

## From Pursuit: Silence in Order to Listen

Thursday, November 27, 2025

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**[00:00:03.6] Jeffrey Rosen:** Hello, friends, and happy Thanksgiving. I'm Jeffrey Rosen, President and CEO of the National Constitution Center, and welcome to We the People, a weekly show of constitutional debate. The National Constitution Center is a non-partisan non-profit chartered by Congress to increase awareness and understanding of the Constitution among the American people. This week we're sharing the latest episode from our new podcast series, Pursuit: The Founder's Guide to Happiness. Each episode features conversations with filmmaker Ken Burns and other great American historians. We explore what the pursuit of happiness meant to the founders and how learning about the forgotten meaning of those words changed my life and can change yours. All 12 episodes are available now, Pursuit: The Founder's Guide to Happiness on your favorite podcast app.

**[00:00:56.8] Jeffrey Rosen:** Friends, this is Thanksgiving season and I want to share my appreciation for everyone who made Pursuit possible. To Ken Burns and the American historians who shared their rich and deep understanding of the founders. To Jennifer Blythe, James Martin and Greg Stroman of Dickinson College for collaborating with me on the songs. To Bill Pollock, Griffin Ritchie, Annie Stone and our partners at PRX Productions for their outstanding craft and care throughout. And to the John Templeton Foundation for their support. I'm so grateful to the amazing team that came together to create this podcast, and I hope you like it. From Pursuit, here's episode 12. Silence in Order to Listen.

**[00:01:44.9] Robert P. George:** If we want our children to be capable of maintaining this experiment in ordered liberty and self-government, if we want them to have the virtue that will enable them to do that, then we have to model it.

**[00:02:05.1] Ken Burns:** I always said my films ask one question, who are we?

**[00:02:10.9] Jeffrey Rosen:** Over the last 11 episodes, you've heard from filmmaker Ken Burns and from leading historians on what the founders really meant by the pursuit of happiness.

**[00:02:21.2] Ken Burns:** They also have to ask, not only of the audience but of the filmmaker, who am I? And so at that moment of possibility, it's then all up to you.

**[00:02:31.5] Jeffrey Rosen:** The daily effort to become a better person is hard work. It's a moment-by-moment struggle to be your best rather than your worst self. Just when I think I'm approaching success, I realize how far I have to go. It's an invitation for all of us, through self-examination, to overcome our egos, become a little more perfect, and connect to the light within. In our final episode, we hear from you, plus more wisdom from Ken Burns and Robbie George on how we can pursue happiness together. Hello, friends. I'm Jeffrey Rosen, President and CEO of the National Constitution Center, and this is Pursuit: The Founder's Guide to Happiness. In Episode 1, Professor Robbie George walked us through how the meaning of the pursuit of happiness became focused on short-term gain instead of what the founders intended, a long-term pursuit of learning and self-improvement. The stakes were high nearly 250 years ago, just as they are today. Here's Professor George.

**[00:03:46.0] Robert P. George:** Now, remember the basic problem that our founders faced. Once they had, against all odds and to their own surprise, as well as the surprise of the entire world, overthrown the greatest military power on earth to gain their independence, then the question became, okay, now, what kind of government do we establish here in order to avoid jumping from the frying pan into the fire, replicating the very tyrannies and injustices that warranted us, caused us, motivated us to seek our independence from Great Britain? Now, one option was a monarchy, just a better monarchy, have a better king than King George. And that must have been tempting to people because they had the ideal king. They had George Washington. You can't get a better king. He's a man who didn't want to be king. There's your best king. He knew from religious teaching, even from what he knew about the great philosophers of antiquity, he knew that virtue doesn't just fall on you down from the heavens. You don't acquire it by just reaching up and grabbing it. You become virtuous by performing virtuous acts. Aristotle, for example, teaches us how do we become courageous? There's only one way, performing courageous acts.

**[00:05:09.9] Robert P. George:** How do we become truthful? How do we build a character that is a truthful character, an honorable, honest character? By never doing something dishonorable. That doesn't mean you're not going to feel the temptation to tell a lie. You get yourself into a certain spot, you're going to feel tempted to escape from that spot by telling a fib. Washington refused to do it. Why? Because he knew that your actions shape your character. They don't just alter states of affairs out there in the world, they alter you internally, either strengthening your character or weakening your character.

**[00:05:51.4] Jeffrey Rosen:** As we heard in Episode 1, Ben Franklin made a list of 13 virtues to live by. The second virtue was silence, and he defined it in this way. Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself. Avoid trifling conversation. Here's filmmaker Ken Burns on the virtue of silence.

**[00:06:12.1] Ken Burns:** As we engage in these virtues, we find one of the most powerful is silence and prayer. Because prayer is a way not to ask for the bicycle you want, not to thank for the grand slam you've just hit, but to create a moment of silence in which you are permitting the momentum of your life to stop and to permit some other thing to fill it. And that is a very powerful force, and it doesn't have to happen in the pew. It could happen with a cup of tea. It could happen with walking. It could happen with singing. It could happen at work.

**[00:07:00.3] Jeffrey Rosen:** Silence is also a path to better listening, stilling your thoughts so you can listen to others. Ken finds that silence is important in capturing a full story and the meaning behind it.

**[00:07:12.7] Ken Burns:** I notice when I'm recording narration, which is the toughest thing that we do, we have to listen to the meaning, and the narrator is doing that, and I've got all these little things that I'm doing with my body. The one thing I do, I'll say this is narration 2.463A, when you're ready, take one. And I put my feet on the ground so that I feel the ground on my feet and I wait for it to come up. And then I hear the words and I can hear what the meaning is. And maybe take one, we hold these truths to be self-evident, take seven, that all men are created equal, take four, that they are endowed with their creator, back to take one, with certain unalienable rights, so that I am editing and shouting out as we're going along what we will take from these takes before we move on to the next one. And it is the most exhausting work that I do, and I'm not the one who's talking, right? I can't imagine what it's like for Peter Coyote or Keith David or other people who have been our narrators, but it is also vivifying and it forces you into the moment.

**[00:08:24.3] Ken Burns:** And at the heart of it is a kind of poise. There's just this moment before the pitcher throws the ball in which everything is suspended, and you're just stopped. And in that is the possibility. And the hallmark of that is silence. But what does that mean to listen? What does it mean to stop the internal chatter and say, I'm going to hear this quote by Lincoln, "Whence shall we expect the approach of danger? Shall some transatlantic giant step the earth and crush us with a

blow? Never! All the armies of Europe, Asia, and Africa could not by force take a drink from the Ohio River or make a track in the Blue Ridge in the trial of 1,000 years. If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of free men, we will live through all time or die by suicide." He wasn't even 29 years old, 1838, Young Men's Lyceum, a conversation in the afternoon about foreign policy and other things. And yet he understands that we have met the enemy and he is us. I always said my films ask one question, who are we? They also have to ask, not only of the audience but of the filmmaker, who am I? And so at that moment of possibility, it's then all up to you. Do you jump in? Do you meet the moment? Or do you equivocate? And there's no wrong thing. But all of that is information for the soul.

**[00:10:04.1] Jeffrey Rosen:** Wow, that's exactly the quest and the path, developing the habits of setting aside time to listen to the celestial music. That's what I've found, setting aside mornings for daily reading or writing poems and now writing songs. That's what we hear from people around the country who set aside their mornings for times of prayer and silence and reflection. It's getting out of your head, receiving the celestial music and connecting to the divine.

**[00:10:32.9] Ken Burns:** That's exactly it. And of course what we know, and this speaks directly to prayer and silence, is that in music, it isn't the notes. It's the intervals between the notes, which is silence. In cinema, there's a very poor superficial version of this, is that if you have a shot and another shot and you put them together, you really have three things. And that's the interval between the two as you let go of the other one and receive the new one. And so all possibility occurs in that space. And so the genius of music, the effectiveness of music, the love that is implied mathematically as well as emotionally by music is in the interval, is in the stop, is in the silence between the notes.

**[00:11:30.2] Jeffrey Rosen:** And Leonard Bernstein, the great teacher, talked about music being intervals moving through time. And by tuning into those divine intervals and harmony, we literally connect to the divine. It's also a great tip for listeners who are looking for habits in daily practice. And Jefferson said, I've given up newspapers for Tacitus. I feel much better. The great historian who is his favorite of all authors.

**[00:12:00.1] Ken Burns:** I do know of it.

**[00:12:01.4] Jeffrey Rosen:** And it's really true, especially today.

**[00:12:03.3] Ken Burns:** Today.

**[00:12:03.4] Jeffrey Rosen:** When news gets challenging, it's very important not to follow it every hour, but to use every hour instead of browsing and surfing, deep listening to music.

**[00:12:12.2] Ken Burns:** And that's not abdicating. It's actually realizing that if I am churning myself up with events that I can't actually control as a citizen, the constant picking of the scab is only that it leads to infection. But there's a way to heal.

**[00:12:34.4] Jeffrey Rosen:** You've been modeling in these extraordinary conversations the habits of virtuous self-mastery, beginning with your morning practice with the Book of Wisdom with Tolstoy. But you've shown us you're practicing these habits throughout the day, every moment of the day.

**[00:12:53.4] Ken Burns:** I was fortunate early on in college to be exposed to spiritual ideas and to mentors in art. Jerome Liebling, the still photographer who is my mentor, and then having the good fortune in the early projects to meet mentors, have grounded. Arthur Miller said to me, it ended up in the very last moments of the Brooklyn Bridge film, the first film that PBS broadcast. He said, looking at the Brooklyn Bridge, that it made you think that maybe you too could add something that would last and be beautiful.

**[00:13:27.7] Jeffrey Rosen:** Why don't you share some final thoughts for our listeners about how they can lead a self-mastered life and therefore pursue happiness?

**[00:13:36.2] Ken Burns:** No one can ignite in another the actual ability to do it. That spark already exists in us. And the question is, can we clear out the deadwood and find it? And once you find it, then there's no guarantee it's going to be sparked, that it's going to go anywhere or that it can't be distracted. And so I think everyone has more tools than they think that they have. And it really just becomes a matter of intention, something we haven't talked about, will, which is how you first accept the inevitable failure that is part of the project, that we're all flawed. That is true. And the way you can accept that with magnanimity, perhaps in your child who's learning to walk, try to accept that in you and think that perhaps this is another version of learning to walk. It's really hard to get these legs stabilized before you let go of the finger that is holding you up. And I think understanding that the greatest thing is that we're not alone and that when we practice the love of the other, then the journey, however painful it might be, is just made easier because we have that company of the people that we love and admire and respect.

**[00:14:58.7] Jeffrey Rosen:** When we come back, we'll hear from listeners who've shared some big and small changes they've made in the spirit of lifelong learning and the pursuit of happiness. This is Pursuit: The Founder's Guide to Happiness. I'm Jeffrey Rosen.

**[00:15:24.0] Robert P. George:** We need to remember it's not just schools, it's parents, it's grandparents, it's auntie, it's uncle, it's pastor, it's coach, it's librarian. All the people who influence the lives of our children, we need to impart to them virtue.

**[00:15:43.7] Jeffrey Rosen:** Professor Robbie George teaches courses on constitutional interpretation and civil liberties at Princeton.

**[00:15:50.4] Robert P. George:** And there are only two ways to do it, and both are essential. The two ways are by precept and by example. If we want our children to be capable of maintaining this experiment in ordered liberty and self-government, if we want them to have the virtue that will enable them to do that, then we've got to preach to them to be sure on the importance of being a morally good person, of living justly, of living honorably, and we have to model it. I am keenly aware that in my classes, what they see me do is, if anything, more important than what they hear me say. If I want my students, and I do, to be determined truth-seekers and courageous truth-speakers, I'd better model that because they can see and smell a hypocrite a mile away. If I want them to be determined in their pursuit of truth, not be dogmatists, not be ideologues, dogmatism and ideology are fatal to Republican government. If I don't want them to be that, and I don't want them to be that, I'd better not be that myself. No, we should all have our views, we should defend our views vigorously, but we need to be open to criticism.

**[00:17:13.3] Robert P. George:** We need to be willing to engage with others. We need to respect their freedom of thought, freedom of inquiry, freedom of speech. If my students see me failing to accept criticism, to engage others in a truth-seeking spirit when we disagree, they see me trying to use power to restrict other people's freedom of speech, they're not going to believe a word I say about the importance of these practices and virtues to the maintenance of republican government. And that's going to be true of parents and grandparents and aunties and uncles and coach and pastor and teacher and librarian and the whole panoply of people whose interaction with our young people shapes their understandings of the world and of themselves. So that's, I think, the most fundamental thing we can do. Want to be good citizens and hand on our republican government to the next generation? Be good people. You've got to be good people.

**[00:18:15.8] Jeffrey Rosen:** Being good people. You don't have to do it alone. Here are some voicemails we've received from listeners about how you've made changes in your lives.

**[00:18:25.7] Speaker 4:** I'm calling from Atlanta, Georgia. Pursuit is my favorite podcast. I love

learning how our country's founders, men and women, strove to be better people, often failing but always trying. Inspired by Ben Franklin's What good did I do today? My takeaway is to show up each day with hard work, curiosity, and kindness.

**[00:18:48.6] Speaker 5:** I read Jeffrey Rosen's book, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, about a year ago and I've been listening to this wonderful series now. And as a 21-year member of Alcoholics Anonymous, I relate so much of what I'm hearing from the founders to the program I've been involved with for a very long time. We all seek humility. We take responsibility for things we've done and admit when we're wrong. We put the needs of others above our own.

**[00:19:22.4] Speaker 6:** Receiving advice from the founders of America wasn't on my bingo card in 2025, but it's been helpful. I start my day with deep reading. Maybe not deep as the founders for 12 hours a day, but I start off with 30 minutes. I try to get to an hour. And it's better than starting the day off on my phone. I get clarity. I get knowledge. I get a little bit of wisdom. And then I can start doing the usual activities of the day. But it's been very, very helpful for me to focus. And I feel like I can plan my day out better.

**[00:19:53.2] Speaker 7:** It's made me ponder what the pursuit of happiness originally meant. And as the podcast taught me, it's about being good rather than chasing the feeling of happiness. I've learned a lot and it's inspired me to read more books about the Constitution. I feel like I have a closer connection to the founding people discussed in the episodes. And I even find myself thinking about the song lyrics created by Jeffrey Rosen going about my day-to-day life and how I can apply them.

**[00:20:24.6] Jeffrey Rosen:** That last voicemail filled me with joy. My hope in writing the songs is that some of you might like them. And if anyone is finding them catchy and useful, that means more than I can say. Thank you. Now it's time for the final song about silence. I wrote it to remember why silence is golden by setting to music the wisdom that before we speak, we should ask three questions. Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary? Here's baritone James Martin with Jennifer Blythe at the piano.

**[00:21:05.0] James Martin:** When you're addressed, apply this three-part test before you speak in reply. And whenever you're moved to chastise or reprove, examine your reasons why. Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary? Only speak when it's necessary. Silence is golden's the name of this song. Sing it in your mind, it's not very long. And after you croon this silent tune, here's a rule you'll be ready to apply. Silence is golden, so hold your tongue. Think before you speak. So while you're holding your smoldering tongue, try this well technique. Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary? Only speak when it's necessary. Silence is golden, so hold your tongue. Think before you speak. Your friends but not God may think it's odd when you think before you speak. The pregnant pauses before your clauses will mark you as unique.

**[00:22:42.0] James Martin:** But although when you're in flow, some will interrupt you, keep your cool and don't let them disrupt you. Silence is golden, it's just the only way. Take your time in composing what you want to say. And before too long, just like I composed this song, you'll have aced your self-composing technique. Silence is golden, so hold your tongue. Think before you speak. So while you're holding your smoldering tongue, try this well technique. Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary? Only speak when it's necessary. Silence is golden, so hold your tongue. Think before you speak. Think before you speak.

**[00:23:52.8] Jeffrey Rosen:** There's one last song I'd like to share with you. It's a coda that leads into the theme song, *The Pursuit of Happiness*. You've been hearing the melody at the beginning of every episode, with the arranger Greg Stroman on the trombone. Here's the baritone James Martin singing *The Pursuit of Happiness* with Jennifer Blythe at the piano.

**[00:24:13.7] James Martin:** The pursuit of happiness means being a lifelong learner. The pursuit

of happiness means learning every day. And I feel such happiness that you're a lifelong learner. Let's spend a lifetime learning together. It's the only way. When you're pondering just how to spend your life, stop pondering and start to read a book. When you're pondering just how to spend your life, stop pondering and take a closer look. You can't control the turns of fortune or of fate. The only thing you can control is your thoughts and deeds. So read a book when you wake up every morning, you feel great. You feel you seize control of your life proceeds. The pursuit of happiness means being a lifelong learner. The pursuit of happiness means learning every day. And I feel such happiness that you're a lifelong learner. Let's spend a lifetime learning together. It's the only way. It's the only way.

**[00:26:00.6] Jeffrey Rosen:** Thanks for listening, friends. I'm thrilled that my new book is out now. It's called *The Pursuit of Liberty: How Hamilton Vs. Jefferson Ignited the Lasting Battle Over Power in America*. Please order online or check it out at a bookstore near you. Please also check out the book that inspired this podcast, *The Pursuit of Happiness, How Classical Writers on Virtue Inspired the Lives of the Founders and Defined America*. I'm Jeffrey Rosen. Pursuit: The Founder's Guide to Happiness is produced by PRX Productions for the National Constitution Center. From PRX, the team is Genevieve Sponsler, Courtney Fleurantin, David Newtown, Sandra Lopez-Monsalve, Tommy Bazarian, and Pedro Rafael Rosado. The executive producer of PRX Productions is Jocelyn Gonzales. From the NCC, our team is Annie Stone, Griffin Ritchie, and Bill Pollack. Music and lyrics by Jeffrey Rosen, with arrangements by Greg Stroman.

**[00:27:01.0] Jeffrey Rosen:** Many thanks to Clean Cuts Audio Recording Studio in D.C. I wrote two song cycles for this podcast, *The Golden Mean*, *Songs for the Pursuit of Happiness*, and *Twelve Titans, Songs of the Greek and Roman Gods and Goddesses*. We debuted both cycles at the American Philosophical Society in September, with James Martin singing *The Golden Mean* and me singing *Twelve Titans*. You can find the video in the show notes and on C-SPAN, and we'll release the audio of that concert as a special bonus episode of Pursuit. I hope you like it. This podcast was made possible with the support of the John Templeton Foundation.