

One World Spiritual Center
Community Circles
July 5, 2020
The Pursuit of Happiness
with Rev. Melanie Eyre



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. That, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.
~ Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

This week we looked at one of our most important founding documents, the Declaration of Independence, and the principles stated in it as the basis of our new nation. We explored what these principles might mean for us today as we create new national community.

These principles inspire us for sure, but they didn't come with a definition to guide our interpretation of them. We can all agree on "life," but "liberty" and "the pursuit of happiness?" It's left to each individual to decide what these mean to them, and to each generation to create again what these ideas mean for us as we live in a changing society. Over the years since the Declaration was adopted our national definitions have surely changed – at times they grow, and at times they become more limited.

What is your understanding of this idea of liberty? Of the pursuit of happiness? Are these ideas connected in your mind? How? Have your ideas changed over time?

Many think that Jefferson understood that the notion of our pursuit of happiness was a great deal larger than our individual right to acquire as much as we can at the expense of others. We often take the phrase "the pursuit of happiness" to mean individual pleasures, individual fulfillment – you all get out of my way because I have the right to my pursuit of happiness regardless of the impact on you. In the talk, we explored recent examples of this attitude, including the current debate over wearing masks. Some of those who refuse say that they have no obligation to take even the smallest step for others' safety. Those who disagree take a very different view of communal responsibility and even of individual rights.

Is this a civic discussion alone? Is there a spiritual aspect to it? Can we divorce the two, and, if not, what are the ramifications of that idea?

The 17th century philosopher and cleric Richard Cumberland wrote that our greatest happiness comes from promoting the common good (he said it differently, but that's what he was getting at.) What are your thoughts on this idea?

And one last question:

If you were asked to identify historical or current figures who in your view might be "founders" of the nation you hope we can become, who would you identify? Why?