

**Sermon: "In Pursuit of Happiness"**  
**Rev. Tracey Robinson-Harris, Interim Minister**  
**First Unitarian Church of Worcester**  
**Delivered January 26, 2014**

**Reading** from *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* by Garry Wills

“. . . 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.” When Jefferson spoke of pursuing happiness, he had nothing vague or private in mind. He meant a public happiness which is measurable; which is, indeed, the test and justification of any government. . . Jefferson makes happiness a hard political test of any reign's very legitimacy not the vague yearning of the individual . . . “the surest way to promote private happiness is to do publicly useful actions.”

**Sermon**

In *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* Garry Wills analyzes every detail of that document, examining philosophies that informed it and cultural developments and political circumstances that led to it. He explores the Declaration as a revolutionary charter, a scientific paper, a moral paper, a sentimental paper and a national symbol. He offers insights into the many influences on Jefferson – among them David Hume, John Locke, and Frances Hutcheson who in 1725 coined the phrase “the greatest happiness for the greatest number.” As for Jefferson's use of “the pursuit of happiness,” Wills argues against a commonly held belief that Jefferson took this phrase **lightly** from the works of philosopher John Locke who spoke of "life, liberty, and property". Jefferson was not making an oblique philosophical reference to property as equivalent to or a definition of happiness, nor to property rights of any kind. “When Jefferson spoke of pursuing happiness, he had nothing vague or private in mind. He meant a public happiness which is measurable; which is, indeed, the test and justification of any government.”

Pursuit of happiness. A curious phrase. Curious to know more about “the pursuit of happiness” in the context of democracy I've pursued it starting with Garry Wills followed by this brief foray into French politics.

In 2008 French President Nicholas Sarkozy created the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress, chaired by Nobel Prize Winning economists Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen. In its 2009 final report issued amidst a growing financial crisis and increasing concern over the impacts of climate change, Stiglitz and Sen wrote it “has long been clear that gross domestic product (GDP) is an inadequate metric to gauge well-being over time particularly in its economic, environmental, and social dimensions . . . often referred to as *sustainability*.” (p.8) They distinguish between assessments of *current*

*well-being* and of *sustainability*. Current well-being has to do with economic resources, such as income, and with non-economic things like what people do, what we can do, how we feel, and the natural environment we live in. Whether these levels of well-being can be sustained over time depends on whether the capital that matters for our lives - natural, physical, human, and social capital - is passed on to future generations. (p.11)

Consider increased driving. As GDP is measured now, increased driving is a good thing, a very good thing. It increases production and consumption of both gasoline and cars and all manner of things associated with both gasoline and cars. If we measured wellbeing and sustainability we'd have other things to account for - like the hours of leisure and work time lost to long commutes and traffic jams, like the environmental costs of pollutants both on the production and consumption sides of the equation. (Peter Goodman, *Emphasis on Growth is Called Misguided* 9/22/09) As the report noted, "What we measure affects what we do; and if our measurements are flawed, decisions may be distorted."

Within two years of the report, France, Great Britain, and the United States followed by Mexico, Brazil and Croatia, began work on meanings and measures for wellbeing and sustainability to go with those of gross domestic product.

More than three decades before these efforts, in 1972, the term "gross national happiness" was coined by the King of the tiny Eastern Himalayan kingdom of Druk Yul, the Land of the Thunder Dragon, the country of Bhutan. As the King prepared to open Bhutan to the "modern age" he spoke of "gross national happiness" and made a commitment to economic development based on Buddhist spiritual values - including the Four Noble Truths, the first teachings of the Buddha after attaining Nirvana, and the Noble Eight Fold Path leading to cessation of suffering and eradicating greed, hatred and delusion. Beneficial development of human society takes place when material and spiritual development occur side by side, complementing and reinforcing each other.

The website of Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Commission provides information: on the four pillars of gross national happiness (sustainable and equitable socioeconomic development; preservation and promotion of culture; conservation of the environment; good governance); on the nine domains of wellbeing of the Bhutanese people including psychological wellbeing, community vitality, time use, cultural diversity and resilience. Using 33 indicators and over 100 subindicators emphasizing different aspects of wellbeing and ways of meeting underlying human needs, and informed by empirical research from psychology and other social sciences, the Commission actually measures gross national happiness – from unhappy to deeply happy.

Bhutan has not attained national happiness. It struggles to meet the basic needs of its people. It struggles with religious and cultural differences. And it has made happiness the goal of societal change. Economic growth is not an end in itself. It is a means to achieve this more important end. . . happiness. In 1972 the Bhutanese King set in motion the creation of a new and different frame for understanding the purpose of government and economic development. The purpose is – the collective well-being of the people.

We have the need and opportunity to do the same here – to create a new frame for our political life. George Lakoff, author of *Don't Think of an Elephant* about the creation and use of frames in politics, defines frames simply as structures of thought we use every day. All words in all languages are defined in terms of frame-circuits in the brain. Framing is about ideas. *It is about how we see the world. And how we see the world determines how we act.*

Our government is in mid-term – mid way between presidential elections. It has been a rocky ride lately. . .with too little heart or courage for negotiation, too much opportunity for attack and blame. Still I remain a glass half full kinda gal, holding on to optimism, and even some hope, that we will see change in our political discourse. Change away from political identity conflicts that force people into corners and off any common ground that might exist; that make negotiation and compromise the equivalent of moral failure. I find the story of Bhutan compelling because it is one window onto possibilities for our political life. Possibilities rooted in our national story and the notion of the pursuit of happiness. As Garry Wills said, when Jefferson spoke of pursuing happiness, he had nothing vague or private in mind. He meant a **public happiness** which is measurable.

If I were reframing the purpose of this nation's government I'd take the "the pursuit of happiness"; inspiration from the Bhutanese, and a page from George Lakoff about democracy as my tools. (sources including Huffpost 7/28/11)

Here's the page from Lakoff. Democracy starts with caring about one another. We act on that care and build trust, doing our best for ourselves, our families, friends and neighbors, our country, for each other, AND for people we have never seen and never will see. Democracy calls us to share equally in the responsibility to work together – *to work together* - to secure a safe and prosperous future for them. Lakoff continues. The central work of our democracy is a public enterprise; people acting together to provide what we all depend on: roads and bridges, public buildings and parks, a system of education, a strong economic system, a system of law and order with a fair and effective judiciary, dams, sewers, a power grid, agencies to monitor disease, weather, food safety, clean air and water, and on and on. This is what we, as a people who care about each other, give to each other. None of us makes it on our own. We all depend on all the things the public provides. We depend on each other.

We depend on each other in the tasks we must do. We depend on each other to share the tools we need to get them done. Quality education for our children. Protection for each other's health and safety. A strong, open and honest financial system.

What if we took "the pursuit of happiness" as in the Declaration of Independence, inspiration from the Bhutanese, and that page from George Lakoff about democracy as caring for one another? What if we took those tools and set about the task of creating jobs? Of reforming immigration policy and practice? Of providing quality and affordable health care to all? Of reforming the prison system? Of ending gun violence that has killed almost 4,000 people since the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary just over a year ago? What *could we* do?

One last thought. Next Sunday afternoon this congregation will gather for our version of the New England town meeting . In our annual meeting we have an opportunity by our

practice of democracy to further care, trust, and our collective well-being. We can add to something we might call gross congregational happiness. See you there!

**Benediction (John Morgan)** In the end it won't matter how much we have, but how generously we give. It won't matter how much we know, but rather how well we live. And it won't matter how much we believe, but how deeply we love.