**The Pursuit of Happiness**

STOP IT!

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The “pursuit of happiness” is a term well known to us Americans as it is an iconic phrase in our Declaration of Independence. It is up there with Life and Liberty as the bedrock of our freedom. But, what exactly does it mean?

Thomas Jefferson, and our other founding fathers, were profoundly influenced by John Locke, a seventeenth century philosopher who best articulated the revolutionary idea of democracy and personal freedom. It is likely that Locke’s idea of happiness; namely “prosperity, thriving, and wellbeing,” is what Jefferson intended. Our modern day meaning of happiness, however, seems closer to “pleasant, positive emotions and having needs satisfied.” Many philosophers and spiritual teachers take the concept even further to mean inner peace or joy.

**An Endless Search?**

We all want to be happy. Why is it so elusive?

Simply put, it is elusive *because* we are pursuing it!

Pleasure is derived from something outside meeting a need or desire: food, drink, relationships, experiences or material goods. We have all felt the desire for something that we feel will make us happy, feeling pleasure on attaining it, only to see that pleasure quickly fade and have the process repeat itself as we chase after another object of our desire. Much like a whack-a-mole of pleasure seeking, we are continuously moving from one object of desire to another.

Joy, on the other hand, comes from within … from a peace and sense of wholeness and satisfaction that is not related to any material thing but from our very existence. It is a state of no wanting, and therefore, no need for pursuit. It is a durable serenity and freedom from perceived lack. This, I believe, whether we know it or not, is the happiness we seek.

**The Source of Joy**

So, if the happiness we seek is from *within* why is there any need to pursue it? Isn’t it more of a process of discovery and exploration of what *is* rather than the accumulation of things or new experiences?

Absolutely! In fact, durable happiness is more readily available to all of us than we think. The Dalai Lama tells us we CHOOSE happiness. That’s right, by choosing what we think about and what we value, we can discover that happiness is, in fact, always with us waiting to be noticed and enjoyed. This is a simple first step to this state is a half-full vs half-empty approach to our lives. Research seems to validate the value of this approach as optimistic, positive people tend to live as much as seven and a half years longer than their gloomy counterparts. Einstein told us that you can choose to see the world where nothing is a miracle or everything’s a miracle. I’m thinking the latter view is rich with happiness and joy.

Eckhart Tolle, in his magnificent book *The Power of Now* extolls the miraculous value of spending more time in the present moment … aware but without racing thoughts and judgement. Meditators, artists, and craftsman tell us that being present and totally immersed in what they are doing brings contentment, happiness, peace, and yes, joy.

**Deep Roots**

We are creatures who, for most of the time we have walked the earth, have been tightly connected to each other. Our survival, and ultimately our emotional wellbeing, depended on it, and we have inherited a deep and non-negotiable need to be linked to others. This social connection is a solidarity based on our place as part of whole and something larger than ourselves. Our ancestors held the greater good to be the prime driver of all actions. Individual need or desire was unacceptable when in conflict with the greater good. And, although our modern lifestyle seems at total odds with that concept, when we do act with compassion or kindness, and in cooperation with others or even just with shared experience, we are usually surprised and pleased with our reaction. Yes, doing things with or for the benefit of others or the common good is the true north of our very being and the source of our wholeness, serenity, and satisfaction ... our happiness.

So, happiness then, is actually a by-product of our state of mind, and deeds that reflect a realization of our relationship to others both as individuals and as part of a complex collection of living things. Pursuit then, is a false, useless and destructive journey. As noted above, happiness begins with discovery not acquisition.

**Some Guiding Principles:**

1. Realize that all things change, and that the pleasure we seek in things is temporary and will fade and bring pain when removed.
2. Pursue what pleases you, but realize this will not bring the true happiness you seek.
3. Happiness is the result of a choice to value our core human traits of compassion and solidarity with all life and to act accordingly.
4. Bring kindness into your life every day and see the result. The happiness you seek is within the Golden Rule.
5. Tame the acquisition treadmill with Presence. Be in this moment, seeing and appreciating the miracle that surrounds you.

*Live long. Live well.*