

## On the Pursuit of Happiness

*By Dennis Payton Knight*

I first encountered the concept of “the pursuit of happiness” in an early lesson on the Declaration of Independence. I was only five or six then, but still had enough depth of thought to wonder why chasing after happiness was necessary when it was right there at the kitchen table, under my bed or hanging from trees in my back yard. Of course, I understood later that Thomas Jefferson only meant that the pursuit of happiness is a right endowed by our creator, not necessarily a job we must do as citizens.

A British novelist, Jeanette Winterson, captured my childhood thought and explained it in a grown-up way. “Pursuing happiness, and I did, and I still do, is not at all the same as being happy – which I think is fleeting, dependent on circumstances... If the sun is shining, stand in it – yes, yes, yes. Happy times are great, but happy times pass – they have to because time passes...”

The Oxford dictionary defines happy as “a feeling or showing of pleasure or contentment,” and happiness as “the state of being happy.” Oxford obliges us with synonyms like cheerful, joyful, carefree, untroubled, contented, smiling and beaming. We can be satisfied, gratified, buoyant, joyous, blissful or euphoric. Happiness can put us in seventh heaven, on cloud nine, walking on air and happy as a clam.

Happiness is a very individual thing. Some folks are able to live a devil-may-care existence full of exuberance and joy, without ever feeling a need to go off in a pursuit of what they already have. More power to them, but most of us live an existence of a little trouble here, a little laughter there, a sour apple here, a sweet one there. We lose loved ones and loved ones come into our lives. For us, the state of being happy is the process of picking the low hanging fruit of happiness. We get enough of it without much pursuit, and so it is easy for us to declare that happiness is a state of mind.

It is not so easy for others. Picture yourself in the grip of a deep, chronic pain that exists only to remind you around the clock of your situation, during sleep, during meals, during whatever activities you can muster. It is hard, in depression, loneliness or pain, to reason yourself into a state of happiness. And the more reasonable you are, the more elusive happiness is.

That idea is expressed well by a contemporary American fiction writer, Jonathan Safran Foer, who wrote, “I think and think and think. I’ve thought myself out of happiness one million times, but never once into it.”

And yet in your deepest state of blue, a kind word, even to yourself from yourself, or a helpful gesture given by another, can bring you joy for the moment. That is the lowest hanging among all the fruit of happiness, and I hope more of it falls your way.