

## On the Pursuit of Happiness

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Words mean things. Unfortunately, with a living, dynamic language, words have a way of having their meaning changed because of the way we use them. In the so-called “dead” languages such as Latin, ancient Hebrew, and ancient Greek, the meanings of words have been frozen in time and we can determine what the contemporary readers of early documents understood by examining the contemporary context of those words.

This is not true with English. Our language is in a constant state of flux. New words come into existence and old words are dropped or redefined. There are expressions that have emerged from our past which we still use but with little thought or understanding as to their origin or original meaning. We use sayings like “rule of thumb”, “the whole 9 yards”, “raining cats and dogs”, “knock on wood”, for example. When we hear them, we sense the connotation and understand the intended meaning even though, strictly defined, they make no sense.

Usage determines meaning and a word whose meaning has taken a turn for the worse is “happiness”. Our Founding Fathers stated that, among the unalienable rights inherent in our humanity as designed by our Creator, is “the pursuit of happiness”. What was their intended meaning?

The word “happiness” is rooted in the word “happen”. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century it referred to what was happening in a person’s sphere of activity that was positive and beneficial as it affected the person’s relationship to family, community and to God. Happiness was not a state of mind or a feeling. It was a state of being. True happiness *produced* a pleasant feeling as one saw his standing before men and God as proper and good. Feeling good was the *result* of true happiness, not happiness itself.

It is important that we understand this. The unalienable right to pursue happiness is not the right to pleasant feelings. Nor is it the right to never have any unpleasant feelings. It is the right to *pursue* circumstances that would provide a right standing before God and man. This right standing is apart from feeling. There will be times when this pursuit produces unpleasant feelings. Paying a bill, submitting to authority, fighting for Freedom, asking for forgiveness are all things that are unlikely to feel good at the time but they are the foundation stones of true happiness.

Our Founding Fathers did not envision a government that would provide all we need to make us feel good but rather one that would not stand in the way of our individual and collective pursuit of happiness.