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What About That Pursuit of Happiness?

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What About That Pursuit of Happiness?

Abstract

On the Fourth of July, many Americans will take the opportunity to read the Declaration of Independence. It is a long document, but the passage that is most likely to stir feelings of patriotism comes early, at the start of the second paragraph:

"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." [*excerpt*]

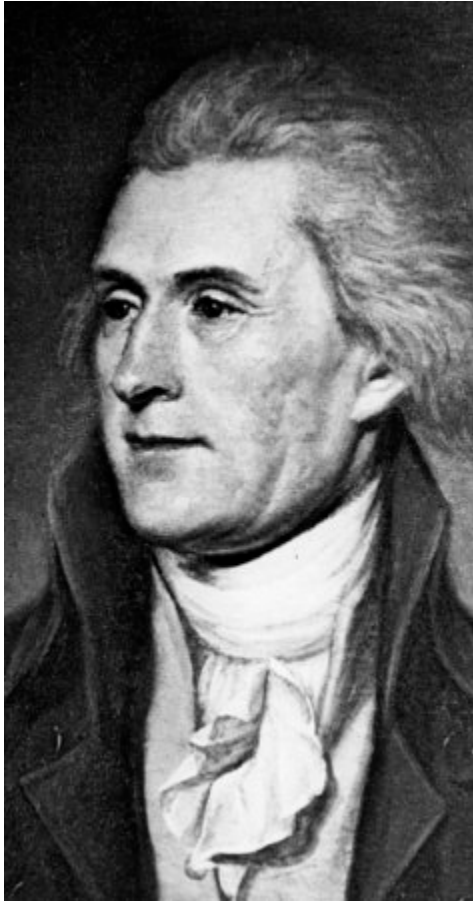
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Commentary: What about that pursuit of happiness?



Thomas Jefferson

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On the Fourth of July, many Americans will take the opportunity to read the Declaration of Independence. It is a long document, but the passage that is most likely to stir feelings of patriotism comes early, at the start of the second paragraph:

"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."

As unalienable rights go, the meaning of "Life" and "Liberty" are indeed self-evident, but what did Thomas Jefferson mean when he inserted the "pursuit of Happiness" into this very short list? And 240 years after he wrote it, does that phrase still hold meaning?

In a letter to James Madison in 1823, Jefferson claimed that "I turned to neither book or pamphlet while writing" the Declaration, but historians have long noted that the document's most famous passage had two obvious precedents.

Nearly a century before Jefferson put quill to parchment, English philosopher John Locke in *The Second Treatise of Government* wrote "That all men by nature are equal" and that

nature also gave each man the right "to preserve his property, that is, his life, liberty, and estate against the injuries and attempts of other men."

Jefferson's fellow patriot George Mason invoked those same ideas in June 1776 when he wrote in Virginia's Declaration of Rights: "All men are created equally free and independent and have certain inherent and natural rights . . . among which are the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety."

Jefferson may not have had "book or pamphlet" open in front of him when he wrote the Declaration of Independence, but he certainly borrowed freely from Locke and Mason, and his phrase "the pursuit of Happiness" admirably streamlined Mason's "pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety."

But what exactly did Jefferson mean?

Perhaps the answer lies in the Constitution. The Bill of Rights gave tangible form to the natural rights of life and liberty. The right to life is expressed in prohibitions on cruel and unusual punishment and unlawful imprisonment. The right to liberty is laid out in freedoms of religion, speech, and assembly.

But the framers never attempted to define happiness in the Bill of Rights, nor did they guarantee it to anyone elsewhere in the Constitution.

Is it possible that Jefferson's "pursuit of Happiness" was just a rhetorical flourish, a bit of purposefully vague window dressing inserted to give universal appeal to the colonists' cause against King George III?

If that was Jefferson's intent, he certainly succeeded - we are far more likely to quote Jefferson's distillation of Lockean principles in the Declaration's second paragraph than anything contained in the long list of grievances that makes up the rest of the document.

However, Jefferson was not alone when he wrote about happiness. Many of his contemporaries pondered the same issue: What is happiness and what is the best way for individuals and societies to pursue it?

The short answer that Jefferson and other Enlightenment thinkers came up with was that happiness had its roots in humankind's inherent capacity for reason and desire for material security. Reason was the faculty that enabled humans to manipulate and control their environment. It was the means by which they pursued individual and collective improvement. The "Creator" gave humans reason because he wanted them to be happy. (All those T-shirts to the contrary, Benjamin Franklin never said that beer was the divine gift intended to make us happy, but he did write, "So convenient a thing it is to be a reasonable creature, since it enables one to find or make a Reason for everything one has a mind to do.")

In Jefferson's world, reasonable people pursued happiness by migrating from poverty and deprivation in the Old World to the natural bounty of the New. They pursued happiness by adopting new techniques that improved crop yields and livestock breeding. They built ships, roads, and canals that opened new markets and sped commerce.

Happiness meant being able to provide for your family without fear of famine, incessant warfare, or an exploitive aristocracy. In his essay "Information to Those Who Would Remove to America," Franklin called this condition a "general happy mediocrity." Today, we call it a stable, middle-class society, where people who work hard can reasonably expect freedom and prosperity for themselves and their children.

With that context in mind, Jefferson's "pursuit of Happiness" becomes much more than a pleasing turn of phrase. It was a remarkably succinct expression of the American dream, a confident look to the future rather than a backward nod to Locke. As such, it remains foundational to how we define ourselves as a nation.

In this election year, the pursuit of happiness sometimes appears to be in full retreat. Donald Trump has ridden a tide of fearmongering to his party's nomination, and his campaign promise to "make America great again" cynically swaps hope for nostalgia. By many measures, Americans have lost their faith in the pursuit of happiness: Suicides and drug addiction are up; geographic and social mobility are down. With those sobering statistics in mind, now is a good time to consider anew the meaning of the pursuit of happiness. Does it mean retreat into declining expectations, fear, and isolation, or are we still bound by a promise Jefferson and his contemporaries made in 1776 to the future?

Pursuing happiness doesn't mean we get it, but abandoning the pursuit seems a much worse alternative.