and tiresome maker of almanacs, Poor Richard Saunders, seemed to think?)

Silence then runs into another set of ramblers, “a Crowd of Tarpolins and their Doxies,” behaving as one might expect sailors on shore leave to behave. And then a covey of brazen hussies hoping to “revive the Spirit of Love in Disappointed Batchelors, and expose themselves to Sale to the first Bidder.” All this, right here, in the Boston of Cotton Mather! But Mrs. Dogood is not shocked. Instead, she finds social utility in “our Night-Walkers,” concluding that as a group they “contribute very much to the Health and Satisfaction of those who have been fatigu’d with Business or Study, and occasionally observe their pretty Gestures and Impertinencies.” Moreover, with all their extra walking, they generate more business for shoemakers!

One is left to wonder what studies have left Silence Dogood so fatigued. And has whatever she has now learned made her less angry and more accepting of human folly? This puzzle leads us to reconsider her self-characterization written five months earlier:

I shall conclude this with my own Character, which (one would think) I should be best able to give. Know then, That I am an
Enemy to Vice, and a Friend to Vertue. I am one of an extensive Charity, and a great Forger of private Injuries: A hearty Lover of the Clergy and all good Men, and a mortal Enemy to arbitrary Government & unlimited Power. I am naturally very jealous for the Rights and Liberties of my Country; & the least appearance of an Incroachment on those invaluable Priviledges, is apt to make my Blood boil exceedingly. I have likewise a natural Inclination to observe and reprove the Faults of others, at which I have an excellent Faculty. I speak this by Way of Warning to all such whose Offences shall come under my Cognizance, for I never intend to wrap my Talent in a Napkin. To be brief; I am courteous and affable, good-humour’d (unless I am first provok’d,) and handsome, and sometimes witty, but always, SIR, Your Friend, and Humble Servant, SILENCE DOGOOD.

Compared to Mrs. Dogood’s mellow and relaxed account of night life near Boston Harbor, this bravura self-portrait is strikingly political. True, she is not indifferent to the presence of virtue and vice, but she is engaged and energized by a broader concern for her country, however defined. Is it too much to call hers a republican jealousy, a patriot’s suspicion?

AN AMERICAN OF THE FUTURE

To see how much of the Benjamin Franklin known to history is already foreshadowed in the character of Silence Dogood is no easy task. Not only does the sheer range and variety of his interests and accomplishments make him impossible to summarize, he also hides behind masks, sometimes behind a mask behind a mask, as in the case of the Dogood letters themselves. One needs to be wary of simply identifying Franklin’s thought with that uttered by any one of his characters. He is not above pulling our leg.

Even pinning a political identity on Franklin is more problematic than it might first appear. He was no provincial. Well before the final break with Britain, he was the designated agent to represent the interests of four highly diverse colonies. Like George Washington and Alexander Hamilton after him, his horizon embraced a continent.

But at the beginning of the 18th century, settlers perched on a narrow littoral with over 3,000 miles of ocean in front of them and totally
unknown miles of dark wooded wilderness behind them might not have found it easy to know who they were and where they fit in the larger scheme of earthly things. Anything that they could or would recognize as civilization lay elsewhere, a hazardous ocean voyage of two months or more away. Nor were the British colonies on the mainland well acquainted with one another. An overland trip from Massachusetts to Georgia could take as long as an ocean voyage from Philadelphia to London. The common point of reference for those colonies and colonists was, as it had long been, the mother country.

Notwithstanding the grievances and unhappiness that had impelled people in the first place to leave their homeland and resettle in America, those emigrants persisted in thinking themselves transplanted Englishmen or Britons, not an alien, let alone a conquered, people. Posing as an impartial observer, Franklin in 1768 offered the London press a historical account of the colonists’ state of mind leading up to the crisis over the Stamp Act. Theirs might indeed be “inveterate prejudices,” “wild ravings” of a “half distracted” people. Nonetheless, widespread and established opinions among the governed ought not to be ignored or unnecessarily thwarted. Awkward as it might be from the standpoint of Lord North’s ministry, this was a people who knew their rights and privileges, “the American principle” being that “money is not to be raised on English subjects without their consent.”

It was not only the crisis occasioned by the Stamp Act that reshaped Franklin’s self-awareness. He professed to Lord Howe in 1776 that he had long admired and cherished “that fine and noble China Vase the British Empire,” even while recognizing its fragility. The psychic rewards of being a part of something grand, powerful, dazzling in its men of learning and taste — all that was not to be dismissed.

What in America could match, let alone surpass, the company Franklin kept in his suppers at a succession of London clubs: scientists, literary luminaries, “Honest Whigs,” and philosophers? One might surmise that he was sorely tempted, after being away from Philadelphia and America for so long, to transplant himself to a place where “Dr. Franklin” was a name to conjure with. It is all too easy to make much of this professed Anglophilia. But to do so is to ignore the fact that beginning in 1765 Franklin conducted a relentless 10-year campaign in the British press, writing anti-British essays, satires, and hoaxes excoriating government ignorance, pride, and folly in their misbegotten policies.
toward the Americans. Whatever passing warming sense of identity and acceptance for one’s true worth he might once have felt among his British friends came to an abrupt halt—and with it something more. In a 1775 letter drafted (but not sent) to William Strahan, fellow printer, long-time friend, and member of a vindictive House of Commons, Franklin wrote, “[y]ou are now my Enemy.”

His failure to persuade those in charge of colonial affairs to mitigate and reverse their feckless policies toward America continued to prey on him, even into his years in France at Passy when he was charged with negotiating a treaty with Britain to bring the war to an end, to secure the release of imprisoned American seamen, and to settle outstanding claims for reparations. His disappointment had mutated into resentment, resentment into anger, and anger into what has been dubbed the “savage eloquence” of his 1782 hoax, “Supplement to the Boston Independent Chronicle.” “I know too well her abounding Pride and deficient Wisdom,” he wrote of Britain. Franklin exhibited the truth that injuries can be forgiven and perhaps even forgotten, but contempt never.

**BEHIND THE MASKS**

From his first to his last appearance in print—a period stretching almost seven decades—Franklin spoke from behind a mask. Pseudonyms were common enough in 18th-century English journalism and essay writing, but in Franklin’s case, the adoption of masks takes on a special character. Rare indeed are the occasions when a published piece by Franklin carries its author’s name. We encounter, rather, anonymity, or more often an affectation of being a Briton, or still more often an imagined zany character whose opinions and tone press against the social conventions of the day. Franklin’s almost obsessive resort to such modes of concealment bespeaks a settled conviction that keeping a low profile is safest for him, while using comic characters to voice heterodox opinions may be more effective in penetrating closed minds.

Our desire to push aside the veils in which Franklin enveloped himself needs no apology. If the end in view is to have a clear-eyed appraisal of the career of an outstanding political actor of a receding past, then focusing on the man behind the masks is a necessary first step. Yet the premise on which we undertake this effort is shaky at best. Franklin has been aptly described as “multitudes.” His immense curiosity and
energy propelled him in an astonishing number of different directions. He lived a long life—perhaps twice as long as his average contemporaries—and he remained active and engaged to the very end. Summing up his many-sidedness may well be beyond reach, especially if we are intent on settling on a single theme or trait that makes comprehensive sense of a thousand different facts. Our search is not for that overrated virtue, consistency—Franklin certainly did not include that on his list of virtues. We are better advised to seek and find, if we can, some persistent characteristic or stance that helps the pieces fall into place.

Complicating this effort is the fact that Franklin learned quite a few things over the course of his long life. The saucy adolescent who was charmed by Xenophon’s accounts of Socrates’ easy victories over self-satisfied, opinionated Greeks likewise enjoyed following suit and toying with his hapless victims—until he learned that flabbergasting others did little good for his own reputation. He learned the costs and benefits of friendship and of entangling foreign alliances. He learned that appealing to others’ self-interest was a surer way of engaging most men to join in his causes, but not (pace John Adams) when addressing the France of Louis XVI, “a generous nation, fond of glory” that wished to be lauded for its benevolence, not its calculation.

By the age of 42, Franklin had a handsome enough annual income to retire from the active management of his printing business. Not only could he now devote himself to public service and the study of natural philosophy, but he could also even acquire and display the tokens of a man of some means: renting a more commodious house, one no longer attached to the noisy, dirty print shop; owning several black domestic slaves; dining now on china and silver plate which had replaced earthenware and pewter. Frugality—the virtue by which the proverbial empty sack might be made to stand upright—receded, and the slide toward comfort and even luxury commenced.

Within 15 years, however, Franklin had revised upwards his “Opinion of the natural Capacities of the black Race.” He would ultimately free his slaves before the end of his life. When challenging himself to explain why he had ever doubted that black children were the equals of white children, he declined to either explain or justify “all [his] Prejudices.” What is clear is that he increased his involvement in an English philanthropy dedicated to imbuing slave children (among others) in America with the rudiments of an Anglican education. Further, he became a
leader of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, petitioning the United States Congress to abolish both slavery and the wretched trade that sustained it. His was a life of learning and self-examination, and hence of change.

Far more momentous for Franklin were the transformations he underwent in the course of his life as regards a personal religion and a political identity. He wrote more about religion than any other layman in British North America. This was a topic of which he could not let go and on which others kept prodding him. Raised in the tight bounds of Puritan Presbyterianism, he soon became a conspicuous non-attender of sermons and services, and in time an impartial contributor to helping others build their diverse places of worship. It was not only his elder brother’s heavy-handed rule that led this spirited apprentice to break his contract and sneak away, like the fugitive he was, to make a new life in a distant city; early on, it appears, he chafed under Boston’s clerical hegemony.

Dispensing with any available conventional religion, he concocted one of his own—a strange amalgam of an unapproachable and indifferent Creator with a polytheism of subordinate gods who do hear and care. To address one of these local gods, Franklin devised a ritual with its distinctive Adoration, Petition, and Thanksgiving. Along with that, he composed a doctrine to be preached that amounted to the belief that we serve this second-tier god best by serving our fellow human beings here on earth. Let others, too, form Juntos—associations of mutual help—as he did in Philadelphia with his leather-apron friends. That would please the god to no end.

It is unlikely that Franklin followed this ritual for many decades; the business of a very busy life—politics, scientific experimentation, projects of civic improvement, diplomacy, and more filled his days just as sociality filled his nights. But this doctrine of his that disparaged doctrine and taught that our focus as individuals should not be on becoming good Presbyterians (or what have you), but on making this a better world for ourselves and others in large ways and small—that belief framed his life choices to the very end.

Franklin was a reluctant revolutionary. He was not eager for America to assume a separate and equal station among the nations of the earth. Together, he believed, Britain and its colonies could exercise a power and influence greater than they could achieve separately. With mutual
forbearance and a greater share of prudence and wisdom on both sides, “both countries might thence much longer continue to grow great together.” But it would be a British Empire with a difference. In view of the Americans’ fecundity and the vast land in which they might expand, Franklin confidently predicted that within several generations, “the greatest Number of Englishmen will be on this Side the Water.” A quarter-century later, Adam Smith made explicit what Franklin had left to suggestion: “The seat of empire would then naturally remove itself to that part of the empire which contributed most to the general defence and support of the whole.” This was an outcome that a realistic and sensible British administration should have accepted with equanimity. But that was not to be.

At that point, it might be argued, Benjamin Franklin became an American. But when we go back to Franklin’s first appearance in the public forum (wearing a mask, of course), we see that things are by no means so simple. Silence Dogood’s robust and sturdy sense of who she is prefigures a line of singular women stretching from Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren to Tocqueville’s depiction of the resolute democratic young woman as a pioneer wife, and beyond. That suggestion may be the proper gloss on the Latin tag (doubtless supplied by her boarder Clericus) with which Mrs. Dogood brushed off criticism of her analysis of pride: Mater me genuit, peperit mox filia matrem. “My mother gave birth to me, and soon the daughter gave birth to a mother.” With his creation of Silence Dogood, Franklin has the new, revolutionary, democratic woman step forth from the shadows. At the age of 16, he was already an American of the future.

STOOP AND SWIM

“B. Franklin, Printer”—so would Benjamin Franklin have wished to be remembered according to the epitaph he composed somewhat prematurely, at age 22. There would be much more to add later on, but that simple characterization is not misleading; he was totally immersed in the world of the printed word.

However engaging he may have been in private conversation, Franklin was no orator and generally shunned speechifying. He was a reader of books and known to be a reader. That proved to be an opening wedge for him to come to the attention of others who might help him emerge from obscurity. He soon found that his efforts to enlist others
in his causes and engage others to begin thinking along his lines would be best furthered by the written, indeed the printed, word.

He crafted a style clear, precise, and utterly unpretentious, put his words in the mouths of invented characters, and loosed them upon the world to work their way. Just as he struggled to shape his own life, so did he craft the story of his life—the better to serve as an exemplar to others. As Franklin came more and more to understand the ways of the world, his plans for shaping that world waxed. He soon learned that to further his sundry particular projects along with his overall objective, he had to adopt or invent a mode of communication that was supple, inoffensive, and ingratiating. In this respect, harangues and sermons were useless. But proceeding by homely examples and indirection might better convey his intended message.

Of the very many examples and stories that Franklin told, two in particular shed light on his arts of persuasion. He recalled with great vividness an encounter with Cotton Mather half a century earlier:

I had reason to remember, as I still do a Piece of Advice he gave me. I had been some time with him in his Study, where he condescended to entertain me, a very Youth, with some pleasant and instructive Conversation. As I was taking my Leave he accompany’d me thro’ a narrow Passage at which I did not enter, and which had a Beam across it lower than my Head. He continued Talking which occasion’d me to keep my Face towards him as I retired, when he suddenly cry’d out, Stoop! Stoop! Not immediately understanding what he meant, I hit my Head hard against the Beam. He then added, Let this be a Caution to you not always to hold your Head so high; Stoop, young man, stoop—as you go through the World—and you’ll miss many hard Thumps. This was a way of hammering Instruction into one’s Head: And it was so far effectual, that I have ever since remember’d it, tho’ I have not always been able to practise it.

Yet practice it he did, putting on the humble inquirer, avoiding expressions of certainty, and more generally working behind the scenes and through others.

Franklin’s love of swimming, and his adeptness in that sport, are but an occasional theme in his writings. Yet mastery in that skill seems
to have had surprising resonance for his project of helping to form a self-governing people. Having grown up just a short walk from the shore of Boston Harbor, young Benjamin was eager to make use of its promised pleasures and challenges. As a child, he appears to have taught himself to swim, refined his technique through study and practice of Melchisédech Thévenot's *Art of Swimming*, and become an evangelist of sorts, urging others to learn to do so as well. The extent of his enthusiasm may be gauged by the letter he wrote in his 60s—a letter of some 1,200 words—in which he described to his correspondent with Cartesian clarity all the steps needed to overcome fear of drowning and come to enjoy “so delightful and wholesome an exercise.”

Franklin swam in Boston Harbor, he likely swam in both the Schuylkill and Delaware Rivers, and he swam most impressively in the Thames. These exercises were surely for his own health and pleasure, but beyond that served as examples to inspire others. Speaking of John Wygate, a young acquaintance whom he had met and befriended at the London printing house where both were employed, he wrote:

I taught him, & a Friend of his, to swim, at twice going into the River, & they soon became good Swimmers. They introduc’d me to some Gentlemen from the Country who went to Chelsea by Water [for sightseeing]. In our Return, at the Request of the Company, whose Curiosity Wygate had excited, I stript & leapt into the River; & swam from near Chelsea to Blackfryars [a distance of about 3.5 miles], performing on the Way many Feats of Activity both upon & under Water, that surpriz’d and pleas’d those to whom they were Novelties. — I had from a Child been ever delighted with this Exercise, had studied & practis’d all Thévenot’s Motions & Positions, added some of my own, aiming at the graceful & easy, as well as the Useful. — All these I took this Occasion of exhibiting to the Company, & was much flatter’d by their Admiration.

Here was Franklin again doing good and simultaneously gratifying his pride and vanity. “In reality there is perhaps no one of our natural Passions so hard to subdue as Pride. Disguise it, struggle with it, beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive, and will every now and then peep out and show itself.”

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The larger context of all these stories and examples emerges into the open in the heavily annotated 1749 “Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pensilvania,” another publication introduced anonymously and modestly as “Hints.” The great political end in establishing an academy in the province could be put in the terms Franklin quoted from John Milton: that students should

be instructed in the Beginning, End and Reasons of political Societies; that they may not, in a dangerous Fit of the Commonwealth, be such poor, shaken, uncertain Reeds, of such a tottering Conscience, as many of our great Councillors have lately shewn themselves, but stedfast Pillars of the State.

What does it take to rear men — citizens — with political backbone? A whole course of training, physical and mental, in overcoming fear. Quite apart from the utility of learning to swim that Franklin quotes from John Locke — being able to save one’s life if need be, and gaining the advantages of health — Franklin adds, “’tis some Advantage besides, to be free from the slavish Terrors many of those feel who cannot swim, when they are oblig’d to be on the Water.” Perhaps the proper gloss on Franklin’s famous, possibly apocryphal response “[a] republic — if you can keep it” would be: “and only if the people learn how to swim in the new waters of the new order of the ages being introduced by the proposed Constitution of the United States.”

Thanks to their singular self-education, Silence Dogood and her creator already had the temperament and skills to stand their ground in the face of arrogant dominators. Succeeding generations would need to be inspired by example to learn to swim on their own.