BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

Episode 394: Jeffrey Rosen, "The Pursuit of Happiness"

[00:00:00] Announcer: You're listening to an Airwave Media Podcast.

[00:00:04] Liz Covart: *Ben Franklin's World* is a production of Colonial Williamsburg Innovation Studios.

[00:00:09] Jeffrey Rosen: Later on in the founding period, James Madison comes to focus more on the refinement of public opinion. And he says that the ultimate authority is opinion. And that through education and new media technologies, like the broadside press, a group of enlightened journalists that he called the literati could educate the people with pieces like the Federalist Papers, which people would read in newspapers and discuss with their representatives and reason would slowly diffuse across the land. That puts less emphasis on resisting bread and circuses and parading around in togas, and more faith in a representative republic.

[00:00:54] Liz Covart: Hello and welcome to episode 394 of *Ben Franklin's World*, the podcast dedicated to helping you learn more about how the people and events of our early American past have shaped the present-day world we live in. And I'm your host, Liz Covart.

"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." What did Thomas Jefferson and the members of the Second Continental Congress mean by the pursuit of happiness? And why is pursuing happiness so important that Jefferson and his fellow Founding Fathers included it in the Declaration of Independence's most powerful statement of the new United States's ideals?

Jeffrey Rosen, the president and CEO of the National Constitution Center, and a law professor at George Washington University Law School, joins us to investigate and answer these questions with details from his book, *The Pursuit of Happiness: How Classical Writers on Virtue Inspired the Lives of the Founders and Defined America*. Now during our pursuit of understanding about the pursuit of happiness, Jeff reveals the subject of moral philosophy and the founding generation's interest in this subject, how the ideas of Greek, Roman, and Enlightenment moral philosophers shaped the founders' understanding of virtue, happiness, and the characteristics of a virtuous citizenry, and why the founders described the pursuit of happiness as the chief aim of good government.

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But first, I'd like to ask you a favor. Would you please help me spread the word about *Ben Franklin's World* by telling one of your friends or family members about the show? Your recommendation of this podcast to someone you know is the best way for this show and your other favorite podcasts to find new listeners. So thank you for listening, and for helping to spread the word about *Ben Franklin's World*. Okay, are you ready for our pursuit of the founding generation's understanding of happiness and virtuous living? Allow me to introduce you to our expert guide.

Our guest is the President and CEO of the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia. He's also a law professor at George Washington University Law School, and he has written several books about law and legal culture in the United States, including *The Pursuit of Happiness: How Classical Writers on Virtue Inspired the Lives of the Founders and Defined America*. Welcome to *Ben Franklin's World*, Jeffrey Rosen.

[00:03:33] Jeffrey Rosen: It's great to be here.

[00:03:34] Liz Covart: And we're glad to have you, Jeff. Now in episode 152, we had the chance to speak with the late historian Bernard Bailyn about the ideological origins of the American Revolution. And during our conversation, we came to understand that many of the founders relied on their educations in history and Greek and Roman philosophy to define the American Revolution and then establish the new state and national governments that came after that.

Now in *Pursuit of Happiness*, your new book Jeff, you explore the influence that Greek and Roman philosophers had on the founders, and how the founders understood the Declaration of Independence's idea, the pursuit of happiness. So Jeff, could we start with having you tell us what drew you to study the Greek and Roman philosophers that the founders studied, and what drew you to investigate how the founders' classical ideas informed the eighteenth century understandings of the pursuit of happiness?

[00:04:23] Jeffrey Rosen: Absolutely. Well, first of all, what a thrill that you had the great Bernard Bailyn on the podcast. And as it happens, I had the honor of studying with him in college. I took his lecture course on American history. And in college, I remember yearning for some kind of moral framework that was an alternative to the "greed is good" ethos of the 1980s, which is when I was an undergrad. And I didn't find that in my studies with Bernard Bailyn or

with other great teachers of history and literature, because classical moral philosophy had fallen out of the curriculum when I was in college in the 80s.

It was during COVID that a series of synchronicities led me to this project. I was rereading the part of Ben Franklin's autobiography where he talked about his effort in his twenties to achieve moral perfection. And he came up with a list of thirteen virtues; temperance, prudence, industry, order, resolved each night to see how he'd lived up to them. I knew about the project, but I noticed that he'd chosen as his motto a book by Cicero that I'd not heard of, *The Tusculan Disputations*. And the motto was, "without virtue, happiness cannot be." A few weeks later, I was at the Boar's Head Inn in Charlottesville on the UVA campus and noticed that Thomas Jefferson had made a list of twelve virtues for his daughters. They were almost identical to Franklin's. But what was surprising is that Jefferson too, when people would ask him "what's the secret of happiness," would send a passage from this Cicero book *The Tusculan Disputations*, that said essentially, "the person who's achieved tranquility of soul, who's neither unduly exuberant or unusually despondent, they are the wise and happy person."

So I figured I should read Cicero because I'd not heard of this book before, but what else to read? And then I found this amazing reading list that Jefferson would send out to people who asked him when he was old how to be educated. He would send this to kids who were going to law school who were children of his friends or anyone who asked.

And this list included political philosophy, ancient history, literature. What caught my eye was the section on moral philosophy that Jefferson sometimes called ethics and sometimes natural religion. And at the top of this list was Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*. And then other Greek and Roman moral philosophers, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, as well as Enlightenment philosophers like John Locke, Francis Hutcheson, Bolingbroke, and Hume.

Basically, during COVID, I set out to read these books just because I thought it was a gap in my education. I've had a marvelous liberal arts education. But despite that wonderful education, I never encountered these books of moral philosophy because they fell out of the curriculum by the time I was in college in the 1980s. So I set out to read them during COVID. I woke up early before sunrise—just as Jefferson suggested in his very rigorous schedule—watched the sunrise, read the moral philosophy, spent a year doing this. And after a year, it just changed my life. It changed the way I understood happiness.

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Because for the founders, I learned, happiness was not feeling good but being good. Not the pursuit of pleasure, but the pursuit of virtue. They understood virtue as the use of our powers of reason to moderate our unproductive passions or emotions, so that we could achieve the calm tranquility that allows us to be our best self.

Basically, for the founders, virtue was self-improvement, character improvement, being your best self so that you could achieve your potential. And that understanding both changed the way I thought about how to be a good person and how to be a good citizen. And it was just a wonderful, fresh way of understanding how the founders understood the pursuit of happiness.

[00:07:56] Liz Covart: I know we're going to discuss stories of some of the founders and how they pursued their pursuits of happiness, but moral philosophy is a theme and topic that is going to come up again and again as we talk. So Jeff, would you tell us what moral philosophy is and whether our definition of moral philosophy today has changed since the eighteenth century? How did the founders understand moral philosophy?

[00:08:19] Jeffrey Rosen: Moral philosophy was the branch of practical reason that told us how to live, how to be a good person. And there are different versions of it among the Stoics and the Epicureans and different schools in the classical era. But they're all united by a focus on what we would call today, emotional intelligence. It was really an effort to moderate or modulate your unproductive emotions like anger, jealousy, or fear, so that you could achieve productive emotions, such as the classical virtues, temperance, prudence, order, courage, and justice.

Really, it was an attempt to improve your character, and to spend each day mindfully focusing on controlling the only things you could control, which is our own thoughts and emotions, rather than the thoughts, emotions, and external events. Today, we look at these matters within spiritual traditions, both religious traditions and nonsectarian traditions like mindfulness. The Eastern wisdom traditions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, focus on this form of emotional self-mastery as the key to virtue.

But what's so striking is that this used to be a core part of the curriculum of middle school students, high school students, college students for much of, certainly, American history and really for much of world history. But in America, this moral philosophy fell out of the curriculum sometime in the twentieth century. And today it's not studied much.

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[00:09:46] Liz Covart: Something I think we can appreciate is that as part of Jeff's research for *The Pursuit of Happiness* he set out to read the same philosophy books as Thomas Jefferson. Jeff, would you tell us more about Thomas Jefferson's reading list and what he was reading?

[00:10:00] Jeffrey Rosen: The whole reading list is remarkably broad and it's really inspiring. It includes novels. He was a big fan of Laurence Sterne and other novelists who gave examples about how to live well.

What's so striking about it is he prescribes not only what you should read, but the time of day you should read it. You have to wake up early in the morning and read moral philosophy, and after breakfast you're allowed some political philosophy and history, after lunch some natural science and astronomy, after dinner you can get the poetry and literature, and then to bed. And it's essentially twelve hours a day. He's really very strict about the need to spend each moment of the day in self-improvement. It was his own unique list he'd added to it over the years. Some of the moral philosophy was added later because it came out later.

But what's so amazing about the moral philosophy is that when I read the books on Jefferson's reading list, and there are ten or so in the moral philosophy section, almost all of them contain the phrase, "the pursuit of happiness" or "pursuing happiness." Both the English authors, like John Locke, for whom the pursuit of happiness turns up in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and some of the English translations of the classical authors, like Seneca—and Jefferson recommends the translators too.

What this showed me was that the pursuit of happiness was not some esoteric phrase that Jefferson made up, it was ubiquitous, it was everywhere, it was absolutely shared by all of the traditions, Classical, Enlightenment, Christian, and Whig, and Blackstone the legal philosopher used it as well. And all of the traditions have a version of the same understanding of it also, as a form of character improvement or emotional self-mastery.

Jefferson famously said that when he wrote the Declaration, he wasn't doing anything new, but just channeling public philosophers. And he cited four. Aristotle, Sidney, Locke, and Cicero were the four that he cited. And it's really striking that all of those philosophers understood the pursuit of happiness in the same way and, in fact, often used the phrase to describe their understanding.

[00:12:04] Liz Covart: In addition to reading the books on Thomas Jefferson's reading list, did you follow his pretty strict reading schedule as well? And if you did, did you find his

recommendations of reading as the sun rises and reading poetry before bed, did you find that that schedule impacted your understanding of the different books that you were reading?

[00:12:22] Jeffrey Rosen: It changed my life. You know, I'd read, but I'd fallen out of the habit of reading for stuff that wasn't related to immediate deadlines, just reading for the sake of understanding and learning and growing.

And yes, following this rigorous schedule, getting up before sunrise, reading for an hour or two, watching the sunrise, and then I found myself moved to write sonnets summing up the wisdom of the moral philosophy I'd read. Which I know sounds really weird, and I'd not done it before. But then I learned that all sorts of people in the founding era also would watch the sunrise and write sonnets; including Phillis Wheatley, the great Black poet, Alexander Hamilton, Mercy Otis Warren, and John Quincy Adams, who would watch the sunrise and write sonnets related to his favorite author, Cicero. And he spent a year rereading Cicero, in particular, *The Tusculan Disputations*, his favorite book,

So there's something about the wisdom that just yearns to be summed up in classically balanced form. And I found if there's a takeaway to this whole practice, and there is, it's the radically empowering virtue of deep reading. Yes, I read for work, but to actually spend an hour or two reading books and not browsing and not being distracted, it's a life changing experience.

And ever since I finished the happiness book, I've tried to keep up the schedule. I'm getting up before sunrise if I can. I'm not always Jeffersonian and achieving that now. But the crucial thing is spending an hour or so engaged in deep reading or writing or some other creative work like writing poems or songs or something like that, and not browsing.

And just the simple rule that I have for myself now, which is that I can't check email or blogs or newspapers or anything until I've done my reading, is really a great practice. It has carried me into the new book that I'm writing and is just a wonderful way of experiencing the wisdom of the virtue of the fact that the fountain of wisdom flows through books.

[00:14:18] Liz Covart: Now, in your reading and research, you found that many people of varying backgrounds read these same classical texts. In fact, just even in our short conversation thus far, you've mentioned several people who read Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*. And Lydia would like to know how and why early Americans came to read these classical texts by Greek, Roman, and European philosophers, and she'd also like to know if the readers that we're talking

about, who read these texts, were just a handful of elite people or whether this constituted a large body of early Americans?

[00:14:51] Jeffrey Rosen: Such a great question. Everyone read the same books because there was such a consensus about what you needed to read to be an educated person and a good person. Some of the founders got them in elite settings, like James Madison, who got it from President Witherspoon at Princeton, John Adams studied at Harvard, and it was all part of the core curriculum at the great universities.

Others were self-taught. Jefferson went to William and Mary, but he also taught himself a lot of this when he was a kid. And he read Cicero when his dad died, and he was fourteen years old, and he was copying selections from Cicero to console himself.

But here's the striking thing, it's not just for elites or just for privileged white men. The same classic texts appeared in the readers, essentially best-selling textbooks, that were pervasive throughout the nineteenth century. And one of the most inspiring truths is that the great Frederick Douglass encountered this wisdom when he taught himself to read on the streets of Baltimore by paying boys with bread for reading lessons. And then with bread bought a book called *The Columbian Orator*, this transformative book that changed his life and resolved him to be the greatest freedom fighter of his time.

And *The Columbian Orator* was a best-selling textbook, along with McGuffey Reader. It was the most widely read book in American public schools. And it contained excerpts from the same classical sources, Cicero, Marcus Aurelius, a dialogue on slavery that inspired Douglass, passages from Benjamin Franklin.

So the point of all this is that it's not just for elites. The texts are everywhere. People read them because everyone agrees that they're what you need to know to be an educated person and a good person. And it was really pervasive for most of American history.

[00:16:37] Liz Covart: I wonder if we could go into more detail on something you mentioned at the start of our conversation, which is, the pursuit of happiness is not just the feeling of being happy and joyful the way we think about it today, but the act of doing good.

Because the word happiness appears in the Declaration of Independence twice. And Kristen asks, why Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and other members of the committee of five who wrote the Declaration of Independence, plus the Continental Congress who edited the

document, why did they feel that it was important to include happiness in the Declaration of Independence?

[00:17:12] Jeffrey Rosen: Another great question. So many wonder why didn't they say life, liberty, and property? After all, John Locke's second treatise of government, which Jefferson had before him, talks about our natural rights of life, liberty, and property. And for a long time, people have assumed, well, property is just a synonym for happiness.

That's not true. There was a technical reason that Jefferson chose happiness and not property. Happiness, unlike property, is an unalienable right. What's an unalienable right? In the state of nature, we have certain natural rights, and we surrender or alienate to government certain rights in order to get greater security and safety of the rights we've retained.

Property is obviously alienable. You have to be able to exchange property, and you also need to give government the power to regulate it, to enforce contracts. Happiness is unalienable because happiness is based in our reason. And the founders view reason as the quintessential unalienable right because it's rooted in our conscience.

Jefferson says in the Virginia Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom [transcript corrected, see *The Pursuit of Happiness*, 102-103], the opinions of men being dependent on evidence contemplated by their own minds cannot be controlled by other men. In other words, I can't give you or anyone else the power to control my thoughts because they're the product of my reason.

So that is why the pursuit of happiness, which for the ancients was the right and duty to live according to reason, is unalienable because you can't surrender it even if you want to. And that's why they say life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness rather than life, liberty, and property.

The reason they included the phrase is because it is central to both their political and their moral philosophy. All of the thinkers on which they are relying say that happiness is the first purpose of government. Securing the happiness of the people is the first principle of government. That's from Jean-Jacques Berlamaqui, who's one of their big sources.

And happiness is both a right and a duty. Just as governments exist to promote public happiness, individuals have a duty to achieve private happiness. And both depend on self-mastery. Personal self-government is necessary for political self-government. Unless we modulate or moderate our own unreasonable passions and emotions as individuals, we can't achieve a similar balance in a republic. And that is why it's so important that governments secure public and private happiness,

the overwhelming consensus among both the natural law theorists on which they're relying and the classical philosophers that those Enlightenment thinkers were relying on, those are all reasons why Jefferson included the famous phrase about the pursuit of happiness.

[00:19:46] Liz Covart: A point that you make in *The Pursuit of Happiness* is that the founders believed that in order to be a good person, you had to identify virtues, and then try to live up to those virtues because living up to those virtues is what would make you a good person. So I wonder if you would tell us about Benjamin Franklin and his virtues, and whether there was any agreement among early Americans about which virtues would make you a good person.

[00:20:09] Jeffrey Rosen: Franklin identifies twelve virtues, which he later expanded to thirteen. He'd initially left out humility, but a Quaker friend told him he had to work on that, so he added that at the end of his project. And Franklin's virtues include temperance, order, sincerity, frugality, and other virtues like that. He is glossing the classical virtues, which he's finding in his daily readings in both classical and Enlightenment sources.

The classical virtues, of course, are temperance, prudence, courage, and justice. And Franklin is just expanding on those. There's some disagreement about exactly how to define them. But Franklin is finding the same virtues described in all of the sources that he's relying on, including the English Christian self-help and advice manuals that he's translating for Poor Richard's Almanac, which is his snappier and more aphoristic versions of these more lugubrious English advice manuals.

So it's a long way of saying, everyone agrees, essentially, what the classical virtues are and how to express them. It's striking that Franklin does not include the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and charity. Not because he doesn't think they're important, but because they're not at the center of the classical moral philosophy that defines happiness for him.

[00:21:24] Liz Covart: That is really interesting. Although Franklin was a deist—he grew up in a strict Puritan household, tried out Anglicanism a bit in Philadelphia thanks to his wife Deborah who was an Anglican—so I guess I'm not all that surprised that he didn't include Christian virtues.

But it does make me wonder, did you see any overlap between the virtues of classical moral philosophy and the virtues of Christianity? Because by the time of the Second Great Awakening, which started during the mid- to late-1790s, early Americans started to see Christian religion as

really something that would make you a good person in addition to those classical virtues. So did you find any overlap between the virtues of Christianity and the virtues of moral philosophy?

[00:22:03] Jeffrey Rosen: Absolutely. For many or even all of the founders, the pursuit of happiness was experienced within spiritual traditions and was a spiritual quest. Of course, the founders have different relationships to organized religion. Some are more orthodox Christians than others. Washington and Hamilton are more traditional in their religiosity. Jefferson, famously deist, is the least orthodox among them. Although he believes in an afterlife and insists that the pursuit of happiness is indeed a spiritual pursuit of life according to the divine.

What's significant about the Enlightenment was that there was an effort to reconcile religion and reason. And a series of very popular preachers called Latitudinarian Christians, like Wollaston and Tillotson are insisting that it's possible to achieve salvation through reason rather than by faith alone or by religious observance. And these reasonable Christian thinkers, as they call themselves, deny any tension between the classical and the Christian traditions. And in fact, the Orthodox Christian traditions also rely heavily on the classics, and Augustine is a great acolyte of Cicero, and many of the Christian sources rely on the classics as well.

So, all this is to say that the debates about the relationship between religion and the state are completely separate from the core understanding of happiness as virtue. That basic understanding is shared by the classical traditions, by the Christian traditions. The differences among the religious traditions are much less significant than the similarities, which is a shared commitment to character improvement, to self-mastery.

And for all those reasons, Tocqueville, when he talked about the pursuit of happiness—which he defined as self-interest properly understood, to the degree that the classical understanding of happiness involved impulse control of resisting immediate gratification so you could achieve your long-term interest. Tocqueville famously defined that as self-interest properly understood. And he thought that in America it was most likely to be achieved because of the spirit of religion. He thought that religion would make people sober and long-term thinking and able to achieve self-mastery. And he worried that the growing individualism, as he called it, might threaten this long-term thinking and lead people to seek immediate gratification.

So that's a broad take on the fact that the quest for self-mastery for many people throughout history was viewed as a spiritual quest, but the different religious traditions disagreed about exactly how to achieve it.

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[00:24:45] Liz Covart: Would you talk about ideas of reason and how these ideas manifested in the Declaration of Independence? Where did the founders see connections between religion and reason, and what type of future did they want to set up for the new United States?

[00:24:59] Jeffrey Rosen: Well, of course, the core paragraph of the Declaration is a pay in to Enlightenment reason. It's a statement of natural rights philosophy. And it says, "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, and among these rights are life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness." That's the statement of the Enlightenment belief that it's self-evident that we're all endowed with equal and natural rights.

But then it goes on to say that "to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the government." That's a test of the proposition, as Hamilton put it in Federalist One, that governments could be established based on reason and reflection, rather than force or violence. That's the whole notion of social contract theory, that we, through our reason and reflection, voluntarily alienate or surrender control over certain natural rights to government, in order to obtain in exchange an equivalent, namely greater security and safety of the rights we've retained.

And then the final clause says that "when government subverts these rights, it's the right of the people to alter and abolish it and to establish new governments such as will be most conducive to their safety and happiness." So in other words, when government breaks its side of the bargain and threatens retained natural rights, rather than making them more secure, people have the right of revolution and to establish governments that are more likely to secure public happiness.

It is all united by this transcendent, shining faith in reason, and that is the proposition that the Constitution set out to prove.

[00:26:36] Liz Covart: I was just going to ask, as a legal scholar and the CEO of the National Constitution Center, did you see a shift in the way that the founders were thinking about the pursuit of happiness and the virtues that made people good, between the writing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the United States Constitution in 1787?

[00:26:54] Jeffrey Rosen: The shift is not in the way people are thinking about. happiness and virtue, but in how best to achieve those ends. So, the revolution is centrally concerned with asserting natural rights of equal liberty and sees an unalterable antithesis between liberty and

power and is determined to overthrow a tyrannical government that's threatening our reserve natural rights.

By the time of the Constitution, there's been ten years of experience of the failed revolutionary era state constitutions under the Articles of Confederation, where mob violence is increasingly ascendant. And that defining fear of mobs—manifested by Shay's Rebellion, where in 1787, debtors are mobbing the federal courthouses because they don't want to pay their debts in Western Massachusetts—leads the framers who come to Philadelphia to be centrally concerned with checks on democracy and slowing down deliberation to prevent mobs from forming and to separate powers vertically and horizontally in order to prevent power from being concentrated in one place.

So, the main concern with the Declaration is in natural rights. The main fear of the Constitution makers is in the excesses of democracy. But both are determined to create a government strong enough to protect our reserved rights but constrained enough so that it doesn't become tyrannical.

There was a shift during the founding era about how much faith to put in virtue. The classical understanding is that citizens have to be rigorously restrained, like Sparta, and resist the impartations of demagogues, like Caesar who would offer bread and circus and cheap luxury in exchange for liberty. And the thought that was that you had to be very austere in resisting these blandishments to preserve the republic.

Later on in the founding period, influenced by French thinkers, James Madison comes to focus more on the refinement of public opinion. And he says that the ultimate authority is opinion. And that through education and new media technologies, like the broadside press, a group of enlightened journalists that he called the literati could educate the people with pieces like the Federalist Papers, which people would read in newspapers and discuss with their representatives and reason would slowly diffuse across the land. That puts less emphasis on resisting bread and circuses and parading around in togas and more faith in a representative republic, where through reason, deliberation, balance, and harmony can be achieved.

And finally, the founders have different degrees of optimism or pessimism about whether or not it's possible to achieve the virtuous self-mastery and cool devotion to reason that they believe is necessary. Madison moderately optimistic at the end of his life. Many of the others deeply pessimistic, including Washington, who fears factions. Adams, who thinks the government isn't

strong enough. Hamilton, who wanted a president elected for life and fears a Caesar on the horizon. And Jefferson, who accurately perceives the coming of the Civil War and the fissure of the Union over slavery.

So important differences among them about how much virtue it's possible to achieve and what's reasonable to expect citizens to achieve, but a deep consensus from the Declaration through the Constitution about the need for a degree of virtue among the citizenry in order to make the whole thing succeed.

[00:30:19] Liz Covart: What about women's ideas of virtue? Rosemary acknowledges that some early American women had access to books and classical texts and tutors, so she wonders how much exposure women had to these classical ideas and moral philosophers, and how they might have used their understandings of these texts and their understandings of the pursuit of happiness to assert their rights to equality and freedom?

[00:30:42] Jeffrey Rosen: There's nothing more inspiring than the stories of Abigail Adams, Mercy Otis Warren, and the great Phillis Wheatley. These are brilliant women who, as Rosemary suggests, were not allowed to have access to the same education that their brothers did. All were educated in the school rooms with guys. Abigail Adams gets books that John and his friend recommend. Mercy Otis Warren is educated along with her brother, James Otis, who denounces the writs of assistance and sparks the revolution. And Phillis Wheatley, astonishing story, comes over enslaved from Africa, and her mistress decides that she can sit in on the lessons of the boy and girl in the house. And based on those experiences, all three of these great women have extraordinary literary achievements.

Abigail Adams, of course, with her remarkable letters, including the one exhorting John to remember the ladies in creating this new republic and insisting on equal education for women.

Mercy Otis Warren—who Adams acclaims her as the poetical genius of the revolution—who writes these satires that help spark the rebellion and then writes a history of the United States from a Jeffersonian perspective that Adams doesn't like very much but he acknowledges its brilliance, and they eventually make up.

And then Phillis Wheatley is just an extraordinary story. Her poems are so brilliant that people say she can't have written them. And the city of Boston holds a trial presided over by John Hancock where she has to prove that she actually wrote her own poems. And she passes with flying colors, they assert her authorship, and then she becomes an international celebrity.

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Professor Henry Louis Gates calls her the Oprah Winfrey of her day. She goes to London, she meets the royalties, she's given the key to the city, and her poems are bestsellers. And it's all just a great testament to the fact that when given access to these texts, these brilliant women were able to achieve at the highest levels.

So it's a striking first phase of the effort for equal rights for women in America. The three women I mentioned, as well as others, inspired this second generation of equal rights advocates at Seneca Falls, who were also great students of the classics. And that, of course, all culminated in the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920.

[00:32:58] Liz Covart: We've talked a little bit about Thomas Jefferson and his ideas about what makes a person good. And we've also talked about Benjamin Franklin, Abigail Adams, Mercy Otis Warren, and Phillis Wheatley. What about George Washington, who quite famously wrote out the "Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior," which were 110 different rules about how one should govern oneself. So Jeff, can you talk about George Washington and his ideas about what made a person good and how they should act?

[00:33:26] Jeffrey Rosen: Absolutely, Washington is such an inspiring example of self-mastery, perhaps the most self-controlled and self-mastered of all the members of the founding generation. "The Rules of Civility" was a series of rules written by French Jesuits that he studied as a kid. They have recommendations about good table manners and also about how to be a self-mastered person. Washington also reads Seneca, who he loves, especially Seneca on time, and he becomes very conscious of clocks and keeping a regimented schedule.

The main thing about Washington is he has a really hot temper. His mom is always nagging him, basically, in an effort to prevent himself from exploding at her, which he did on a few occasions. He really works on never showing his emotions in public, and that self-mastery leads him to lose his temper in public on very few occasions.

And two extraordinarily inspiring moments, like when the troops are rebelling at Newburgh, he first of all has read to them his favorite play, Addison's *Cato*, which talks about the consolations of mild philosophy. And then he mounts what's called the Temple of Virtue, this wooden stage, and reads his appeal to the soldiers to achieve virtuous patience. He just says, "wait, be patient and I'll ensure that Congress pays you for what they owe." And this appeal, amplified by the fact that he puts on his reading glasses to read it, which makes the soldiers weep because they've

never seen him confess weakness before, all contribute to his extraordinary leadership and the respect that he has across the board.

So he's a very studied and successful example of how self-control and self-mastery can actually increase authority. It's the virtues of soft power we'd call it today, and it's what makes him the most respected American of his time.

[00:35:15] Liz Covart: And I guess by not showing emotion in public and hiding any physical weaknesses that you might have, like having to read with your glasses on in public, if you can avoid that then you'd also be demonstrating a type of physical reason, in the sense that you're not showing weakness, you're, you're physically strong.

[00:35:33] Jeffrey Rosen: Yes, that sexist charge was amplified by this classical notion that it's so important to use our powers of reason. But the reason it was so unfair is, first of all, because many of the classical authorities were champions of the education of women, such as Seneca. And also, because the classical wisdom is not to lack emotion or to make a complete antithesis between emotion-bad and reason-good. It's the modulation of emotion, recommended by Aristotle, so you can achieve productive rather than unproductive emotions.

It's summed up by—just as Ruth Bader Ginsburg told me that her mother gave her the same classical advice. Her mother told a young Ruth Bader Ginsburg avoid unproductive emotions like anger, jealousy, and fear. They will distract you from productive work. And RBG tried to remember that each day of her life and succeeded in becoming among the most self-mastered, productive, self-disciplined, and heroic people of her age.

So that's why this philosophy has been extraordinarily galvanizing to women as well as men, including some of the greatest feminists of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. And that's why this antithesis between reason and emotion is far too simplistic.

[00:36:48] Liz Covart: It seemed like the founders feared, at least by the time of the writing of the Constitution, that they fear the idea of factionalism and the emotions or passions that people can feel when they support what we now call a political party, and they support one party over another political party.

And some of the sections of the Federalist Papers, which is a series of articles written by John Jay, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton to convince the people of New York to ratify the

Constitution of 1787, that some of the Federalist Papers were influenced by a collection of essays written by David Hume.

Jeff, in your book, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, you state that Hume argued that the authority of the government relied on public opinion, and that he also noted that public opinion could be distorted by political parties and factions. So would you tell us more about the Federalist Papers and their use of classical ideas and reason to help stem the tide of public passions?

[00:37:44] Jeffrey Rosen: Absolutely. Such an important question. So, Madison's definition of faction is derived from Hume and from classical wisdom. Any group, a majority or a minority, animated by passion rather than reason, devoted to self-interest rather than the public good. There's that reason-passion distinction, and Madison says it can arise in majorities or minorities.

Montesquieu had said that the only way to have a successful republic would be a small territory where people could deliberate face to face, as in the Greek and Roman assembly of six thousand people at its largest. David Hume said that that was wrong, that basically, when you have a representative republic, you can meet in a larger scale. And Hume was also confident that it would be harder for passion to spread over a large republic. By the time that mobs discovered each other, they'd get tired or go home because it's harder for factions to organize over a large space; it would actually be a form of security.

And Madison adopted Hume's understanding of the virtues of a representative republic over a large territory, and that's why he's confident that in America it's possible, through representation, to ensure that reason rather than passion prevails.

Madison and Hamilton disagree about how strong to make the central government. And this is the big debate between Hamiltonians on the one hand, and Jefferson and Madison on the other. And Hamilton, for him, the British constitution is the greatest model. And he favors a strong executive and thinks that in America the president should be elected for life because then he won't be tempted to flatter the people and to serve his own ego-based interest, and instead will be able to tend to the public good.

Interestingly, Jefferson is just as concerned about demagogues as Hamilton. And in a remarkable letter to Madison when he receives the Constitution, Jefferson says, "I'm concerned about two things. First, there's no bill of rights, and second, in the future, a demagogic president might lose an election by a few votes, cry foul, refuse to leave office, and enlist the states who voted for him on his behalf." Jefferson's solution is a one term limit for the president. He thinks if the president

can't run again for reelection, he won't be tempted to try to steal an election or cry foul and deny that he lost it.

So Jefferson and Hamilton have opposite solutions to the problem of demagogues, a life term for Hamilton, one term for Jefferson. But both are responding to the same problem, which is the need to ensure that the executive serves the people rather than himself.

[00:40:22] Liz Covart: In a conversation we have with Michael Hattem in episode 307, we learn that the founders, in addition to reading and understanding all the great moral philosophers, they also read and understood their history. And of particular historic interest to the founders was the history of the Roman Empire.

So Jeremy asks how the founders' understandings of the Roman Republic and its gradual decline may have shaped their concerns about the dangers of factionalism, the formation of political parties, and the concentration of power in the federal government under the new Constitution? Because, as we've said, the Declaration and the Constitution and what these documents contain was really informed by the revolutionary moment, and the founders had just fought for and achieved independence from a monarch because they felt that monarch had too much power.

[00:41:08] Jeffrey Rosen: Great question. And Madison comes to Philadelphia with Athens on his mind. He's just read two trunkfuls of books that Jefferson has sent over from Paris about the failed democracies of Greece and Rome. And Madison makes a list of the defects of the ancient confederacies and what led them to fall, both Greece and Rome and also European confederacies, as in Poland and elsewhere.

And he concludes that what leads republics to fall is a lack of virtue in the people, who after a point of time after the revolutionary moment has passed, cease defending republican virtue, and being alert to any incursions on their liberties, and begin allowing leaders to subvert the republican forms in exchange for cheap luxuries and simple amusement. That's how Caesar subverted the Republic. Remember, he was chosen by the Senate and then subverted the republican forms and the people let him get away with it because they were happy enough with authoritarian rule.

So that indeed influenced the founders' concerns that the people would lack enough virtue to keep the republic. We know that famous phrase by Franklin, "what have you wrought, Dr. Franklin?" asked Mrs. Powel when he leaves the convention, "a republic, if you can keep it."

And by keep it, he means will the people keep enough virtuous self-restraint to defend liberty when it's under threat and not to surrender it in exchange for comfort.

And they're not sure about whether or not that virtue will succeed. They have different views about how the power should be distributed in a constitution in order to both keep the people in check, but also to empower them enough to achieve self-government.

And for many of them, the ultimate solution is education. And Jefferson really puts all of his hope in the University of Virginia, which is supposed to educate great citizens. And Washington's hope is a national university where people will come from across the country to set aside their regional differences and converge around common ideals and learn from each other free of factionalism.

[00:43:06] Liz Covart: We should admit that the founders were human, and they were not without faults. And we've talked about how George Washington and Benjamin Franklin wrote out these virtues or behaviors that they wanted to emulate and model based on the classical philosophies that they had been reading. And as Franklin famously said in his autobiography, I'm going to paraphrase here, he said the equivalent of, "I'm not perfect. Some of these virtues I lived up to better than I lived up to others."

So knowing all this, Jeff, I wonder if you would tell us what you think we can learn about the founders ideas about the pursuit of happiness and their journeys to trying to be good moral citizens of the United States

[00:43:44] Jeffrey Rosen: It's so striking that far from imagining that they were perfect, the founders are constantly beating themselves up for not living up to their ideals, for not being productive enough, for not using their time well, for squandering their opportunities, and for their own hypocrisies.

And we haven't talked about the most notorious and shameful of those hypocrisies, but it was obviously slavery. And what's so striking is that far from defending the morality of slavery, the first generation of enslavers recognize their own hypocrisy. There's that really striking and important quotation from Patrick Henry, where he says after giving the give me liberty or give me death speech, "is it not amazing that I myself who think that slavery violates the Bible and natural right, myself own slaves, I will not attempt to justify it. It is simple avarice or greed. I can't do with the inconvenience of living without it."

And that brutal moment of self-awareness and candor, "I know it's wrong, but I like the lifestyle and I don't want to give it up," is one that different founders came to in different moments. Jefferson was always accusing other people of greed, even though that he himself lived this avaricious life of addiction to luxury at Monticello. And it was because of his own avarice that he didn't free his enslaved population, including his own children by Sally Hemings who waited on him hand and foot throughout his life, until his death where he passed along his debts and his enslaved population to his kids.

So looking closely at the founders grappling with moral philosophy by no means absolves them of their hypocrisies or suggests that they were perfect, but what is striking is that they were aware of these hypocrisies and they didn't imagine that they themselves were perfect. And they led morally serious lives because they grappled so constantly with their own anxieties and imperfections and failings.

It really humanizes them. Just to see someone like John Quincy Adams writing in his diary in his early thirties, he's just turned down a Supreme Court appointment, he's the minister to St. Petersburg, and he says, "you know, I'm thirty-something years old. I haven't achieved anything. I'm squandering all my opportunities. I'm spending too much time at the theater. I'm drinking too much. If only I had a little more self-discipline, I might have ended war and slavery." That's the kind of high bar that he set for himself. But it's because he's bristling against his mom, Abigail, who's always telling him, "Be perfect. Subjugate your passions to your reason." I thought having a Jewish mom was tough, imagine having a Puritan mom. It's a very difficult bar to achieve.

But when you see how utterly immersed all of these men and women were in this particular moral framework, you realize how human they were, how much they recognized their own shortcomings, how hard they struggled to do better. In some ways, it's consoling to recognize that our great founders were constantly beating themselves up for their own imperfections and didn't imagine that they were even making the best use of their own talents.

If there's a single place where they did succeed in living up to their youthful ideals, for me, it's the fact that so many of them were such deep readers. And there's something so inspiring, at the end of their lives, to see Jefferson and Adams trading book recommendations, and getting so excited about studies of comparative religion and philosophy, and talking about the latest books that have been published in London and Paris, and keeping up the same reading schedules that

they had ever since they were kids. Getting up early, spending the day engaged in deep reading and writing and reflection, and deliberating with each other about its meaning.

And that's something we can all take with us. We have the extraordinary privilege of living in an age when all the books in the world are essentially free and online. It just blows my mind that I was able to do my COVID reading and then write this book sitting on my couch at home because you can either read cheap or free editions of all the books in the world or actually copies that the founders themselves read.

So, it's a marvelous time to be a reader. All we need is the self-discipline to actually read rather than browse, and the founders themselves are inspiring models for that kind of self-discipline.

[00:47:45] Liz Covart: I guess it's also really important to remember that the pursuit of happiness is a pursuit. It's a journey. And as you mentioned, Jeff, even the founders sometimes found this pursuit, this pursuit of happiness, to be a real challenge.

[00:47:57] Jeffrey Rosen: Absolutely. It's a journey. It's a quest. And it's in the quest and the journey, rather than the obtaining, that happiness is found. Because happiness is daily efforts to become more perfect. That powerful phrase in the Constitution is one that Ben Franklin used when he said, he hoped at the end of his long life that any of the many errors that he made in his life could be considered like printer's errors or errata and corrected and amended by the author, by the divine.

So, there's no final state or resting place but each day when we feel like we've used our talents and abilities to the best of our abilities and read a good book or had a good conversation with a loved one or connected or done something for others, that's the quest. That's the pursuit. And realizing that rather than the immediate gratification of just doing what feels good in the moment, the slow and steady quest to become more perfect is the meaning of happiness.

[00:48:57] Liz Covart: We should move into the "Time Warp." This is the fun segment of the show where we ask you a hypothetical history question about what might have happened if something had occurred differently, or if someone had acted differently.

Jeff, what if Congress had not written the word happiness in the Declaration of Independence? How would the absence of the pursuit of happiness have shaped the early republic and the personal lives of the founders we discussed today?

[00:49:41] Jeffrey Rosen: Well, the founders were so devoted to this quest for self-mastery, which they got from their youthful reading, that they would have done it whether it was in the Declaration or not. However, it might have been harder to sell the Declaration, because what are you fighting a revolution for? You can talk about abstractions like tyranny and no taxation without representation, but really what motivates all of us is happiness. It's the first purpose of government and life, as everyone recognized. So it was a great slogan. It's a really good brand or meme.

And then, of course, it crucially inspired freedom fighters throughout American history. It's so inspiring to see the abolitionists and heroic Black freedom fighters, starting with Prince Hall in 1777, invoking the Declaration and saying, "we're entitled to this too, you are hypocrites in excluding us. We also demand our right to pursue happiness and that you recognize it and secure it." And then David Walker and his appeal in the antebellum era, and then Susan B. Anthony and the great women's suffrage advocates, and Ida B. Wells, and then all of the Progressive era groups that invoke the Declaration, all the way up to the twentieth century and Martin Luther King on the Mall.

It's been the mission statement of America, the Declaration of Independence, and in every generation previously excluded groups have demanded that they be included in its sweeping promise and its embrace and that America live up to its promissory note, as King put it. And in all of these eras, it's been crucially important to frame the demand for inclusion in terms of the pursuit of happiness.

[00:51:18] Liz Covart: So Jeff, you mentioned earlier that you're continuing to follow Thomas Jefferson's reading recommendations and his deep reading habit, and that this habit is really helping you write your newest book. Would you tell us what this newest book is about?

[00:51:31] Jeffrey Rosen: I would love to, because I'm so excited about it. It's how the Hamilton Jefferson debate has defined all of American history, all of our political history, and all of our constitutional history.

And in some ways, it's the most obvious of all theses. Martin Van Buren recognized it was the central debate in American history in the Jacksonian era. And at every stage, historians have identified it as crucial to the American idea. But no one has taken it up from 1776 to 2026, which is when the book is going to come out. So that's the project.

The first half of the book just tells the great story of this amazing battle for the soul of America between Hamilton and Jefferson. And in particular, how their battles over a couple of big ideas: national power versus state's rights, liberal construction versus strict construction of the constitution, and democracy versus aristocracy or rule by elites. How that battle over the bank defined the rise of the first political parties, the Federalists versus the Republicans, and then every political party ever since, the Whigs and the Jacksonian Democrats, the Lincoln Republicans and the Wilson Democrats, and then of course our current parties.

And then after telling that story, I take it up to the present and show that in the big moments of American history—the founding, Reconstruction, the New Deal, and then the Reagan revolution—Jeffersonian strict constructionists have invoked his principles to fight back against their perceptions of Hamiltonian excesses of big government. And the Hamiltonians have defended nationalism against what they view as the insurrectionist nullification of the states' rights folks.

It's just a marvelous way of learning about American history, of telling a great and dynamic story. I can't wait to wake up every day because it's so much fun to learn about this great story. And I'm so excited to share it. It'll be out in 2026.

[00:53:17] Liz Covart: We can tell you're very excited about this book, and we're looking forward to hearing your argument in 2026. Now, although we've been focused on the topic of your book, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, you're also the CEO of the National Constitution Center. And I wonder if you would tell us about the National Constitution Center and what we can see if we go to Philadelphia and visit.

[00:53:37] Jeffrey Rosen: Well, I'm thrilled to do that. It's just the most marvelous national treasure, this institution founded by Congress during the bicentennial of the Constitution. And here's the mission statement, which I always recite at the beginning of our podcasts and programs, "The National Constitution Center is the only institution in America chartered by Congress to increase awareness and understanding of the Constitution among the American people on a nonpartisan basis." And it's so inspiring to be the organization that brings together liberals and conservatives to debate and discuss every aspect of the Constitution on all media platforms.

We have this magnificent museum in Philadelphia on Independence Mall across from Independence Hall—it's the greatest view of Independence Hall in America—with live theater

about the Constitution, rare copies of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, Signers' Hall where you can see life size statues of the founders, and incredible exhibits on the First Amendment and Reconstruction on the history of the American idea.

And then there's this amazing online platform that I really want listeners to check out, called The Interactive Constitution, and it's at constitutioncenter.org. It's gotten eighty million hits since we launched in 2015. It's now among the most googled constitutions in the world. And you can click there on any clause of the Constitution and find the leading liberal and conservative thinkers with a thousand words about what they agree it means, and separate statements about what they disagree about. This is people like Justice Amy Coney Barrett and Neal Katyal debating the meaning of the habeas corpus clause and you multiply that by eighty parts of the constitution. It's just a feast.

But then there's these wonderful podcasts that I have the privilege of hosting every week, *We the People*, that bring together liberal and conservative thinkers on constitutional issues in the news and throughout American history. And then there's this Constitution 101 class that we've launched. It's free and online, everything you need to know about the Constitution. You can see it now at constitutionscenter.org. And in the fall, we're doing a version of it with Khan Academy. This is Khan's first civics class. And in partnership with that great online education provider, we're going to really aspire to reach hundreds of thousands of kids providing nonpartisan civics for all.

So those are among the great resources you can find at the National Constitution Center. It's just an honor to be working with this incredible team of colleagues to host these great discussions and educational experiences which model what America's supposed to be; thoughtful dialogue among people of different perspectives respectfully exploring areas of agreement and American history and disagreement, all in the service of learning about American history just as the founders hoped.

[00:56:14] Liz Covart: And we'll include links to those resources in our show notes. Jeff, if we have more questions about the pursuit of happiness, or perhaps the United States Constitution, where can we get a hold of you and learn more about your work and pose those questions?

[00:56:26] Jeffrey Rosen: constitutioncenter.org or write to me, jrosen@constitutioncenter.org.

BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

[00:56:33] Liz Covart: Jeffrey Rosen, thank you for joining us and for introducing us to the pursuit of happiness and piquing our interests in the books and ideas that the founders were interested in.

[00:56:43] Jeffrey Rosen: Thank you. It's been wonderful to talk with you.

[00:56:47] Liz Covart: The pursuit of happiness is a slow and steady quest to become a more perfect person and citizen. It's a quest to overcome your passion, those unproductive and sometimes destructive emotions, so that your reason can thrive and help you live and work as a good citizen. These are the ideas that texts written by moral philosophers like Cicero and Plato and John Locke and David Hume conveyed to the founding generation.

And as Jeff revealed, the founding generation as a whole believed that by reading moral philosophy, you could learn to be a good, virtuous, or moral person. And this is why early American men and women across the social and economic spectrum read the ideas of classical and Enlightenment moral philosophers.

To read these texts made someone educated and set them on the path to a life well lived. Now as we've heard, many of the most famous founders engaged in this moral quest. Benjamin Franklin, for example, identified and worked to emulate twelve virtues that he thought would make him a better person, a person of reason. Only this wasn't enough, so a friend told him he needed to add humility as his thirteenth virtue and try to emulate that.

A teenage George Washington learned to govern his passion by writing out 110 rules of civility in his schoolbook, which set the stage for Washington to emerge as the United States Cincinnatus. A man so virtuous that he placed the needs of the American republic over personal ambition by governing his emotions and turning down the opportunity to replace King George III with King George Washington.

Thomas Jefferson's extensive study of moral philosophy is infused in the Declaration of Independence. Where after declaring that the pursuit of happiness is an unalienable right, Jefferson and his fellow Second Continental Congressmen used the Declaration as a forum to consider and reflect upon ideas about the consent of the governed.

And James Madison's study of moral philosophy led him to conclude that democracies and republics fail when their citizens lack republican virtue and allow leaders to encroach on their liberties and subvert republican forums in exchange for cheap luxuries and simple amusements.

Which is why he advocated for the system of government offered in the United States Constitution.

In the late eighteenth century, living a good, moral, and virtuous life, striving to be a better, more caring, and generally good person was understood to be the pursuit of happiness. And it was thought that the chief aim of good government was to protect and allow for this pursuit so that the new United States would be filled with a citizenry of good, rational people capable of supporting lasting self-government.

For more information about Jeff, his book, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, plus notes, links, and a transcript for everything we talked about today, look on the show notes page, benfranklinsworld.com/394. Please help me spread the word about *Ben Franklin's World* by telling someone you know about the show. Remember that friends tell friends about their favorite podcasts.

Production assistance for this podcast comes from my colleagues at Colonial Williamsburg Innovation Studios, Jordan Hammon, Ashley Bouknight, Derek Litvak, and Morgan McCullough. Breakmaster Cylinder composed our custom theme music. This podcast is part of the Airwave Media Podcast Network. To discover and listen to their other podcasts, visit airwavemedia.com.

Finally, what other ideas from the founding or other periods in early American history would you like to explore next? Let me know, liz@benfranklinsworld.com, because I really do use your feedback to plan future episodes. *Ben Franklin's World* is a production of Colonial Williamsburg Innovation Studios.