

What Does the Pursuit of Happiness Mean?

by

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Imagine a time when America was not at war, when children were safe to play outdoors all day, when movies and books were not so graphic, and when people worked hard and the middle class had a good life.

That was the time I grew up in. Olney, Illinois, in the mid-1940s and 50s was a peaceful town where the worst thing that could happen to you was being fined because your car hit a white squirrel scampering across the street. We had no TV until I was in elementary school, and even then there was so much snow on the tiny screen that it was not worth watching. We climbed trees, built forts, played kick-the-can, and rode our bikes to the swimming pool and the park. I grew up on Westerns where no blood was seen and musicals where everything turned out fine. The books I read had no swearing, sex, or violence, and at school and at home teachers and parents were respected.

I know now that, of course, things were not as perfect as they seemed and that bad things were happening all over the world, but growing up in a small town with loving parents and grandparents in a world where I was not subjected to the coarser side of life made me a happy but naïve person. I was free to pursue happiness every day because nothing very bad ever happened to me. Obviously, sad events did take place, but I always felt safe and secure.

It took years for me to realize how blessed I've always been, and thanks to 24 hour news, I'm very aware of how much evil and suffering exists in the world, but I still maintain a positive outlook on life and still have the freedom to pursue happiness in whatever way I choose. I'm lucky and I thank God everyday for my blessings. I'm especially thankful to have been born in America where we are free to pursue our dreams. Not everyone has that freedom today. Throughout history and certainly in the 1770s when our country was young, many Americans led hopeless lives where any thoughts of

happiness did not even exist. Their goal was simply to survive and hope for a better life. When Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, just what did he mean when he stated that Americans have the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”?

The colonists were angry. For over ten years they had endured continual abuse from the British government: the Stamp Act in 1765, which created a tax on newspapers and legal documents, and then more taxes on goods in 1767, which led to the Boston Tea Party in 1773. More laws were passed as punishment, and again the colonists united against these Intolerable Acts. The First Continental Congress in 1774 sent the British a message that the colonies would no longer trade with them, something that had been required in the past. When that didn't work, the Second Continental Congress met in 1775 and decided that independence from England was the answer. After Richard Henry Lee of Virginia introduced the resolution in 1776 “That These United Colonies . . . ought to be free and independent States,” (*World Book*, J-K, p. 61) Thomas Jefferson was asked to write the draft for the declaration. On July 4, 1776, Congress voted to adopt Jefferson's final draft, and the Declaration of Independence as we know it today was born. (John Alden)

In that document lies a declaration of our rights as citizens of the United States:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. (www.ushistory.org.us)

We have all heard these words many times in our lives and have debated what they really mean. By researching that time period, it becomes obvious that the delegates declaring our independence from England had a different thought in mind than we do today. Americans in the 21st century, who have a more shallow view of the meaning, feel that the pursuit of happiness means seeking or chasing after whatever brings them pleasure, but that is not what our forefathers intended.

We must go back in time before 1776 to fully understand why Thomas Jefferson chose those particular words. They were not invented by him but had been expressed by writers and philosophers years earlier in England and other countries.

One of Jefferson's intellectual heroes was English philosopher John Locke, whose political writings helped prepare the path that led not only to the American Revolutionary War but also to the French Revolution a few years later. In 1689 Locke wrote his *Two Treatises of Government*, in which he first criticized English political theorist Robert Filmer's belief in the divine right of kings to rule their subjects, (Wikipedia) and then suggested his own solution to the problems England and other European countries were facing. He believed that "men are by nature free and equal" and "argued that people have rights, such as the right to life, liberty, and property." (Stanford) "Since governments exist by the consent of the people in order to protect the rights of the people and promote public good, governments that fail to do so can be resisted and replaced with new governments." (Stanford)

Those writings definitely influenced Jefferson, but then why did he change "property" to the "pursuit of happiness"? When you think about the time period, Jefferson could have left "property" in the phrase because only the wealthy elite actually owned property, so perhaps he felt happiness was something the majority of colonists could strive for. And another thing: Some of Jefferson's property included over one hundred slaves who obviously couldn't pursue happiness the way they wanted to.

Another of Locke's writings clarifies even further what Jefferson might have been thinking when he wrote the Declaration of Independence. In 1690 Locke wrote *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, in which he emphasized that "the pursuit of happiness is the foundation of liberty since it frees us from attachment to any particular desire we might have at any given moment." (pursuit-of-happiness.org/history-of-happiness/john-locke) For example, you are walking past a bakery and you spot a great big cinnamon roll that your body wants right now, but your mind knows that sweet roll is not a good idea. It will give only temporary happiness, not "a true and solid happiness." (pursuit-of-happiness.org/john-locke) So Locke and later Jefferson really mean that the pursuit is "the freedom to be able to make decisions that result in the best life possible for a human being." (Heavy Questions)

Interestingly, John Locke and later Jefferson were both influenced by thinkers who lived centuries earlier. Epicurus, the Greek philosopher who lived 341-270 B.C., clarified the difference between "true pleasure" and "false pleasure," which gives immediate gratification." (pursuit-of-happiness.org/john-locke) By using alcohol as an example, Locke points out that it can give a feeling of

confidence and well-being for a short time, but over-use of it can lead to health problems in the long run. False pleasures lure us to unethical and sinful acts, which can result in misery and sorrow. Locke also points out that everyone has a fear of death, but that if there is “hope for an afterlife,” then we should all live virtuously so that after we die we have a chance of continuing the happiness in heaven that we felt on earth. A life of hedonism can only bring ever-lasting pain. (pursuit-of-happiness.org/john-locke) True happiness, then, is the foundation of liberty because it allows us to make decisions that benefit each of us personally as well as society as a whole because our choices often have social consequences. (civiced.org) Each person has the right to decide on the path to happiness as long as it doesn’t interfere with anyone else’s pursuit, but the government does not have the right to dictate any particular path because what brings happiness is different for each individual. Locke believed that “the desire for happiness is a natural law that is implanted into us by God and motivates everything we do.” (pursuitofhappiness.org/john-locke)

Jefferson also praised Epicurus when he stated, “I consider the genuine doctrines of Epicurus as containing everything rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us.” Aristotle, who lived a few years earlier than Epicurus, and Cicero, who was born later, both represented “a classical republican tradition that emphasized liberty. . . . Happiness was seen as growing out of civic virtue. . . . Civic virtue had little to do with pleasure” and often required “self-sacrifice, denial, and sometimes, even pain.” (heavyquestions) Therefore, when Locke and Jefferson wrote of “the pursuit of happiness,” they were calling upon those ancient philosophical traditions, which emphasized the civic virtues of “courage, moderation, and justice.” (Carole Hamilton)

When Thomas Jefferson wrote the words “all men are created equal” and that they have a right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” he revealed a huge contradiction during the Revolutionary

time period and beyond. He and others who signed the Declaration owned slaves and were well aware that slavery was an issue that troubled the nation. In 1772 he, James Madison, and Patrick Henry encouraged the Virginia Assembly to come up with a plan that would keep slaves from being imported, but King George III, who still ruled the states, wouldn't let the Assembly take action. This Virginia Assembly, known as the House of Burgesses, was an important link between the British government and the democracy our founders were attempting to create. When royal governor George Yeardley arrived in Virginia in 1619, he announced that the colonists would be allowed to establish a legislative assembly, the first of its kind, composed of 22 elected burgesses or representatives who would meet once a year to decide local laws and taxes. Both Jefferson and Patrick Henry were members of this assembly, which led the way to other colonies demanding their own legislature. (thehouseofburgesses-ushistory.org)

Jefferson did, in fact, try to include language in the first draft of the Declaration of Independence that acknowledged the problem of slavery, but when delegates from South Carolina and Georgia saw it, they asked that it be removed. The New England states also agreed that any reference to slavery should be excluded because they realized that war with England was inevitable and that the colonial states needed to be united. Slavery had been causing problems between the North and the South for years, and the founding fathers knew they couldn't take on that issue before they had even formed a country or had independence from England. (Slavery: The Horrifying Institution)

And so the decision to delete any mention of slavery in the Declaration was a political one. Jefferson and the others needed the support of the South in order to win independence, but they also knew that slavery would have to end at some point, and they hoped it would be gradually. (Slavery: The Horrifying Institution)

Besides slavery, there were other problems the founding fathers faced. From the very beginning, America was not a democracy, and many colonists found pursuing happiness very difficult if not impossible. Representatives in the early years came from plantations and corporations; governors were mostly appointed by the English king, and some governors chose their justices of the peace, sheriffs, and clerks. By the 1700s colonists could vote for their legislators, but that was the problem. White males with property who were 21 or over were the only ones who could vote.

John Adams “wrote in 1776 that no good could come from enfranchising more Americans,” and it would be “dangerous to open so fruitful a source of controversy.” “Women will demand the vote; . . . and every man who has not a farthing will demand an equal voice.” (Crews)

Another serious problem the founding fathers faced was the rebellious nature of the ordinary citizens who not only didn't like the English telling them what they had to do, but also didn't like the wealthy elite in the colonies making all the decisions. These colonists were free but certainly had few rights and privileges. There had been a number of rebellions beginning with Nathaniel Bacon's Rebellion in 1676 when about a thousand settlers in Virginia took up arms against English Governor William Berkeley over safety grievances. (Bacon's Rebellion, Wikipedia) By 1760 there had been 18 uprisings, six black rebellions and 40 other riots, all aimed at overthrowing colonial governments. (Zinn)

The French and Indian War ended in 1763, with the French being expelled, so the colonists could concentrate on the British and the Indians. Thinking the Indians could be handled later, the colonial elite saw an opportunity to use the energy of the working classes against England for their own purposes. (Zinn) However, all one has to do is look at what happened to all the property left behind when the Loyalists fled our country to know that the war for independence did not change the quality of

life for the disenfranchised very much. Historian Edmund Morgan explained it this way: “The fact that the lower ranks were involved in the conflict should not obscure the fact that the contest itself was generally a struggle for office and power between members of an upper class: the new against the established.” (Zinn)

We know, of course, that it took many years for our country to begin to look like a democracy and for the underserved to gain any rights and privileges that would make it possible for them to pursue happiness in any form. This quest for a better life is still just out of reach for many struggling Americans, but organizations and projects all across America are attempting to improve life for those who are able to strive for it.

According to Yourdictionary.com, the pursuit of happiness today may be “defined as a fundamental right mentioned in the Declaration of Independence to freely pursue joy and live life in a way that makes you happy, as long as you don’t do anything illegal or violate the rights of others.” That definition describes what Americans today understand happiness to mean, but it does not include the civic virtues and moral aspects Jefferson had in mind when he inserted “the pursuit of happiness” in the Declaration. In his 2005 lecture at the National Conference on Citizenship, Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy explained that for the framers “happiness was about an individual’s contribution to society rather than the pursuits of self-gratification.” (History News Network)

If I were to ask each of you what would make you happier, some of you might say “a new job, losing weight, relief from back pain, more time, more money, a new car, a bigger house,” (Lyubomirsky, p. 13-14) but psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky states in her book *The How of Happiness* that those things do not bring lasting happiness. She uses “the term happiness to refer to the experience of joy, contentment, or positive well-being, combined with a sense that one’s life is good, meaningful, and

worthwhile.” (Lyubomirsky, p. 32)

To have true happiness, Lyubomirsky shows that we can attain it by using specific strategies that she describes in her book. She contends that happiness isn’t something to pursue but rather she prefers to think of it as the “creation or construction of happiness, because research shows it’s in our power to fashion it for ourselves.” (Lyubomirsky, p. 15)

Fifteen years ago “positive psychology,” as it is called, was just beginning to grow, and psychologists realized that there was no scientific study supporting the idea that a person’s happiness could be improved. Over the years Lyubomirsky and other psychologists were able to discover what determines happiness by creating a pie chart. They believe that each person has a set point for happiness that is determined by genetics, a bit like we have a set point for weight or body type. They determined that genetics accounts for 50% of the pie chart. Their findings also revealed that only 10% of the pie chart is affected by our life circumstances—“whether we are rich or poor, healthy or unhealthy, beautiful or plain, married or divorced, etc.” (Lyubomirsky, p. 21) That leaves 40% of the pie left. After genetics and situations are removed, it means our behavior, what we choose to do on a daily basis, is up to us. We control our thoughts and actions and make decisions that can increase our happiness level. Lyubomirsky emphasizes that it takes work to achieve happiness; it requires effort and oftentimes changes in our lifestyle, but the effort is worth it because studies show that “happier people are more sociable and energetic, more charitable and cooperative, . . . show more flexibility and ingenuity in their thinking and are more productive in their jobs.” Also “they are more resilient in the face of hardship, have stronger immune systems, and are physically healthier.” (Lyubomirsky, p. 25)

If we do want a more fulfilling life, Lyubomirsky suggests, first of all, to “practice gratitude and

positive thinking,” (Lyubomirsky, p. 88) in connection with our attitude toward the day-to-day hassles we encounter: an argument with a family member, a car that breaks down, money problems, a house that needs cleaning, or a job we don’t like. Everyone faces the mundane side of life; all jobs are not exciting all the time; some days just don’t go well. But having an attitude that things will get better and that each problem offers a new opportunity to grow can help each day look more positive. Being grateful for what we have and not always wanting more is bound to lead to a feeling of satisfaction.

A second strategy Lyubomirsky recommends is “living in the present” because as she puts it, “the present moment is all we are really guaranteed.” Author Spencer Johnson, has written a gem of a book called *The Precious Present*, and in it he offers a simple story for those who seek happiness but cannot find it even though they travel the world and gain material wealth. A little boy who lives in the moment as he plays and climbs trees learns from a kind old man about the precious present, but as he grows older, he tries to locate this gift, making himself sick and sad because he can’t find it. As he begins to remember all the things the old man had told him, he realizes that “the present moment is always precious. Not because it is absolutely flawless, which it often seems not to be. But because it is absolutely everything it is meant to be . . . at that moment.” (Johnson, pp. 39)

Trying to define happiness is complicated because it is different for each person, and ultimately it is up to us to decide what will bring us contentment, but the one thing psychologists all agree on is that “happiness is not a life without problems.” Rather it is “the strength to overcome problems that come our way,” and that strength can come from our religious faith. Certainly the people we admire most do possess a “strong inner self.” According to David Brooks in an article last year in *The New York Times* entitled “The Moral Bucket List,” these people are “kind, brave, honest, faithful”... and “capable of deep love” for others. He believes they “are made, not born” and that they have “an inner virtue, built

slowly from specific moral and spiritual accomplishments.” He asks each of us, “Have you developed deep connections that hold you up in times of challenge and push you toward the good?” By confronting our own weaknesses and dealing with them, we can become not “better than others but better than we used to be.”

In April of 2002, David Ridderheim wrote a Quest paper titled “What Does It Take to Make Us Happy?” Dick Florea was kind enough to forward the paper to me thinking I would enjoy reading what Dave had to say, and I certainly did. We agreed that life and liberty are rights, but happiness is not. It is the pursuit that we have a right to. If we are all seeking something better in life, then it is up to us to find what that is. David mentioned that the Dalai Lama encourages us to identify those factors that lead to suffering and to cultivate those that lead to happiness, themes that are similar to the writings of John Locke and the psychologists previously mentioned. Money, possessions, and a fancy house do not bring happiness, but your religious faith can strengthen your ability to feel inner peace and contentment. Attitude is the key as I also emphasized. David said there should be a class teaching us how to pursue happiness because enjoying life is a skill. (“What Does It Take to Make Us Happy” by David Ridderheim)

Interestingly, in my research I did find a classroom curriculum on the pursuit of happiness written by Robin Blackwood in 2009. She is “a Stanford-educated teacher, a community volunteer, a gardener,” and she hopes she is “an inspiration to others to live each day to the fullest.” (Blackwood, p. 206) Robin feels “that making good choices about the people we bring into our lives is central to the pursuit of happiness.” She had read a book called *Too Soon Old, Too Late Smart* by Dr. Gordon Livingston and agreed with him that our relationships are too important to leave to chance, so she created a curriculum with Livingston’s book as the course text that teaches skills to make students more aware of decisions involving their friends and family. Given the amount of time kids and adults today

spend connecting to people on their phones and on Facebook, you would think that they would have good relationships, but that is not always the case. Young people today seem more disconnected and stressed than ever because of all the drama that social media encourages as they try to outdo each other in accomplishments and insults. I don't know if Robin's curriculum has ever been taught, but it would certainly help students and adults to become more mindful of the way they treat others and the way they are treated in return. Kindness and empathy are the key virtues that Robin hopes to instill in her students. She takes them on a journey to help them become more aware of their relationships and the consequences of their good and bad choices in life. (Blackwood, pp. 10-15)

There is no doubt that the choices and decisions we make everyday do influence the quality of our lives, from the food we put in our bodies to the way we spend our time. "Are these choices guided by the values we treasure?" (Kasparov) Since I began working as a CASA volunteer with families involved in the court system, I can speak from experience about the terrible choices people make right here in Fort Wayne. Getting involved with drug and alcohol addiction, which can lead to child abuse and neglect, causes many mothers and fathers to get into serious trouble and often leads to time in jail and loss of their children. One young mother I worked with kept getting pregnant every time her boyfriend got out of prison. Meanwhile, he had another girlfriend who also had a child by him. My present case involves young unmarried parents who are both addicted to heroin, causing their two-year-old child to be placed with grandparents where she will likely live permanently. The parents are terribly unhappy and ashamed, and even though counselors and supervisors who work with CASA are trying to teach them the skills to succeed, they are unable to confront their addiction and overcome it.

We are all on a journey through life, and it is the journey itself—"rather than the destination" (Wheeler) that is important. We cannot be happy every moment of every day, but we can know our

passions and use the talents God has given us to help others, so that our journey produces a feeling of fulfillment.

Author Chris Guillebeau agrees that it is the pursuit that creates happiness. When he was 21, he was working in West Africa as a volunteer for a medical charity on a hospital ship and began to realize that helping others in a foreign land made him feel very much alive. During his four years in the area, he learned a lot about traveling and loved exploring surrounding countries, so when his term ended, he made the decision to visit all 193 countries in the next 10 years. Before he began his pursuit, he recognized that there would be challenges—not able to speak many languages and traveling in war-torn countries—but he “was oddly attracted to the idea of going everywhere” and doing it in stages with “lots of obstacles to work through.” (Guillebeau, p. 23) It wasn’t just accomplishing his quest that would be important; it was the journey along the way that would bring satisfaction.

If happiness can be achieved through pursuit and the pursuit is a quest, then I can state, without a doubt, that I have been on a quest this past year. I had a definite goal: to create a paper that I was interested in and my fellow questors would find engaging; it provided a challenge (it wasn’t dangerous, but it wasn’t easy either); it required a sacrifice in that I spent a great deal of time on it; and finally, it required small steps as I progressed toward the goal of completing the paper by April 29, 2016. And I was definitely filled with happiness when it was done. Along the way I learned more about America’s history, and I have a better understanding of how we can all increase our own happiness.

Now that I have finished that particular quest, I’ve been thinking about my next one, and I think I have found the perfect one. My basement holds many items from the past: my grandmother’s photo albums from her trips on the Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth, all of my mother’s painstaking work on

the genealogy of her family and my father's, a slide projector and slides of long ago family events, and boxes of files from my years of teaching. Some of those items I want to keep although I doubt I'll be using the slide projector again, and I know for a fact that I will never be teaching in a classroom again. This quest for a neater, more organized basement fulfills all the requirements: I have a definite goal, it will be challenging, I will need to do it in small steps, and I know it will take me at least a year to accomplish. Plus it would lead to eternal happiness for me and my husband. On the other hand, maybe I would just prefer to be outside gardening, sitting on the back porch reading a good book, or spending time with my family, and leaving that quest for another year.