

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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14 September 2013

The Pursuit of Happiness – Redefined

“The pursuit of happiness:” In the Declaration of Independence, this phrase is connected with “life and liberty” as the three important rights “endowed” by the “Creator” as a “self-evident” truth. What exactly did Jefferson mean by “happiness?” How has Postmodern culture re-defined this important word?

- First a comment on what “happiness” meant in the 18th century. Typically in this century, when human rights were enumerated, life, liberty and property were listed as paramount. But Jefferson substituted the pursuit of happiness for property. Why did he do that? In one sense, we will never know for certain. However, there is little doubt that 18th century philosophers focused on happiness as defined by Aristotle in the 4th century B.C. Greece. For Aristotle happiness (*eudaimonia* in Greek) was the ultimate good, worth seeking for its own sake. It evoked virtue, good conduct and generous citizenship. Without question, this is how Jefferson was using happiness. Other key Founders agreed with Jefferson: James Wilson of Pennsylvania argued that “happiness of the society is the first law of government.” John Adams contended that “happiness of society is the end of government.” [For this point about Jefferson see John Meacham’s essay in *Time*, 8 July 2013, p. 40). For our Founders, then, the pursuit of happiness was the pursuit of the good of the whole, because the good of the whole was central to the genuine well-being of the individual. For them, happiness was not a self-centered, selfish pursuit of personal gratification and self-indulgence; it was the exact opposite. Another way of putting this: Happiness, as they defined it, was inextricably linked to freedom and the survival of the Republic. It was equated with the pursuit of civic responsibility, which was always to be connected to the pursuit of personal goals and ambition. In our Postmodern culture, the link between the two has been severed.
- Second, what is the role of faith in this understanding of “happiness?” In a new book entitled *A Free People’s Suicide*, Os Guinness argues that this nation’s Founders linked three key components. For them, this linkage was central to preserving the freedom for which they had fought so hard. In what Guinness calls the “golden triangle,” the Founders argued that freedom requires virtue (one of those central words connected to how they understood happiness); leg one. Virtue requires faith; leg two. Faith requires freedom; leg three. “Freedom requires virtue, which requires faith, which requires freedom—ad infinitum, a recycling triangle, a brilliant, daring suggestion as to how freedom can be sustained.” Another way of saying this is that without faith, there is no basis for virtue, no reason for accepting their definition of happiness. Without faith, there is no reason for not pursuing a life of utter selfishness and self-indulgence. If Guinness is correct, then America’s pursuit of personal autonomy is a serious threat to freedom. If faith is no longer a vital part of a person’s life, then there is no basis for virtue (again, one

of those key 18th century words connected to happiness). And if there is no basis for virtue, then freedom is indeed threatened. In fact, without faith there is no real basis for human dignity in the first place. The dignity, value and worth of each individual are certainly the reason why we as a nation embraced freedom in the first place. As historians have shown, the basis for the abolition of slavery, the enfranchisement of blacks and women, and the end of child labor were all rooted in revivalist Christianity. Faith provided the foundation for human dignity, which produced significant social change. Virtue, faith and freedom are indeed linked.

- Third, permit me to cite two examples of how happiness is being redefined in America, which in turn is undermining virtue and threatening the survival of freedom. Both illustrate that without faith and virtue, freedom becomes autonomy and the pursuit of self-gratification.
 1. Recently *Time* magazine published as its feature story, “The Childfree Life: When having it all means not having children.” The article centered on this statistic: One in five American women ends her childbearing years without maternity. As columnist Kathleen Parker has observed, the key term is “childfree,” not childless. Childfree communicates personal freedom, autonomy and self-gratification. Parker concludes, “The pleasure principle seems to be gaining on the procreative impulse.” The focus here is not on those women (or couples) who are infertile and cannot have children. The focus is on those women (and couples) who choose not to have children. Faith explains to us that God created the institution of marriage and stipulated that a central aspect of marriage is procreation. In addition, having children is one of the most powerful antidotes to a selfish and self-centered life. Parker also observes what sociologists and psychologists, let alone theologians, have been saying for decades—“Putting someone else’s interests above one’s own is the alpha and omega of parenthood.” Without meaning to be condescending or glib, choosing a life that is “childfree” is an example of the re-definition of “happiness” in the American Republic.
 2. During the recent MTV Video Music Awards ceremony, Miley Cyrus gave one of the most disgusting performances ever seen on television. Apparently no longer desiring to be viewed as Hannah Montana of Disney fame, Cyrus dressed in what gave all appearances as being her underwear and “danced” in a way that could only be defined as obscene. With obvious sexual intent, Cyrus used her tongue countless times, while she utilized a foam finger to “stimulate” her dancing partner, the singer Robin Thicke. Throughout the performance, Cyrus simulated other sexual acts with Thicke. In thinking about this sordid performance, it is important to remember that the vast number of viewers were the teenagers of America. This is the culture we are now providing for our children. Parker writes: “The impulse to replicate animal behavior—called ‘twerking’ . . .—is now mainstream entertainment. So inured have we become to grotesque behavior that even a congressman’s sexting expeditions, were, at least initially, blithely disregarded as errors in judgment. The notion of community standards, meanwhile, has become quaintly irrelevant . . . And sex in the hands of a Cyrus-gone-wild has all the appeal of rutting season at the zoo.” Our

culture has now defined freedom as “all things are permissible.” There apparently are no boundaries, no lines, and no barriers. Happiness to Miley Cyrus (and to MTV) is the simulation-of-sex-as-entertainment—and both will defend to the hilt their right to pursue this definition of happiness.

The Founders of this nation connected virtue, faith and freedom. The American culture of the 21st century has severed all those connections. The pursuit of happiness is the pursuit of personal autonomy with few, if any, standards. Virtue has no meaning anymore. And if virtue is meaningless, then so is freedom.

See “The Happiness of Pursuit” in *Time* (8-15 July 2013), pp. 26-45; *World* (29 June 2013), pp. 37-38; Kathleen Parker www.washingtonpost.com (12 and 28 August 2013).