

Sermon on the “Pursuit of Happiness”

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.

The pursuit of happiness is an American obsession. Thomas Jefferson did not create this sentence out of his philosophic imagination. He wrote that those words captured the spirit of our young nation.

The American Dream articulated in the Declaration of Independence is radically different than the Western European Christian understanding of what life was supposed to be about in 1776. The traditional view was we suffer in this life to be resurrected on the Judgement Day to an eternal life of bliss. There is no point in pursuing happiness here at the peril of our heavenly reward. Ibsen captures the sentiment in these words: “Only the spirit of rebellion craves for happiness in this life. What right have we human beings to happiness?”

The idea that just maybe people could be happy in this life as well as the one to come was reintroduced with the rediscovery of the Greek philosophers. The Enlightenment Humanists started questioning the feudal order that supposedly reflected the heavenly one in which people’s purpose and meaning was to be found in fulfilling their station in society. Philosophers like Bentham, Mills and Locke pulled heavenly happiness down to earth as a way to structure a more mobile society. The Utilitarian ideal of the greatest good for the greatest number asserted the value of happiness, happiness as a goal individuals worked out for themselves shorn of its societal obligations. Self-satisfaction gradually has replaced social and moral obligation as the driving force of the pursuit of happiness.

This nation was the fulfillment of the Lock’s philosophy separating church and state with a free market economy and a democratic polity. Many of our immigrant ancestors came to these shores in search of materialistic self-satisfaction. They came to our shores saying, “Some say that money can’t buy happiness. All I ask is a chance to prove it.”

Of course we know better don’t we? One of the great privileges of enjoying prosperity in America is beginning to understand that money can’t buy happiness. Yet few of us who were children of privilege appreciate the source of this attitude. Few of us know the consuming despair of deprivation, oppression, homelessness and starvation that make wealth appear to be the solution to one’s problems. In reality, we know wealth just trades one set of problems for another. One can experience tremendous misery in a comfortable home with a full stomach.

While many of us know that money doesn’t buy us happiness, still, it enables us to look for it in a lot more places. As

George Burns liked to say, “Happiness? A good cigar, a good meal, a good cigar and a good woman-or a bad woman; it depends on how much happiness you can handle.” Going to the movies, eating out, enjoying the theater, musical performances and the opera, beholding great art, traveling the world, reading good books, yes, money does help us enjoy a pleasing, culturally satisfying life. William Wordsworth said it in these poetic words:

Dreams, books, are each a world; and books, we know, are a substantial world, both pure and good. Round these, with tendrils strong as flesh and blood, our pastime and our happiness will grow.

Today many believe happiness is synonymous with pleasure. Utilitarian hedonistic philosophy proposes the more pleasure we experience, the happier we will be. Sadly, the association of pleasure and happiness can become profoundly destructive. In a materialistic culture, each consumer eats up the resources of the planet in the pursuit of a happiness defined as “well-feeling” rather than “well-being.”

The classical understanding of happiness as well-being is quite different from the modern view of happiness as well-feeling and why I bring the topic to you today for your consideration. While good health, wealth and pleasure were components of a happy life for the ancient Greeks, they were far from its goal. For Aristotle, the eudaimonic life was measured by its Arete.

These two ideas dominated Greek thought(2). Actually, eudaimonia is imperfectly translated as happiness. Others have translated it as living well, well-being, and flourishing. It is a state of refinement that is the source of feelings such as pleasure, satisfaction and contentment. Aristotle described being eudaimon as the highest good to be achieved in human life.

Arete, commonly translated as virtue but probably better as excellence, was used by philosophers to express desirable social qualities such as wisdom, courage, justice, moderation and piety toward the Gods as well as expressive qualities such as eloquence and wittiness.

Aristotle answers the question, “how does one achieve a eudaimonic life?” by saying it is a life of intellectual contemplation suffused with excellence and virtue found in a life of community. The prerequisite for such a life was good health, enough wealth for one’s needs, and good social standing and honor in the community.

“Great!” you might be thinking, “So what about those slaves feeding and pampering Aristotle?” For that matter,

what about Job's wife watching her children being crushed and tending Job's sores? What about poor Lord Byron's miserable existence? How do they fit into this classical understanding of happiness?

Aristotle is often criticized for his claim that the best life is the life of the philosopher. It denigrates the happiness aspirations for most of us wage slaves who must labor 40 plus hours a week. Aristotle appears to put the good life way out of our reach.

And what if that were true? What if during some portions of our lives, the greatest form of happiness will be out of our grasp? What would the effect be on our politics to know the poor and oppressed are limited in their experience of happiness?

What Aristotle lays out in his philosophy is objective gradations of happiness. Not all experiences of happiness are equal or praise worthy. The lowest forms of happiness are animal pleasures found in sexual satisfaction, food and drink, and sensual delights. These are the most fragile sources of happiness because they are limited by our bodies. We can only eat and drink so much before we get sick. Too much physical pleasure can easily turn into pain. The happiness of the flesh is clearly impermanent and dependent on one's circumstances.

Aristotle calls the political, what we today might want to call the social, as the next level of happiness. I read him saying the practice of virtue or excellence, terms defined in a social context, build and affirm a sense of community. We can expand on the classical virtues of courage, wisdom, justice and moderation including benevolence, forgiveness and generosity. This form of happiness is built on social engagement and action. Marcus Aurelius writes in his *Meditations*: The happiness and unhappiness of the rational, social animal depends not on what he feels but on what he does; just as his virtue and vice consist not in feeling but in doing. You hear the same refrain in the words of John W Gardner, President of the Carnegie Foundation who said "Storybook happiness involves every form of pleasant thumb-twiddling; true happiness involves the full use of one's powers and talents." Much happiness can be found in the social and political life of the community.

The highest form of happiness for Aristotle is philosophy. Better than practicing virtue is also understanding why an action is virtuous. Aristotle thought the happiness of theoretical wisdom is greater than the happiness of practical wisdom. Again, this doesn't negate any of the sensual and social forms of happiness, only grades them. And the sweetest form of happiness is the form found in the mind.

What is critically important about this understanding of happiness is its independence of pleasure and self-satisfaction. The happy mind is somewhat insensitive to pleasures and pains and social ups and downs. The Greeks debated whether the philosopher being tortured could be happy (Aristotle said no) but the idea is the philosopher's happiness is independent of his circumstances. Whether living in luxury or simplicity, the life of the mind provides meaning and satisfaction.

I sense this understanding in Whitman's life and writings. He had a stroke in his fifties and lost much of the use of his left side. He had to leave Washington DC and his lover to live near his brother in Camden New Jersey. Though he struggled with depression at first, in the next almost 20 years of his life he continued writing, carousing with the railroad workers, ferry men, and drivers - the common men he wrote about in his poems, finding meaning in their lives.⁽³⁾ The counterpoint of the azure sky happiness with which he closed his life is a powerful counterpoint to the dour pessimism of Lord Byron.

What excited me about discovering Aristotle's ideas about the good life was recognizing the connection to Unitarian Universalism. On Sunday morning, we gather as fellow philosophers to explore the life of the mind as well as the spirit. We have been accused more often than once of being a philosopher's club. Our communal life within and outside this congregation allows us to develop our arete, our virtuous social excellence. And we always have great food at our events. No matter what our circumstances or access to happiness, this religious community is a great place to cultivate eudaimonia.

This has been true for me. I find the intellectual stimulation in Unitarian Universalist circles engages my mind with ideas that may have beginnings and endings in my mind but have a life of their own beyond me. The feeling of fellowship we create on Sunday morning, in classes, meetings and discussion groups, in one to one encounters as we get to know each other better, I find a rich source of happiness. And the esthetic pleasures of music and singing feed my soul. For me, religious community practically defines eudaimonia. Eudaimonia is not an accumulation of serial pleasurable moments, but a deepening and refining experience of meaning and value that builds over a lifetime.

In fact my experience in different UU congregations over a lifetime has led me to question if searching for happiness even makes sense. Satisfying as my involvement has been, it has never been without problems, burdens and annoyances. I wonder if pursuing happiness is the even the right approach to the good life. Ashley Montagu said the moments of happiness we enjoy take us by surprise. It is not that we seize them, but that they seize us. I think for many of us happiness is what happens while we're making other plans. And the greatest happiness, as William Saroyan said, is knowing that you do not necessarily require happiness.

Life is hard in the beginning, difficult in the middle and ends with death. The Buddha wisely taught that life has an unsatisfactory component that cannot be removed. Even a few hours of Byronic happiness may not come to some of us.

So let us strive to create the conditions in our congregation, our community and the world that allow people to experience happiness, enjoy it fully and then discover what lies beyond it. "Happiness is available," says Thich Nhat Hahn, "help yourself."