

Jeffrey Rosen

The Pursuit of Happiness

OPENING THE CONVERSATION

1. Rosen traces the intellectual origins of the phrase “pursuit of happiness.” What stood out most to you about how he defines happiness?
2. The Founders often suggested that self-government begins with the government of the self. How does that idea shape your understanding of the “pursuit of happiness”?

CLOSE READING AND INTERPRETATION

3. How does Rosen connect the “pursuit of happiness” to classical ideas of virtue and moral development?
4. What role did self-mastery and character play in the Founders’ understanding of happiness?
5. How does Rosen use primary sources—letters, philosophical works, or other writings—to explain what the Founders meant by this phrase?

EXPLORING TENSIONS

6. How does this understanding of happiness differ from modern associations with personal satisfaction or individual success?
7. Is there a tension between happiness as a personal pursuit and happiness as something tied to civic responsibility?

REFLECTION AND APPLICATION

8. If self-government begins with the government of the self, what might that look like in practice today?
9. Where do you see this older understanding of happiness reflected—or absent—in American culture today?

CLOSING REFLECTION

10. How does Rosen’s essay change the way you read the phrase “pursuit of happiness” in the Declaration of Independence?