



THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

Posted on May 1, 2023 by Charles Dudley Warner



Charles Dudley Warner (1829—1900) was a widely read American essayist and novelist. He was a friend of Mark Twain, with whom he collaborated in writing the novel, *The Gilded Age: The Take of Today*.

His essay, "The Pursuit of Happiness," was published in the *Century Magazine* (December 1900), and deserves to be read in our own age.



The Pursuit of Happiness

Perhaps the most curious and interesting phrase ever put into a public document is "the pursuit of happiness." It is declared to be an inalienable right. It cannot be sold. It cannot be given away. It is doubtful if it could be left by will.

The right of every man to be six feet high, and of every woman to be five feet four, was regarded as self-evident until women asserted their undoubted right to be six feet high also, when some confusion was introduced into the interpretation of this rhetorical fragment of the eighteenth century.

But the inalienable right to the pursuit of happiness has never been questioned since it was proclaimed as a new gospel for the New World. The American people accepted it with enthusiasm, as if it had been the discovery of a gold-pro prospector, and started out in the pursuit as if the devil were after them.

If the proclamation had been that happiness is a common right of the race, alienable or otherwise, that all men are or may be happy, history and tradition might have interfered to raise a doubt whether even the new form of government could so change the ethical condition. But the right to make a pursuit of happiness, given in a fundamental bill of rights, had quite a different aspect. Men had been engaged in many pursuits, most of them disastrous, some of them highly commendable. A sect in Galilee had set up the pursuit of righteousness as the only or the highest object of man's immortal powers. The rewards of it, however, were not always immediate. Here was a political sanction of a pursuit that everybody acknowledged to be of a good thing.

Given a heart-aching longing in every human being for happiness, here was high warrant for going in pursuit of it. And the curious effect of this 'mot d'ordre' was that the pursuit arrested the attention as the most essential, and the happiness was postponed, almost invariably, to some future season, when leisure or plethora, that is, relaxation or gorged desire, should induce that physical and moral glow which is commonly accepted as happiness. This glow of well-being is sometimes called contentment, but contentment was not in the programme. If it came at all, it was only to come after strenuous pursuit, that being the inalienable right.

People, to be sure, have different conceptions of happiness, but whatever they are, it is the custom, almost universal, to postpone the thing itself. This, of course, is specially true in our American system, where we have a chartered right to the thing itself. Other nations who have no such right may take it out in occasional dribbles, odd moments that come, no doubt, to men and races who have no privilege of voting, or to such favored places as New York city, whose government is always the same, however they vote.

We are all authorized to pursue happiness, and we do as a general thing make a pursuit of it. Instead of simply being happy in the condition where we are, getting the sweets of life in human intercourse, hour by hour, as the bees take honey from every flower that opens in the summer air, finding happiness in the well-filled and orderly mind, in the sane and enlightened spirit, in the self that has become what the self should be, we say that tomorrow, next year, in ten or twenty or thirty years, when we have arrived at certain coveted possessions or situation, we will be happy. Some philosophers dignify this postponement with the name of hope.

Sometimes wandering in a primeval forest, in all the witchery of the woods, besought by the kindest solicitations of nature, wild flowers in the trail, the call of the squirrel, the flutter of birds, the great world-music of the wind in the pine-tops, the flecks of sunlight on the brown carpet and on the rough bark of immemorial trees, I find myself unconsciously postponing my enjoyment until I shall reach a hoped-for open place of full sun and boundless prospect.

The analogy cannot be pushed, for it is the common experience that these open spots in life, where leisure and space and contentment await us, are usually grown up with thickets, fuller of obstacles, to say nothing of labors and duties and difficulties, than any part of the weary path we have trod.

Why add the pursuit of happiness to our other inalienable worries? Perhaps there is something wrong in

ourselves when we hear the complaint so often that men are pursued by disaster instead of being pursued by happiness.

We all believe in happiness as something desirable and attainable, and I take it that this is the underlying desire when we speak of the pursuit of wealth, the pursuit of learning, the pursuit of power in office or in influence, that is, that we shall come into happiness when the objects last named are attained. No amount of failure seems to lessen this belief. It is matter of experience that wealth and learning and power are as likely to bring unhappiness as happiness, and yet this constant lesson of experience makes not the least impression upon human conduct. I suppose that the reason of this unheeding of experience is that every person born into the world is the only one exactly of that kind that ever was or ever will be created, so that he thinks he may be exempt from the general rules. At any rate, he goes at the pursuit of happiness in exactly the old way, as if it were an original undertaking. Perhaps the most melancholy spectacle offered to us in our short sojourn in this pilgrimage, where the roads are so dusty and the caravansaries so ill provided, is the credulity of this pursuit. Mind, I am not objecting to the pursuit of wealth, or of learning, or of power, they are all explainable, if not justifiable,—but to the blindness that does not perceive their futility as a means of attaining the end sought, which is happiness, an end that can only be compassed by the right adjustment of each soul to this and to any coming state of existence. For whether the great scholar who is stuffed with knowledge is happier than the great money-getter who is gorged with riches, or the wily politician who is a Warwick in his realm, depends entirely upon what sort of a man this pursuit has made him. There is a kind of fallacy current nowadays that a very rich man, no matter by what unscrupulous means he has gathered an undue proportion of the world into his possession, can be happy if he can turn round and make a generous and lavish distribution of it for worthy purposes. If he has preserved a remnant of conscience, this distribution may give him much satisfaction, and justly increase his good opinion of his own deserts; but the fallacy is in leaving out of account the sort of man he has become in this sort of pursuit. Has he escaped that hardening of the nature, that drying up of the sweet springs of sympathy, which usually attend a long-continued selfish undertaking? Has either he or the great politician or the great scholar cultivated the real sources of enjoyment?

The pursuit of happiness! It is not strange that men call it an illusion. But I am well satisfied that it is not the thing itself, but the pursuit, that is an illusion. Instead of thinking of the pursuit, why not fix our thoughts upon the moments, the hours, perhaps the days, of this divine peace, this merriment of body and mind, that can be repeated and perhaps indefinitely extended by the simplest of all means, namely, a disposition to make the best of whatever comes to us? Perhaps the Latin poet was right in saying that no man can count himself happy while in this life, that is, in a continuous state of happiness;

but as there is for the soul no time save the conscious moment called "now," it is quite possible to make that "now" a happy state of existence. The point I make is that we should not habitually postpone that season of happiness to the future.

No one, I trust, wishes to cloud the dreams of youth, or to dispel by excess of light what are called the illusions of hope. But why should the boy be nurtured in the current notion that he is to be really happy only when he has finished school, when he has got a business or profession by which money can be made, when he has come to manhood? The girl also dreams that for her happiness lies ahead, in that springtime when she is crossing the line of womanhood—all the poets make much of this—when she is married and learns the supreme lesson how to rule by obeying. It is only when the girl and the boy look back upon the years of adolescence that they realize how happy they might have been then if they had only known they were happy, and did not need to go in pursuit of happiness.

The pitiful part of this inalienable right to the pursuit of happiness is, however, that most men interpret it to mean the pursuit of wealth, and strive for that always, postponing being happy until they get a fortune, and if they are lucky in that, find at the end that the happiness has somehow eluded them, that; in short, they have not cultivated that in themselves that alone can bring happiness. More than that, they have lost the power of the enjoyment of the essential pleasures of life. I think that the woman in the Scriptures who out of her poverty put her mite into the contribution-box got more happiness out of that dribble of generosity and self-sacrifice than some men in our day have experienced in founding a university.

And how fares it with the intellectual man? To be a selfish miner of learning, for self-gratification only, is no nobler in reality than to be a miser of money. And even when the scholar is lavish of his knowledge in helping an ignorant world, he may find that if he has made his studies as a pursuit of happiness he has missed his object. Much knowledge increases the possibility of enjoyment, but also the possibility of sorrow. If intellectual pursuits contribute to an enlightened and altogether admirable character, then indeed has the student found the inner springs of happiness. Otherwise one cannot say that the wise man is happier than the ignorant man.

In fine, and in spite of the political injunction, we need to consider that happiness is an inner condition, not to be raced after. And what an advance in our situation it would be if we could get it into our heads here in this land of inalienable rights that the world would turn round just the same if we stood still and waited for the daily coming of our Lord!

Featured: *Fröhliche Sangesrunde mit einer Donaulandschaft* (Merry Round of Singing, with Danube Landscape), by Rudolf Alfred Höger; painted ca. 1930.

