

The Pursuit of Happiness

Happiness. Amazon lists nearly 12,000 self-help books on the topic of how to achieve it, with over 200 of them published in the last month alone. *The Happiness Project*, Gretchen Rubin's memoir of a year-long experiment in 12 different paths to happiness, spent over two years on the New York Times best-seller list, and its author is now a happiness guru, with daily e-mail tips to help you de-clutter, stop yelling at your kids, cope with difficult people, and know thyself.

The pursuit of happiness is even a foundation for our national life, named as an inalienable right in our Declaration of Independence. Yet we don't seem to be doing too well at that pursuit: In the United Nations' 2013 report on world happiness, we ranked 17th – behind the Scandinavian countries who took 6 of the top 7 spots, and such countries as Canada, Costa Rica, Mexico, and the United Arab Emirates. So what's wrong with our pursuit?

Could some of our trouble come from our understanding of those very words, “the pursuit of happiness?” Did you learn, as I did, back in some U.S. History class that Thomas Jefferson borrowed the phrase, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” from John Locke? John Locke was a 17th century philosopher and political theorist who believed that human beings should be able to exercise some control over their individual lives – a novel idea at the time. He said that each person is entitled to life, liberty, and property. In other words society needs to be governed by rules which ensure that each person will be treated fairly and that no one will be deprived of life, liberty, or property unless it can be shown that certain laws have been violated which harm the larger community. Historians have argued that though Jefferson changed the words, that for him, the pursuit of happiness meant the sanctity of possession. So our minds have been attuned to hear property as the equivalent of happiness. How has that shaped our understanding of society and our individual lives? Has that led us to see our goal as each person's having a plot of land – that house with the picket fence, perhaps – into which each of us is entitled to retreat from the world, surrounded by our family or those whom we allow to cross our boundary lines? If we find our happiness in property, in ownership, what does that say about the meaning of our lives?

The Zen story of the silver cat offers us the opposite message – that property doesn't bring happiness. The poet finds happiness in giving the priceless cat to the children. And it isn't the silver that makes the children happy but the way the cat adds to their play. So are we to be spiritual and follow the wisdom of Zen and other religious teachings, or are we to be rational and follow Locke and other realists? Which is the way to happiness?

Perhaps there doesn't have to be an either/or. What if Jefferson didn't equate happiness with property? What if he consciously changed Locke's words to reflect what **he** thought was important? Historian Garry Wills argued in his book on the Declaration of Independence that Jefferson did draw on Locke, but that he also drew on the writings of the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus. Epicurus taught that pleasure shows what is good, and pain what is bad. So in life, you want to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. (This sounds obvious, but many philosophical traditions argue that it is only through depriving oneself of pleasure that one can attain fullness of life.) Epicurus believed that we should be happy, and that to be happy, people had to have choice. So the pursuit of happiness involves being able to choose - what you will do for work, where you will live, whom you will marry, with whom you will associate, and what you will worship. Jefferson and the other Founders came out of a time when life was more controlled by the community and so they responded to this idea of choice as offering some power

to the individual. But they didn't want to get rid of community ties – they couldn't conceive of people living only for themselves. They imagined a happy life as balanced between solitude and community – time to work, time to reflect, time to socialize, and time for civic duty. As Jennifer Michael Hecht put it in *The Happiness Myth*,

The founders' vision of the good life includes permission to avoid the crowd, to skip church, and to put some distance between you and your extended family – if you want. People had been bossed around by authority; now they had won the right to boss their own selves around... In this move toward freedom, bonds to country and family were reconceived, but were still strong.

Think about how these different understandings of happiness might play out in our Thanksgiving celebrations. If happiness equals property, then Thanksgiving celebrates what we own. It is an inward looking holiday – my family celebrates our successes; your family celebrates yours.

But if happiness means the choices we have made, the wholeness of our lives, then Thanksgiving moves from being about accomplishment to about connection. We offer thanks not for what we have but for what we do and with whom we do it.

We don't say that our Thanksgiving celebrations are about property, but isn't that often how they might look to someone who knows nothing of this holiday? We gather around a huge meal – a sign of our prosperity - in our own houses, sometimes just with our immediate family, sometimes with extended family and friends. Yet the occasion our dinners look back to, the Pilgrim's Thanksgiving with the Native Americans, involved a community meal – different peoples who were in many ways strangers to one another – gathering to give thanks for the support they had received from God and from one another. Though parts of that story are myth, not history, our current observances seem to have diverged from the point of the story.

Or think about the origin of our current practice of celebrating Thanksgiving in November. When Abraham Lincoln proclaimed the first national Thanksgiving in 1863 in the midst of the Civil War, it wasn't around a meal at all. It was a day for people to gather in their churches to give thanks for the blessing of their lives and to think of all the ways that things could have been much much worse – they could have been attacked by foreign nations during this time of war. As his secretary of state William Seward wrote for Lincoln:

The year that is drawing towards its close, has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, ... others have been added... In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign States to invite and to provoke their aggression, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere except in the theatre of military conflict; It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and one voice by the whole American People. I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November ..., as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due ... for such singular deliverances and blessings, they do also, ..., commend to [God's] tender care all those who have

become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquillity and Union.

How far have our Thanksgiving celebrations come from those days. When did it move from a time to give thanks for a larger good and to pray for the healing of society to a family feast? How can we renew that spirit of community, connection, and care?

Our lunch today seems to me to be a good example of how to do that. In many ways it is a Thanksgiving dinner. We may not have turkey and cranberry sauce, but we have people sitting down with friends and strangers in a spirit of gratitude and a sense of a larger purpose. We have all the ingredients for happiness present – certainly cause for thanks.

Thanksgiving as we celebrate it now is often problematic. If you're not happy, not successful, don't have the property necessary to buy the food, open your house, or travel, it can be hard to feel part of the holiday. I find it interesting to compare the two town religious events I've participated in during my 16 months in Scituate. Last November the Scituate clergy hosted a town-wide Thanksgiving service on a lovely fall afternoon. Fewer than 50 people attended. On a rainy, icy night in March we sponsored a town-wide vigil to offer hope for those in the darkness of substance abuse. Hundreds attended. Though they didn't gather around a happy topic, at the vigil for hope people felt that sense of being part of something larger. Perhaps because we are so occasioned to regarding Thanksgiving as being about our families, they didn't feel that larger sense would be offered at that service. The clergy have decided not to hold a town-Thanksgiving service this November. Instead we're talking about holding a service of gratitude at a time unconnected to the holiday, like February. We hope to offer another chance for townspeople to feel part of a larger whole and to be moved to care for the greater good.

How else can we foster within and without these walls that sense of being part of something greater? How can we help one another to pursue happiness in ways which deepen our individual lives AND strengthen our ties?

What difference would an ethic of happiness as maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain for all people make to our society? Would it change things for individuals and communities dealing with substance abuse? If we believed that ethic lay behind Jefferson's words rather than Locke's view of property, would the situations in Ferguson, Missouri, in Sanford, Florida, in Dearborn Heights, Michigan, and so many other neighborhoods, have turned out differently? How would a different ethic affect the lives of the people who will receive the coats we blessed this morning? How might it help the situation of those who will benefit from our Guest-at-Your-Table offering? How might it alter our conversations around the environment and what we are prepared to do to protect our earth and its inhabitants?

As another ancient philosopher, the Roman Seneca, wrote, "to live happily... is the desire of all people, but their minds are blinded to a clear vision of just what it is that makes life happy; and so far from its being easy to attain the happy life, the more eagerly they strive to reach it, the

farther they recede from it if they have made a mistake in the road; for when it leads in the opposite direction, their very speed will increase the distance that separates them.”

Let us slow down, look again at our destinations, and if necessary recalibrate our paths to happiness.

- Pamela M. Barz