

“The Happiness of Pursuit”

“We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.”

When Thomas Jefferson sat down to write the Declaration of Independence, he probably couldn't have foreseen where his words would lead. And of all the Declaration's promises, the pursuit of happiness may be closest to the core of the American Dream.

It hints at what's visionary. More than a promise of good government or popular sovereignty, the pursuit of happiness captures the deep yearnings behind our nation's birth. The hope for a new beginning, a fresh start; possibilities to make a meaningful life for oneself, attain a measure of felicity and personal fulfillment in this world.

But for a birthright, happiness still seems to elude many of us. Polls tell us who's happy, which is sometimes surprising. Men are happier than women, for instance. Married couples are happier than singles, and the mainly monogamous at least say they have better sex than swingers. Those whose work involves an element of service, like school teachers and firefighters and nurses, report being happier with their choice of vocation than tax accountants or corporate attorneys who usually get paid a lot more. People with a strong faith or spiritual practice are likelier to say they are generally satisfied than those without any religious grounding. But money isn't completely insignificant, either, and people earning middle-class incomes are more content than individuals struggling with poverty. Still, having a bigger house, or a fancier car, doesn't correlate with feelings of inward well-being in any direct way. So if there's a secret of happiness, it's not a simple one. And if there are ingredients for more joyful living, many of us are still looking for the recipe.

What was Thomas Jefferson thinking when he said that following our bliss was a fundamental human right? In his rough draft for the document, Mr. Jefferson had at first written, “We hold these truths to be sacred and inviolable,” but at the urging of Ben Franklin thought better of this religious phrasing and substituted “self-evident” for “sacred.” The truths Franklin wanted to enunciate didn't come from Bibles or theologians, but were more like the laws of physics or geometry, not dependent on any special revelation but obvious to all.

But the terminology “pursuit of happiness” was Jefferson's own invention. Conventional wisdom in the eighteenth century said that governments were instituted to protect “life, liberty and property.” Those were the exact words of John Locke, the English philosopher whose theories of the social contract were so influential with the nation's founders. Protecting property was the impetus behind the Tea Party and the rallying cry “no taxation without representation.” Pocketbook issues were at stake. But Jefferson's genius was to realize that accumulating wealth was not among the chief ends of life, an insight that probably came from his study of philosophy.

Not all of the founding fathers had opportunities for such leisurely education. Franklin had just two years of formal schooling. As a teen, Washington learned surveying but never went to college. But Jefferson was luckier, attending William and Mary where he gained fluency in Latin, pursuing the kind of classical education common for gentlemen of that time. In Williamsburg, he studied the thinkers of Greece and Rome, who had a major influence on him.

The central inquiry that occupied all the philosophers of antiquity was the question of how to be happy. What constitutes the good life? How do we define success? Stoics and Cynics and other schools formulated differing answers, but the figure Thomas Jefferson found most enchanting was Epicurus.

He lived roughly at the same time as Aristotle, and most of his original works have been lost, so Epicurus is known mostly through his followers, but even more from his detractors. He gained a reputation as a libertine and hedonist, advocating a life devoted to the cultivation of refined tastes and sensual delights. For “epicure,” my dictionary gives synonyms like “gourmand” and “bon vivant.” But these are distortions of the philosopher’s actual teaching.

Epicurus indeed believed that pleasure is the greatest good. But virtue was the gateway to pleasure. For without prudence and self-restraint, unlimited appetites could only lead to misery. “Nothing is sufficient for him to whom what is sufficient seems little,” he wrote. “Bread and water produce the highest pleasure, when one who needs them puts them to his lips. To grow accustomed therefore to simple and not luxurious diet gives us health to the full, and makes one alert for the needful employments of life, and when after long intervals we approach luxuries dispose us better towards them.”

In short, Epicurus believed in moderation and balance, tempering desires which tended to multiply without end, like the desire for immortality or life without limits. Fear of death, the dread of personal extinction, caused undue misery for the mass of the human race. But Epicurus held that the end of life was nothing more than a cessation of the five senses and, like the quenching of any desire, and ought to be looked upon with equanimity. As he put it, “Death does not concern us, because as long as we exist, death is not here. And when it does come, we no longer exist.”

Friendship was among the chief pleasures of life for Epicurus, and in a home with fragrant gardens nearby he gathered a company of like-minded souls to live out and apply these teachings in everyday life. Kind of an Athenian ashram. Because philosophy, in ancient times, was no mere intellectual pastime. It was intensely practical, a seminar in the art of living

That’s how Jefferson understood it, and early on he called himself an Epicurean, a lifestyle he described as dedicated to “ease of body and tranquility of mind.” He enjoyed fine wine but refrained from hard liquor, for example. As Chief Executive, he dressed simply and informally, often receiving dignitaries in worn out slippers. In contrast to the rather regal ways of his predecessors, he walked to his own inaugural

from the rooming house where he was lodging. No one can visit his home in Virginia without seeing the classical influence on his taste: the emphasis on balance and restraint. For while an estate like Monticello can seem grand by some standards, compared to Versailles and the palaces of Europe's ruling class, it is remarkable mainly for its modesty.

As President, however, Jefferson began to re-evaluate his philosophy. For in the spring of 1803, he received a small pamphlet titled *Jesus and Socrates Compared* from his friend, the Reverend Joseph Priestly.

Priestly was an English Unitarian who shared many of Jefferson's scientific interests. It was Priestly who first discovered oxygen, who initially recorded the tale of Benjamin Franklin flying a kite, who was in some ways a British version of old Ben: inventor, philanthropist and political gadfly.

But because of his democratic sympathies, his laboratory in Manchester had been burned by angry mobs, and he'd emigrated to the newly formed United States in the 1790's, where he'd settled and opened one of the first Unitarian churches in the new world, outside Philadelphia. Priestly was the author of two volumes on *The Corruptions of Christianity* that Jefferson claimed to have read "over and over." And Priestly's little pamphlet on *Jesus and Socrates* made the third President pause and reflect.

The pagan philosophers whom he once felt offered a "more full, more entire, more coherent" ethic than Christian moralists had begun to seem too narrow, too concerned with self-fulfillment and too little with the greater good. So in a little booklet called a *Syllabus of an Estimate of the Merit of the Doctrines of Jesus, Compared with Those of Others*," Jefferson spelled out his growing sense that personal happiness involved caring for others, in broader feelings of benevolence.

Of Jesus, Jefferson noted that "like Socrates ... he wrote nothing himself." But unlike Socrates, he had no Plato to transmit his wisdom to succeeding generations. "On the contrary," said the President, "all the learned of his country, entrenched in its power and riches, were opposed to him, lest his labors should undermine their advantages; and the committing to writing his life & doctrines fell on the most unlettered & ignorant men; who wrote, too, from memory, & not till long after the transactions had passed ... According to the ordinary fate of those who attempt to enlighten and reform mankind, he fell an early victim to the jealousy & combination of the altar and the throne." And yet "notwithstanding these disadvantages, a system of morals is presented to us, which, if filled up in the true style and spirit of the rich fragments he left us, would be the most perfect and sublime that has ever been taught by man."

Love God and neighbor, Jesus taught; love everyone and love the whole creation, with all your heart and all your mind and all your strength. The recipe for bliss, for entering into the kingdom, is as easy (and as hard) as that.

In a letter accompanying the syllabus, Jefferson went on to explain that “to the corruptions of Christianity I am indeed opposed, but not to the genuine precepts of Jesus himself. I am a Christian, in the only sense he wished any one to be; sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others; ascribing to him every *human* excellence; and believing he never claimed any other.”

I think Jefferson was right, that Jesus was one of the great spiritual reformers of all time. And I think Jesus was right, that the happiest people are the ones who love the most; more than passing satisfactions, they find abiding joy in living. I agree that virtue is essential, in the sense exercising self-control, particularly in regard to material possessions in this culture of excess and instant gratification. And I think the wisest people are the ones with a consistent philosophy of life, who know that the chief end of human existence consists in something more than accumulating property, but in pursuing higher aims.

More than pleasure, we need purpose in our lives. More than immediate rewards, we need a sense that our struggles and frustrations have some relevance in the longer view of history. More than happiness, we're called to pursue beauty and fairness, to seek justice and kindness, to strive to be good as a prerequisite for feeling good.

These are truths I hold to be self-evident, but that America in its obsession with endless wealth and power seems to have forgotten. Ironic that a pagan from Greece, a Jew from Galilee and a Unitarian might call this supposedly Christian nation back to the real meaning of its creed.