

# "The Pursuit of Happiness"

Homily for July 4, 2010

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.

How many of us, I wonder, learned those memorable words by heart when we were in grade school? I know I did. First read to his fellow citizens 234 years ago today, Thomas Jefferson's text sounds as stirring now as it did then. While all of these words are profound and beautiful, it's the last four--"the pursuit of happiness"--that exert the greatest fascination for us as a people. Yet what does it mean, that most remarkable of catchphrases "the pursuit of happiness"?

Indeed, the more I've researched and reflected on this phrase over the past few weeks, the more questions I seem to come up with. For starters, what did this phrase mean to Jefferson and those of his age? What might it mean to us today? What, after all, is happiness and what does it mean to pursue it? And, finally, what are the spiritual implications of pursuing happiness in the living of our daily lives? Not surprisingly, I can't say that I've come up with definitive answers to these questions, but I do have some personal reflections to share with you this afternoon on the "pursuit of happiness ."

The first thing I need to point out--if you didn't already know it--is that a booming industry has sprung up in the West over the past fifteen or twenty years concerning happiness, with its headquarters right here in the USA. Part New Age spirituality, part transpersonal psychology, part pharmaceutical industry selling anti-depressants, the happiness industry is firmly based on a belief in our unalienable right to be happy.

Here's just a little data on this growing sector of the economy. While a mere 50 books on the subject of happiness were published in the year 2000, by 2008 that number had grown to more than 4,000 titles. There's also the World Database of Happiness based in Rotterdam in the Netherlands, as well as hundreds of papers are published every year in a discipline now called "happiness studies."

While this new area of academic study may be a recent arrival on the scene, survey researchers have been tracking how happy we humans are for at least the last 35 years. Based on statistical samples of people answering questions like "All things considered, how happy would you say you are these days?", lots of interesting data has been gathered on the topic of happiness. Here are just a few of these findings:

- Married people and others in committed relationships are generally happier than the unmarried.
- People with and without children are equally happy.
- Dog owners and cat owners also report equal levels of happiness.

- People with college degrees are generally happier than those with less education, though people with just a bachelor's degree are happier than those with PH.D.s
- Richer people are happier than poorer ones, though only slightly; that said, I also need to point out that outright poverty does correlate with significantly higher levels of unhappiness
- And, particularly interesting for those of us gathered here this afternoon, people who worship together or engage regularly in some form of group spiritual practice are generally happier than those who don't

When happiness is looked at on a national basis, some other interesting bits of data surface. It might come as a shock--or perhaps not--to learn that, despite the fact that the pursuit of happiness has become enshrined in our national psyche, America is not the happiest place on earth. Indeed, we're statistically behind a range of countries, including the Scandinavian nations, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Costa Rica, Malta, and Malaysia. In case you're curious, the unhappiest countries in the world include many of the former states of the Soviet Union and most of the nations of Africa.

Still, despite the differences in relative happiness expressed in these surveys, one remarkable finding stands out. According to Martin Seligman, a psychologist who's considered one of the founders of the discipline of happiness studies, perceived happiness is only marginally affected by such external circumstances as country of origin, gender, relative health, income level, education, or climate. At most, he says, these factors collectively account for only about 8 to 15 percent of variance in happiness. The implication of that bit of data would seem to support what philosophers and spiritual teachers have been saying for millennia: that happiness--or the lack of it--is largely an inside job.

Yet, for all that the pursuit of happiness has become encoded in our national DNA, the fact remains that we also consume three-quarters of the world's supply of anti-depressants. Which leaves one wondering if the happiness Americans are seeking today has anything to do with the happiness of which Jefferson was speaking more than two hundred years ago.

Which, in turn, brings me to the question of what Jefferson was referring to when he spoke of happiness in the Declaration. For one thing, we know that that he adapted the phrase "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" from a widely quoted observation of the great English political philosopher John Locke. Significantly, however, Jefferson edited Locke's original quote, which referred to an unalienable right to "life, liberty, and property." (Parenthetically, we need to remember that Jefferson's own "property" included more than two hundred human beings who were not permitted to pursue their happiness.)

Historians tell us that, while Jefferson didn't invent this idea happiness as a right--he actually drew on several other Enlightenment thinkers as well as the philosophy of the

classical world--it was he alone who chose to substitute the phrase "the pursuit of happiness" for Locke's "property" in this most important of documents.

So what did Jefferson intend by citing happiness in the Declaration? For starters, Jefferson was not speaking about happiness as either an entirely private pursuit or one focused on the accumulation of wealth or the seeking of personal pleasure. Like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, Jefferson connected "happiness" with what these ancient philosophers called aretê, the Greek word for "virtue" or "excellence." Aretê, in turn, was linked to such civic virtues as courage, moderation, and justice. "The happy man," wrote Aristotle, "lives well as he does well." Most of all, these philosophers connected happiness to both the personal and public pursuit of the Good.

Jefferson's conscious downplaying of the importance of property and his emphasis on this particular form of happiness has much to teach us today. Sadly, however, for many Americans, Jefferson might just as well have left the word "property" in place. To them, happiness does mean the acquisition of wealth and status. So while we give lip service to the idea that money can't buy happiness, as a nation we act as if it does. And that isn't making us noticeably happier.

Which brings me ask the what feels like the ultimate question: If the seeking of material riches or hedonistic pleasure won't result in a real, enduring, and sustainable form of happiness, what will? Fortunately, both philosophy and spiritual teachings have a great deal to say on this subject. The consensus of these ancient wisdom traditions teach us that happiness--real happiness--is attainable. Paradoxically, however, it is not attained as a goal we can pursue in itself. Rather such happiness is the outcome of a whole range of spiritual concerns: mindfulness, gratitude, forgiveness, compassion, being of service, living authentically, fighting for justice, opening ourselves to experiences of wonder and awe, and expressing love for ourselves and each other.

The problem, of course, is that all of these practices take both discipline and effort. While we Americans maintain an optimistic, if sometimes naive, belief in the possibility of happiness, we also seem to lack the patience and willingness to do the necessary work required to cultivate it. The happiness of which Jefferson, Aristotle, and spiritual tradition speak is neither easy, uncomplicated, or instant. It also isn't focused solely on the individual, but also requires taking into account the happiness of others. It looks inward to the voices of conscience and inner wisdom rather than outward to the accumulation of more possessions or the search for more sophisticated distractions from what really matters in both our own lives and the life we share together.

Perhaps most paradoxically, the kind of happiness that's grounded in spiritual wisdom does not seek to exclude sadness or sorrow or any of life's other challenging emotions. Indeed, despite what many of the gurus in the happiness industry would have us believe, real happiness actually embraces the darker aspects of the human experience with both serenity and equanimity. Whenever I think of this particular paradox concerning happiness, I remember all the serene and smiling images of the Buddha, whose First Noble Truth is the inevitability of pain. This is why, despite life's unavoidable

quotient of sorrow, the Dalai Lama insists that the very purpose of our life is to seek happiness.

In closing, I'd like to share a quotation from *Love & Death: My Journey through the Valley of the Shadow*, which is one of the last books published by the great Unitarian-Universalist minister Forest Church. For me, it's one of the most beautiful, yet simple, summations of how to go about the business of seeking happiness. "Want what you have," he said. "Do what you can. Be who you are." Powerful advice if we can only follow it. May it be so this Independence Day and always. Blessed be. Amen.