



The Pursuit of Happiness: A Book Launch and Conversation with Jeffrey Rosen and Jeffrey Goldberg

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[00:00:00] Tanaya Tauber: Welcome to Live at the National Constitution Center, the podcast sharing live constitutional conversations and debates hosted by the Center in-person and online. I'm Tanaya Tauber, the Senior Director of Town Hall Programs. In this episode, National Constitution Center, president and CEO Jeffrey Rosen, launches his new book at the NCC in conversation with Jeffrey Goldberg, Editor-in-Chief of the Atlantic. In *The Pursuit of Happiness, How Classical Writers on Virtue Inspired the Lives of the Founders and Defined America*, Rosen offers a fascinating examination of what the pursuit of happiness meant to our nation's founders, and how that phrase defined their lives and became the foundation of our democracy. Here's Jeff to get the conversation started.

[00:01:16] Jeffrey Rosen: Hello friends. What a thrill to welcome you to the National Constitution Center on President's Day. It has been a wonderful President's Day full of students, and learners, and presidential impersonators, and that's thanks to our friends at Citizens Travelers who not only sponsored President's Day, but have a wonderful civics initiative to inspire their employees to learn about the Constitution, and we're so grateful for their sponsorship. Friends, I also want to acknowledge some very special guests in the front row. They're all sitting together. They are Pamela Reeves, Lauren Coyle Rosen, and Judge Michael Luttig. I must thank Judge Luttig for having had the vision to bring the First Amendment tablet that is shimmering behind us from Washington DC to Independence Mall in Philadelphia. It sanctifies this sacred space, and let's just all feel the vibe of Independence Hall and the First Amendment and how lucky we are to be here. Thank you Judge Luttig for making that possible.

[00:02:43] Jeffrey Rosen: I'm so excited that my friend, my editor, the great Jeffrey Goldberg has come to Philly to talk about the book. One of the great journalists of our generation, he's read it and I can't wait to hear what he thinks and to have our conversation. Please join me in welcoming Jeffrey Goldberg.

[00:03:05] Jeffrey Goldberg: Thank you, Jeff. I really do feel like we're operating under the protection of the First Amendment tonight.

[00:03:14] Jeffrey Goldberg: Judge Luttig, you drove this down in your pickup truck, right?

[00:03:17] Jeffrey Goldberg: One slab at a time. It's really quite amazing. Thank you, Jeff. Thanks everyone for being here. You all this is the subject of our talk tonight. I guarantee you that in 58 minutes, you will be happier than you were when you came in here.

[00:03:33] Jeffrey Goldberg: Or at least you'll have self-knowledge that you didn't have before. You'll list up a path for improvement because this book is actually, it's not about the pursuit of happiness, as a society have come to understand the pursuit of happiness. You talk about this in the book obviously, that at some point in the '60s, perhaps, '60s and '70s, the me decade especially the pursuit of happiness became the pursuit of whatever makes you happy, or the do your own thing or, you do you kind of idea, but what you were meant, what you set out to do, and what I think you did successfully was explain what the founders meant when they used the term pursuit of happiness. It's really an extraordinary book. I'll stop being nice to him in a minute. I'm sorry.

But it's the rare book that you can call simultaneously a work of original history and a self-help book. I don't say that in a slight offhand way about some of the trifling self-help books that we see. You actually, in reading this, you will see how great people led their lives. You will be stimulated to think about the way you lead your own life. Which brings me to this, to the foundation story, which I'd like you to tell, why you wound up writing this book? It wasn't necessarily on your dance card before the pandemic, but there you are in the pandemic and you were having thoughts. Tell us how this came to be.

[00:05:05] Jeffrey Rosen: I'm delighted to share that this project originated during COVID with Benjamin Franklin and the Jews. So that was the connection. A friend and I had been studying at Adas Israel, our local synagogue in DC. The rabbi there recommended this project called Mussar or Character Improvement, where every night you're supposed to make a list of the 13 virtues that were on the list and put an X mark where you fell short. There are virtues like temperance, prudence, humility, and so forth, which is the hardest one to follow. This is Frank Fourie, “and it was very depressing 'cause there were so many X marks, and we gave it up after a while.”

[00:05:49] Jeffrey Goldberg: How many X marks exactly on average?

[00:05:52] Jeffrey Rosen: There's seven days of the week. There were like, at that point, there were seven next to temperance, or it was a tough time, actually. It's a difficult system to try when you're in an emotionally turbulent time. What I learned during COVID was that this didn't originate with a Hasidic rabbi, but with Benjamin Franklin. In his autobiography, he was the one who came up with this 13 virtues project in his effort to achieve moral perfection in his 20s. He had made the list of the virtues. He tried the X marks. He, too, found it depressing after a while, but was glad that he tried it. The COVID revelation was that Franklin chose as a motto for his project, a book by Cicero I'd never heard of, called *The Tusculanae Disputationes*. It said,

"Without virtue, happiness cannot be." So I thought, I haven't heard of this Cicero book. Interesting. A few weeks later, I was at UVA as it happens at the Boar's Head Inn, and saw on the wall a list of 12 virtues that Thomas Jefferson had drafted for his daughters.

[00:06:51] Jeffrey Rosen: They were almost identical to Franklin's, and Jefferson too had this passage from Cicero the *Tusculanae Disputationes* that he would send to anyone who asked when he was old, what the meaning of happiness was. It said, "Without virtue, happiness cannot be. He who is tranquil in mind, who's neither unduly, despondent or in date, indulgences in want and exaltation, he's the happy man of whom we in quest, he's the wise man." So I thought, okay, I've gotta read this Cicero 'cause I've never read it. What else to read? Then I came across a reading list that Jefferson would send to anyone who asked how to be an educated person. It's an arduous schedule. You're supposed to get up and dawn and start reading history and politics, and then have lunch and read the moral philosophy, and then dinner, you're allowed some Shakespeare and then to bed. It's a kind of stakhanovite reading schedule.

[00:07:41] Jeffrey Rosen: Under the section called Natural Religion or Ethics, I found at the top, Cicero's *Tusculanae Disputationes*, and then 10 Works of moral philosophy that I'd never read. They included Stoic and other Greek and Roman philosophers like Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius and Seneca, but also enlightenment philosophers like Locke and Francis Hutcheson, and Lord Kames, most of whom I'd not read. So what so struck me during COVID that I'd never encountered any of these books. I've had this wonderful liberal arts education, great teachers, great universities, studying political philosophy, law, English history, but never the moral philosophy. I remember you talk about the greed is good decade. I was yearning for this in college. I wanted some guidance about how to live a good life that was an alternative to the materialism and hedonism of pop culture, which I, of course, was indulging in, but felt unsatisfied by. Religious dogma and doctrine was not adequate for me. I was studying Puritan theology and was working through the hairsplitting of the doctrine of predestination and did not find that a meaningful guide for how to live a good life. So what to read? What I didn't realize, 'cause it was just hiding in plain sight, is that it was all of this great moral philosophy. So I read it during COVID. I talk about the unusual practice that I developed, which was to get up early, like Jefferson, watch the sunrise, read from the Wisdom literature. I found myself summing up the Wisdom and sonnet form and then would proceed through this marvelous readiness.

[00:09:18] Jeffrey Goldberg: How many sonnets did you write to help you along the way?

[00:09:22] Jeffrey Rosen: I was kind of writing one a day.

[00:09:24] Jeffrey Goldberg: You're writing a sonnet a day?

[00:09:25] Jeffrey Rosen: Look, I know this is extraordinarily weird.

[00:09:31] Jeffrey Goldberg: It's only 14 lines, I mean.

[00:09:33] Jeffrey Rosen: Well, there's a history. My beautiful and wonderful and brilliant wife, Lauren, is a poet. Before this project started, I saw Lauren kind of channeling poetry in real time, just having it come out. It was so extraordinary. I said, "I could never do that." She said, "Yes, you can. Why don't you try it?" I started writing poetry a few months, a little bit before this project started, and got in the habit of it. It was just practice. During COVID, a friend of mine, Barry Edelstein, had a YouTube video about how to write a Shakespearean sonnet. That inspired me to try to sum this up in, in Shakespearean sonnet form. But what's so amazing is not the sonnets, but the fact that so many people who have read this literature are moved to do the same thing. Phillis Wheatley, the great Black poet, Alexander Hamilton Mercy Otis Warren, the brilliant anti-Federalists, and John Quincy Adams would wake up at the White House, read Cicero in the original, write sonnets, which are excellent, and then take a walk along the Potomac and watch the sunrise. There's something in the air about this beautiful, harmonious literature that kind of craves to be summed up in distilled form. So I have a whole lot of sonnets and I finished the year of reading the Moral Wisdom, and it just transformed my life the way I think about how to be a good person and how to be a good citizen.

[00:11:03] Jeffrey Goldberg: This is a small question that obviously opens up to a larger subject we'll talk about, but you're describing your morning routine. How do you keep away from your phone?

[00:11:16] Jeffrey Rosen: That is the crucial question for the pursuit of happiness. Every morning still, it's a question, will I browse or will I read? I kept away with it just by developing a habit. I developed a rule. I'm not allowed to browse. In the morning, I have to read. Every morning, I have to read and not browse. It's a temptation. Sometimes I fall and fail and browse the Atlantic or whatever. But generally I don't.

[00:11:44] Jeffrey Goldberg: That's allowed by our standards. Obviously.

[00:11:47] Jeffrey Rosen: But this is actually my big takeaway, and I become an evangelist for the radical act of self-assertion involved in deep reading. It requires habits. This is what Jefferson and Franklin and Adams had, and it's so inspiring. They're old. They fell short of so many of their virtues, which all of which we'll talk about. But they're reading and learning until the end. Once you have a habit or a practice of reading, then you have to do it. I still can't believe that the sonnets, and I can't believe I wrote this book in a year, but it was all because I just set dedicated time aside in the morning to read.

[00:12:26] Jeffrey Goldberg: Right. Talk a little bit about the organization of the book. Different virtues, different founders. Just to give you a framework of how you organize this, and then dealer's choice. They're all interesting. I want to know which combination of virtue founder, Stoic source actually moved you the most as a person and then also as an academic?

[00:12:58] Jeffrey Rosen: Well, there were 12 virtues that I used. Jefferson had 12, Franklin had 13. I left off Chastity.

[00:13:07] Jeffrey Goldberg: You left off chastity because Franklin had a hard time with chastity, right?

[00:13:10] Jeffrey Rosen: He really did. He struggled. He had his illegitimate son who turned against him and became a Tory. Then his grandson went on to torture Federalist as the leading Republican journalist. But I just chose 12. Then I more or less mixed and matched. I wanted to cover the main founders as well as it was urgently important to cover Phillis Wheatley and Mercy Otis Warren, as well as lesser known founders like James Wilson and George Mason. So, for example, for Mason and Wilson, they were both undone by their, by their avarice and their lack of industry. So they went in the frugality section 'cause they didn't exercise that. Industry was Jefferson for his reading list. But you ask, who did I most resonate with? It was John Quincy Adams. I was so excited. You were on the train and you texted John Quincy Adams' extraordinary. I felt the same thing as I was reading about him, that he distilled the virtuous life more inspiringly than any of the others.

[00:14:16] Jeffrey Goldberg: Spent some time on that because I know Jeff and he writes at a pretty high level of enthusiasm everything.

[00:14:26] Jeffrey Goldberg: Everything that you do it at a high level of enthusiasm, which is a virtue, I think an earnest enthusiasm. In your John Quincy Adams sections, I was feeling your admiration for him. I'm wondering also how we always talk about, even post HBO miniseries, we talk about how John Adams, the father is always thought of a little bit and lesser than Thomas Jefferson or George Washington. Adams understood that in his life. I almost feel like John Quincy Adams is like yet another level that there is a member or a son of the founding generation who's really an extraordinary person, who we don't think about and talk about enough.

[00:15:09] Jeffrey Goldberg: But why don't you just give like a couple of minutes on how John Quincy Adams for you personified a person really devoted to trying to better himself and better-through bettering himself finding the true meaning of happiness, but also bringing enlightenment to others.

[00:15:27] Jeffrey Rosen: Absolutely. He summed up by this letter he wrote in his 20s, and he's just been appointed to, and unanimously confirmed to the Supreme Court. He turns down the appointment because he wants to stay as minister to Russia. He is writing in his diary, which is one of the greatest diaries ever written by an American president. "I'm 27 years old, my life has been dissipated in valence, and I've accomplished nothing."

[00:15:51] Jeffrey Rosen: He says, and he's just beating himself up for not having accomplished enough at this phase. It's because of his parents. The overwhelming pressure he got from John and Abigail to be perfect. Abigail's always nagging him and haranguing him. Not only, "Write more, you never call, or your handwriting should be better," but, "Use your powers of reason to master your unreasonable passions. There is avarice and ambition lurking everywhere. You've got to achieve self perfection so you can serve others." And he internalizes that constantly. He's always beating himself up for minor failures of temper. He keeps these incredible diaries, "I'm spending too much time at the theater. I'm growing corpulent, I'm getting stout. I'm drinking too much."

[00:16:40] Jeffrey Goldberg: But he literally wrote, "I'm becoming corpulent by going to the theater too much."

[00:16:45] Jeffrey Goldberg: Right, to himself.

[00:16:46] Jeffrey Rosen: To himself.

[00:16:46] Jeffrey Goldberg: He could not even enjoy going to the theater without fearing corpulence.

[00:16:52] Jeffrey Rosen: Well, I mean, he thought he was drinking too much. But, always he never stops. He's so self-aware. In these very vivid raw passages, is describing and recording his feelings. It's a spiritual diary. He has a first phase where he's the boyleston professor of Oratory at Harvard reading Cicero, and reading the literature and quoting from it, and taking as his motto, Cicero's motto from the Tusculanae Disputationes, the same book that inspired Jefferson, and the same book that Locke and Bella Mackie quote "as their inspiration." actually his motto from Cicero is, "I plant trees for another century." In other words, the fruits of my laborers won't come to fruition now, it's for the future. It's always delayed gratification. He becomes president. Of course, his term ends and begins with a defeat by Andrew Jackson and the popular vote.

[00:17:53] Jeffrey Rosen: So he views Jackson as a demagogue, but he insists on this program of national Republican internal improvements and envisions of national university and lighthouses in the sky that become the Smithsonian Institution. But he's repudiated by his party, and he's devastated and feels that the world has ended. Then he's been writing these letters to his son about how to be perfect, letters to a Christian, constantly exhorting George Washington Adams to live up to their ideals and the pressures too much. George Washington becomes an alcoholic and kills himself. Adams is devastated. He's lost the presidency, he's lost his son. He prays for consolation from Cicero. Reading the stoics allows him to determine to be more useful and serve his country in some ways, to make some use of the gifts he's been given. Then he becomes the greatest abolitionist of his time.

[00:18:46] Jeffrey Rosen: He denounces the gag rule in Congress, and he proposes an anti-slavery amendment to the Constitution. This is before the wig party is, is fully abolitionist, inspires Frederick Douglas, who acclaim him as the greatest of the American presidents, and dies on the floor of Congress after denouncing the war with Mexico, and murmurs, "I am composed," which is a passage from Cicero suggesting finally he's achieved, not contentment, some think he said, "I'm content." But it was almost certainly, I'm composed, 'cause it's the self-mastery and self composure that defines the virtuous pursuit of happiness. Plus, I mean, there's so much more.

[00:19:27] Jeffrey Rosen: I'll stop. But he argued the Amistad case for four days, the triumph for the enslaved Africans. But it's so interesting a friend of mine just read the book and also resonated to John Quincy Adams and said, maybe I'll beat up on myself a little bit less or my own efforts to try to make some use of myself. I'll be a little more forgiving. But it's reassuring to see how hard he drove himself. Of course, he went far too much, but it's so beautiful what he achieved. The sonnets are really good too. He wrote this anti-slavery sonnet, and he didn't even transcribe it, 'cause he said it's in shorthand. If it were better, I would maybe transcribe it. We, too, shall find how fierce is the prize. Freedom will remain. It's just gorgeous. So he's my favorite founder.

[00:20:22] Jeffrey Goldberg: One of the reasons he may be your favorite goes to contradiction or an essential weakness of the entire project of lifting up the founders. John Quincy Adams was, as you say, the great abolitionist of his time. Thomas Jefferson, among others, slave-holder and many, many people he enslaved, he knew what he was doing. He created a fantasy world in his mind that said that this was not as bad as it seemed. But nevertheless, you're holding up the founders, and their virtues here, but you're also dealing with the fact that many of these men held slaves. How do you balance this out? How do you, how do you, how do you grade them on their adherence to these high values of character when they're doing what they were doing? Especially the Virginians.

[00:21:23] Jeffrey Rosen: Jefferson is even more of a shocking racist than I imagine. The level of his hypocrisy, 'cause that's the most striking thing, as you said, they knew about their hypocrisy. Jefferson listened in the Virginia legislature as Patrick Henry delivered his Give me Liberty, or Give me Death speech. Then wrote Patrick Henry said, "Is it not amazing that I myself, who believed that slavery violates the natural rights of the declaration, my self own slaves, I will not justify it. I will not attempt to, it's simple avarice or greed. I won't do with the inconvenience of living without them."

[00:22:00] Jeffrey Goldberg: You bring up one of the most interesting aspects of Patrick Henry because the, the level of self-knowledge is complete, which means that he is actually living, he, he is actually undergoing the process of self-examination, which we don't ascribe to politicians very often, then or now. It is almost something admirable about his own recognition of his own terrible adverse in a kind of way.

[00:22:24] Jeffrey Rosen: It absolutely is. He was more self-aware than Jefferson, who accused others of avarice. Jefferson would always say, "South Carolina and Georgia are refusing to let us end the international slave trade early, 'cause their avarice requires more imported enslaved people, whereas, we, in Virginia don't need that." Jefferson just had remarkable capacity for self rationalization and was always insisting that slavery should end at some point in the distant future. You asked how do you grade them? The different grades. Jefferson was unusually hypocritical. George Washington did free his own enslaved population in his lifetime, unlike Jefferson, who only freed his own children by Sally Hamming, keeping his promise to her and had the rest of his population separated and sold.

[00:23:12] Jeffrey Rosen: George with Jefferson's law tutor totally lived his ideals and freed all of his enslaved population and denounced slavery. Franklin changed. But what's so striking first is reading the moral philosophy helped me understand that they saw this conflict in moral terms. They directly viewed it as a battle between avarice and virtue. Some lived up to it and others didn't.

[00:23:38] Jeffrey Goldberg: Does it make you feel better about them, that they at least knew they were doing a terrible thing? Or could you almost say that they had diluted themselves, maybe they would've eventually had some kind of breakthrough that would've allowed? I don't know. It's a very interesting question. I don't know the answer at all.

[00:23:56] Jeffrey Rosen: It's inspiring to see how some of them did live their ideals and striking how morally serious they were. They talked about their own efforts to be virtuous constantly. They did recognize the hypocrisies when they existed. Others justified themselves and said, as James Wilson did, "I may have fallen short in any ways, but at least I was industrious."

[00:24:24] Jeffrey Goldberg: I mean, that could have been Mussolini's slogan too.

[00:24:26] Jeffrey Rosen: Absolutely. The trains are absolutely running on time. What's so striking though is that the same moral philosophy inspired Phillis Wheatley and Frederick Douglass and David Walker to denounce the system of slavery, and to insist that the founders be called up to their best ideals. The same moral philosophy inspired Mercy Otis Warren to demand the equal rights of women. So the philosophy itself is deeply inspiring, and it is the inheritance of all Americans, Black white, women and men, we, Jews and Christians, but we're humans. Some people live up to it, others don't. It's also sobering. It's so easy to excuse ourselves for our own virtue today, not recognizing that we, in similar situations, might have been just as fallen.

[00:25:25] Jeffrey Goldberg: Let's go all the way back to the beginning. The question you were aiming to answer is, where does this concept of Pursuit of Happiness come from? Obviously, in pre-declaration of independence documents the Virginia Declaration, number one, it was property instead of pursuit of, of happiness. Where did Pursuit of Happiness come into? I mean,

obviously, the book does a very good job of tracing the founders and their reading. But how does it politically move to the fore? The second part of that question is, what did they mean?

[00:26:05] Jeffrey Rosen: One of the most exciting things about this exciting project were electronic word searches. Everything is now online, and you just download the documents and search for the phrase, Pursuit of Happiness or Pursuing Happiness. I went through, started with Jefferson's reading list in his religion section. Nearly all those documents, both the ancient and the enlightenment philosophy contain the phrase The Pursuit of Happiness. Now, these are from different sources. This is not all stoic wisdom. Some is either from from Greece and Rome. Some of it is from the reasonable Christian theologians like Woolston and Toolston, who were the most popular preachers of their age and were trying to reconcile Christianity with reason. Others were from the wig literature like Cato's letters, that's the source of the blessings of liberty phrase, as well as quoting tacit as we have to think, as we will and speak as we think.

[00:26:55] Jeffrey Rosen: That contains the phrase, the pursuit of happiness. Blackstone's commentaries contains it, the major law book of its time, defining it as the essence of reason and the purpose of law and the civic Republican sources like Locke on the liberal side and Machiavelli. So it's just hiding in plain sight. What is so striking to me is that people have focused in the past about how the pursuit of happiness is a substitute for property. It's not at all. Why did Jefferson leave it out? The phrase all men are in endowed with natural rights to life, liberty and property is in Locke's second treatise, which Jefferson had. But the phrase, the pursuit of happiness is in the essay concerning human understanding, where it talks about how to be a good person. Jefferson uses the pursuit of happiness and not property because property is an alienable natural right.

[00:27:52] Jeffrey Rosen: It's a technical thing. But when you form a state of nature and move from the state of nature to civil society, you can alienate or surrender control over certain rights in order to secure the rights you've retained. You have to alienate control over property, 'cause property itself is alienable. The right to pursue happiness can't be alienated because it's part of the rights of conscience. I can't surrender to you the power to tell me what to think, 'cause I can't command myself to think as you or I or anyone, please. It's the product of my reason. So Jefferson was just being technically precise in leaving property off the list, but he wasn't being original in talking about life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness because all of the sources that I mentioned talk about the purposes of government being happiness, that's the first end of government says Bella Mackie is the happiness of the people.

[00:28:42] Jeffrey Rosen: John Adams puts that in his defenses on government. He gets it from Bella Mackie. James Wilson writes it up in this piece called The Essay Concerning the Extent of Legislative Authority, which I saw at the Pennsylvania Historical Society right before COVID. It was so thrilling to see that first sentence. Then I thought, "How am I gonna get this transcribed?" I looked, and gosh, the Quill Project put it online. It was just so cool. So I could go through and follow Wilson's footnotes and see that Jefferson had that document by his side. Of course he had

George Mason's Virginia Declaration of Rights, whose preamble sounds an awful life like the declaration and talks about the pursuit of happiness.

[00:29:22] Jeffrey Rosen: So what's so important about all this is this is not some contested academic thesis I'm putting forward. It's absolutely lousy with the idea. Every single moral source on which the founders relied from all these different traditions all use the phrase, and they all have you ask, what does it mean? They have a similar conception of it.

[00:29:45] Jeffrey Goldberg: There's a remarkable unanimity of, of what it doesn't mean for one thing. But what it means. These are not men who necessarily all got along ideologically. Philosophically.

[00:29:56] Jeffrey Rosen: They didn't get along at all. Ideologically, the division between Hamilton and Jefferson on national power versus states' rights and strict construction versus liberal construction defined American political and constitutional battles for the next 200 years. That's my next book, which I'm really psyched about. But they all read the same books. Jefferson at Williams at the College of Williams and Mary Hamilton at King's College others through private tutors. It's what they were raised on. Their mothers told them to listen to this advice. Whether people dispute how Christian were the founders, they did not embrace the classical virtues of faith, hope, and charity. It was the classical virtues of temperance, prudence, courage, and justice, because that's what they got in the moral philosophy. The Christian thinkers cited Cicero as well.

[00:30:49] Jeffrey Goldberg: I was gonna ask you though, because to the extent that you've gotten any pushback at all, which I'm sure you deal with equanimity and stoicism. The pushback you've gotten is that you are scanning the Christian influence over their philosophy and the creation of the founding documents in favor of the stoics. That though they were, some of the founders were theists not traditional Christians, they were all more profoundly influenced by Christian thought than by stoical thought.

[00:31:21] Jeffrey Rosen: Yes. That pushback is so interesting 'cause it's a remarkable effort to exaggerate and misrepresent America as a Christian nation. It's not supported by the sources, because the point is that all of the sources, including the Christian ones, all cite Cicero, the point isn't that the founders were stoics. It's that the reasonable Christians, and that's what they call themselves who were rejecting dogma.

[00:31:47] Jeffrey Goldberg: Yeah, wait. Just pause on that, 'cause I don't want people to think that you mean there's unreasonable in the current language of the day.

[00:31:54] Jeffrey Rosen: No, reasonable Christianity is a term of art in the enlightenment for people like the liberal Christian preachers who are the most popular preachers in America like Woolston and Toolson and Samuel Johnson, for goodness sake. It's a really tendentious effort to

misrepresent the core of America's founding as Christian, because Samuel Johnson, who's the major textbook writer who Ben Franklin assigns at the University of Pennsylvania for their core curriculum uses the phrase the pursuit of happiness many, many times. He gets it from Woolston, who Franklin Prince and all of them think that Christianity is consistent with reason. That reason is virtue, which is living in accordance with our best interests.

[00:32:38] Jeffrey Goldberg: Reasonable Christianity, then being the synthesis of enlightenment, understanding of reason, and Christian doctrine?

[00:32:43] Jeffrey Rosen: Completely in no way denying the Christian faith, arguing that it's completely consistent with.

[00:32:48] Jeffrey Goldberg: Right.

[00:32:48] Jeffrey Rosen: But rejecting dogma and ritual, and what Jefferson called monkish superstition. These people are very opposed to the authority of the established national church. But what's so striking is that the people today who are insisting that America was Christian at its founding, cite an alien tradition that comes from Augustine. They're neo Augustinians, and they invoke a natural law tradition that remarkably doesn't appear in this book 'cause the founders never cited it. They cited the liberal Christian thinkers as well as all the others, ones the stoics, the civic Republicans, the Blackstone legal theorists and the wigs. Again, all of these are citing, and it's not just stoics, Cicero is a synthesizer of Greek and Roman philosophy. So he's sometimes called a stoic, sometimes a skeptic more technically precise.

[00:33:41] Jeffrey Rosen: But he's getting it all from Pythagoras, who turns out to be the core innovator of all Greek and Roman moral philosophy. Instigates the reason, passion distinction that Plato then epitomizes in the metaphor of the charioteer. Then they all, like legal schools today of Originalism versus Textualism, the stoics and the skeptics and so forth dispute on matters that are not ultimately important to the consonants, the agreement about the importance of using our reason to moderate and master our unreasonable emotions.

[00:34:17] Jeffrey Goldberg: Can I ask you a question about being an author who has a central thesis challenged? Do you find yourself in a better place? This is a serious question. I know that it will cause some laughter, but do you find you are better able to control your emotions when you read a criticism of your own work about controlling your emotions?

[00:34:41] Jeffrey Rosen: No. It's a crucial question.

[00:34:44] Jeffrey Goldberg: I mean, are you different after having absorbed the lessons that you're writing about?

[00:34:50] Jeffrey Rosen: I really am. There was a critical review in the Wall Street Journal over the weekend. It said I wasn't Christian enough. That really is, it talked about the pagan influences of the, of, of the stoics and said that I should have cared more about the Christian sources.

[00:35:09] Jeffrey Goldberg: It was a review. Can you try to contextualize it? 'Cause it didn't actually have those words, Jeff Rosen isn't Christian enough although I guess you were reading between the lines.

[00:35:21] Jeffrey Goldberg: It was a classic kind of review where the reviewer is not reviewing the book in question. The reviewer has a point that he wants to make a larger ideological point in the culture, and is going to ride the book in order to get to that point. He actually was pretty respectful of the book overall, but just says that you misunderstand the crucial role of Christianity in the formation of American ideals and American documents.

[00:35:49] Jeffrey Rosen: The old Jeff would've gotten very huffy and outraged.

[00:35:53] Jeffrey Goldberg: What would the old Jeff have done?

[00:35:55] Jeffrey Rosen: Just like John Quincy Adams.

[00:35:56] Jeffrey Goldberg: Incredible Hulk kind of stuff?

[00:35:57] Jeffrey Rosen: Beating myself up and, oh my God, and what's my mom gonna think and that sort of thing. But no, the main thing that I was struck by is the documents speak for themselves. His quarrel is not with me, it's with Thomas Jefferson's reading list. I just read the books on Jefferson's reading list and found that they all contained the phrase, the pursuit of happiness, and found that they all cited the same ancient sources. So I thought it was revelatory. I've also come to understand that I wouldn't have thought that a channeling the core moral philosophy of the founding would be controversial, but there is a division just as there is on the, between the left and the right among conservatives between common good and virtue conservatives who really take an Augustinian approach and think that there's a single revealed truth that people should embrace. It's the revealed truth of the Christian church and those and classical liberals. I think I hit a nerve.

[00:36:56] Jeffrey Goldberg: I wanna ask you this large question, shifting topics a little bit. As I'm reading this, as I'm listening to you, and we're in this place, we're looking at what we're looking at, we know that our politicians, 250 years ago and it's almost 250 years ago actually were grappling with great, weighty philosophical issues. They were grappling even in public in a kind of way with their own frailties and trying to better themselves in public. There's a part of reading this, and I'm not trying to discourage anyone from reading it because it will make you a

better person, but there's a part that, that you come to and you think, "My God, what we've lost in our discourse in this country," where it's very hard. I'm not talking about the most obvious character who doesn't seem particularly self-aware on the national scene.

I'm not even talking about him. I just mean there's no room or space or time for American leaders to sit and read and walk along the Potomac in the early hours of the morning and think about how they are going to be good in pursuit of their ultimate happiness, but be good, including good to others during the day that is to come so that they can make the country a better place. We're in a pretty debased place in our politics right now. I'm not saying it's necessarily the most debate that's ever been. 1859 was pretty lousy. But did you have that feeling that I had that, boy imagine if we had leaders who could read Cicero, understand Cicero, try to make themselves better by following Cicero's rules for happiness.

[00:38:52] Jeffrey Rosen: Absolutely. The most inspiring part of the Jefferson Adams story is their old age, and they fought, it was the bloodiest, most contested election in American history at that time. The first partisan election, really serious threats of violence the whiskey rebel, I mean, very, very serious times. They make up 'cause of Abigail who brings them back together. What do they want to talk about? Eastern philosophy. Adams is so excited to learn that Pythagoras may have traveled and read the Hindu Vedas with the Masters of the East. The thing he most wants to know is whether Joseph Priestley, the great utilitarian lived long enough to complete his translation of the Bhagavad Gita, and Jefferson says, "Good news, he lived, he finished it. I'll get you a copy from Paris." Jefferson and Adams are so thrilled that he's gonna get that book.

[00:39:45] Jeffrey Rosen: It's just so moving to think of how excited John Adams was to learn about that connection and then how easy it is for me, and I can just sit on my couch and read the Bhagavad Gita, and read those books. 1859, as we were just saying before the show started, terrible. The darkest moment for our country's history, and yet, the debates between Webster and Hanes in 1830 which are prelude to secession and introduced the South Carolina Doctrine nullification, which they got from Jefferson. They're quoting Shakespeare and Banquet. They are trading meaningful illusions and metaphors. The level is so high, they were so educated and not all of them went to fancy schools. They read it in their homes. Lincoln read it. He got the McGuffey reader, which he would just read in his log cabin and Frederick Douglass, my God, if you want any rebuke every morning that I actually browse rather than read.

[00:40:47] Jeffrey Rosen: Think of Frederick Douglass. What was the point where he felt most crushed in his liberty? It was when his wicked master told his mistress not to teach him to read. He felt the enslavement of my mind was even greater than the enslavement on my body. He snuck out and prayed, and paid boys on the streets of Baltimore with bread to teach him to read. Then he got this book called The Columbian Orator, which is summed up the classical wisdom with little excerpts. That inspired him to be the greatest abolitionist of, of all time. Books were so

precious to them, and we can do it too. All we need is the discipline to read. It's absolutely extraordinary.

[00:41:27] Jeffrey Goldberg: We can do it too, except it seems impossible in this age to imagine our political leadership being contemplative. It's not just social media, and it's not just the coming of AI, but it's those things and many more things. The whole system seems to be built to work against your virtuous instincts as a politician if you possess them.

[00:41:55] Jeffrey Rosen: Of course it does. We've just been talking about personal self-discipline. Social media has obviously changed the whole media landscape of public discourse in a way that's the founder's nightmare. We've talked a lot about how Madison hoped that a class of journalists he called the literati would slowly diffuse reason across the land like a Atlantic magazine for the 18th century. People would read the Federalist Papers and discuss in coffee houses and just social media, the speed of discourse and rage to engage. The fact that you're rewarded for playing to your most inflamed and fascist base rather than coolly, deliberating, and reading makes even readers in politics difficult to talk to the other side.

[00:42:46] Jeffrey Rosen: So it's very hard. But on a personal level, look, I've never read this deeply before. This is a very weird project that, literally, just kind of came to me in COVID. It's a habit, I think is what it is. Many of us read when we were kids in school, and then you get out of the habit. I see some nods over there, and it's just making time, which requires rules, back to Franklin. I wanna say it again, it is a radical act of self-assertion to read deeply. I'm saying that to the kids we talked to at the National Constitution Center and to all of you.

[00:43:21] Jeffrey Rosen: It's so empowering and it's not intuitive. You have to kind of set aside a pattern for it. Maybe it can save us as individuals. Whether it can save us as a society is a deep question. Let's now talk about the fact that the founders weren't sure that the experiment could work. When they said there wasn't enough virtue, they meant on mass.

[00:43:44] Jeffrey Goldberg: Right.

[00:43:44] Jeffrey Rosen: Are enough people gonna be able to control themselves to make the thing work?

[00:43:47] Jeffrey Goldberg: Well, we've talked in the past about Madison and his very skeptical nature about a very skeptical view of human nature and whether passion could ever be controlled long enough, or whether self-restraint could ever be exercised by large enough people, large enough group of people to actually have a functioning democracy. I think that is the acute challenge right now. I wanna stay on this question 'cause I don't want to get into a mode of over romanticizing the founders. I find it pretty romantic already, and so I have to check myself, right? But the question, it's an impossible question.

[00:44:29] Jeffrey Goldberg: If men and women of the founder's character, intelligence, curiosity, self-awareness, or in our politics today, in our current system, could they have survived and flourished, or would what we have developed over time, the things that Madison was so worried about a couple of hundred years ago have come to pass, would anybody, would Ben Franklin be crushed? Would he be making TikTok videos attacking whoever he'd be attacking would that force be crushed out of them?

[00:45:11] Jeffrey Rosen: Yes. They couldn't survive in a system where they're directly accountable and amenable to Factionism where they had to talk fast. It was the structural incentives. If men were angels point, the system is devised not to imagine that people are perfect or not, but they'll respond to the incentives they have and by checking and separating power and slowing down deliberation. The Constitution itself is a document that fears direct democracy and wants to prevent our leaders from being-

[00:45:41] Jeffrey Goldberg: Didn't Madison believe that no president should be in direct communication with the American people? Should it go through the Congress?

[00:45:50] Jeffrey Rosen: Absolutely no tweeting presidents don't address them directly.

[00:45:56] Jeffrey Goldberg: See the idea of a State of The Union Address all the hoop law around that would've been anathema to him?

[00:46:02] Jeffrey Rosen: Jefferson reads it. But it's anathema and the rise of the demagogic president, which begins with Andrew Jackson, who was not exactly important to get, what's the definition of a demagogue? Let's say an ambitious leader who flatters a portion of the people to install himself in permanent power and uses violence to break up the union or incites insurrection. That was the definition that both Hamilton and Jefferson had. I did find this amazing letter where Jefferson says, in the future, a president's gonna lose an election by a few votes, cry foul, enlist the states who voted for him and install himself for life. It's just predicting the future very strongly, if that's the definition, they're trying to avoid direct communication between candidates and the people.

[00:46:51] Jeffrey Rosen: Jackson, who, when push comes to shove, rejects nullification and defends the Union, Liberty and Union, but does insist on direct communication and does listening tours of the people. Then Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt insists that the president's a steward of the people for the first time, rejecting the Madisonian model. But then comes radio and FDR and mass communication makes possible a national demagogue in a way that it wasn't before radio. Now this.

[00:47:24] Jeffrey Goldberg: Social media and AI talk about these phenomena, phenomenon in the context of what we're ultimately talking about, which is finding leaders who can exercise

self-restraint and self-knowledge. There's a very interesting discussion in the book about all of this in the context of the social media age. I think people wanna hear that.

[00:47:53] Jeffrey Rosen: Well, certainly social media is the antithesis of the republic of reason to the degree that, remember, the core definition of virtue is impulse control. It's the marshmallow test. It's waiting. If you take the marshmallow now you get one. If you wait 15 minutes, you get two. The kids who waited had tremendous success. To the degree that social media rewards, likes, shares immediate gratification rather than sober second thoughts, deliberation, and reason, it's the antithesis of our current age that social media also tends to depress and alienate and make kids feel alone, deep reading and face-to-face interactions are the opposite.

[00:48:41] Jeffrey Rosen: AI is a whole new area, but it's a challenge to reason itself and to truth in a way that we're just beginning to understand. The inability to distinguish between truth and falsehood with AI is as radical a challenge to the enlightenment idea of reason as social media is itself. But there is a faith that with deep reading and deliberation, the truth will emerge, 'cause after all, the definition of virtue, the definition of divine, of divine harmony is living according to nature in order to pursue the truth. There's some faith that, given time enough for deliberation, the truth will emerge. That's why the battle today for the liberal idea, which is really the enlightenment idea, is so serious.

We're in the Constitution Center. I might as well ask you about the Constitution. Two cases in front of the Supreme Court right now. Can you give us your view of which way, the first one is the Colorado case that I'm curious about the idea that the 14th Amendment would allow for Donald Trump to be thrown off the ballot. Then of course, the second one, if you want to address it. I just think people would be interested. I'd be interested to know what you think where we're at.

[00:50:04] Jeffrey Rosen: Well the only interesting person in this room to talk about the case is Judge Luttig, who's here in the first row in his written such.

[00:50:11] Jeffrey Goldberg: That's our second hour will be.

[00:50:13] Jeffrey Rosen: Please check out his extraordinarily illuminating briefs and commentary. We did a great podcast on it, where we also presented the other side from Josh Blackman. I mean, I can sum up the arguments, but this isn't the podcast, so I'm not gonna do that. We all listen to the argument and it looks like they're gonna throw it out. So that's what we got.

[00:50:33] Jeffrey Goldberg: Right. The constitution, we've talked about this before. The Constitution, if you had to describe its purpose in a sentence, it is, we don't want a king. Here's

the system to prevent us having a king. Is that fair? That's a crude version of what the founders were aiming for?

[00:50:56] Jeffrey Rosen: That's a great version. I mean, the better version is right outside the building. We, the people of the United States in order to form a more perfect union.

[00:51:02] Jeffrey Goldberg: I like mine better. Yeah.

Yours sums it up, which is that the power is the people. That's the thing. That was James Wilson's brilliant insight. He's so underappreciated for having been the great apostle of popular sovereignty, greater than anyone else. The power is not in the king or in the President or Congress or in the States. The power belongs to we, the people. We parcel it out to different institutions of the federal government and among the federal governments and the states. Why? In order to secure the blessings of liberty, achieving the purposes of the declaration, which are to protect our equal liberty. We form government by consent. That is why it's so important in America's 250 that we think what these basic ideas are, so that we can learn them and understand them, and see if we embrace them.

[00:51:55] Jeffrey Rosen: The Declaration says we're created equal with natural rights of liberty, life, and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted, deriving their just powers from the consent of the government, liberty, equality, natural rights, democracy. How do we do that through the Constitution? We ensure that that power is in the people. We separate it among the branches. We divide it between the federal government and the states. We have an independent judiciary and a rule of law, federalism, separation of powers, the Bill of Rights, and the rule of law. It's all there. That's why it's so good to think together and study and come together and be inspired by the fact that this is a battle for the American idea. It's an idea. It's an experiment. It won't work. Did you see that Emerson came up with the idea of the American idea?

[00:52:52] Jeffrey Goldberg: One of our most prominent staff writers.

[00:52:54] Jeffrey Rosen: He was a hit.

[00:52:56] Jeffrey Goldberg: Hasn't done much lately, I have to say.

[00:52:58] Jeffrey Rosen: He defined it in the Atlantic as the American idea emancipation. It was, it was, it was liberty. It was freedom. What kind of freedom? Freedom of the mind. Where did Emerson get it? From the stoics and the Bhagavad Gita. He saw the connection between the Gita and the stoics better than any American philosopher of the 19th century, although Adams had noted the same connection. That's what's so exciting. The American idea is the pursuit of happiness, which is the pursuit of reason, which is the pursuit of freedom.

[00:53:31] Jeffrey Goldberg: But, I have to say, like, coming back to this and I want to wanna note this as we come to the close, I'm gonna have you read your sonnet on the Bhagavad Gita, by the way, whether you want to or not. But it's very interesting. I'll have to do that in a minute, but I want to note this. We're talking about really one thing, ultimately. When we were driving up from DC today, you, as you enter Pennsylvania, there's a sign, Pennsylvania, Pursue Your Happiness. Kind of made me a little bit, made my wife and I pretty depressed because it didn't seem like they were getting the point of what the pursuit, it sounds like, follow your bliss, or that song, if it makes you happy, it can't be that bad sort of thing?

[00:54:13] Jeffrey Goldberg: You do you. It sounded more of that than what you would want the state of Pennsylvania to stand for. But we're talking about, we're talking about the same thing here. We're talking about finding a citizenry and a leadership that understands happiness as derived through the pursuit of virtue, through the pursuit of self-restraint. I think it comes down to what we were just talking about. Everything is built around the idea that we're all going to restrain our worst impulses, our dictatorial impulses.

[00:54:48] Jeffrey Goldberg: George Washington set the standard when he went back to the farm, Cincinnatus. We've come a long way from Cincinnatus to having a presumptive candidate, Republican candidate who doesn't want to go back to the farm at all and wants to cheat his way back into power. That's very un-American, in my humble opinion. The question is, how do you as an educator, you're the leader of this institution, how do you and others get this message out before it's too late?

[00:55:27] Jeffrey Rosen: By having conversations like this, by convening all of our phenomenal teachers who are here tonight, and I'm so moved that the members of our teacher advisory council who are teaching this wonderful constitution one-on-one class are here. By you incredible lifelong learners, how moving it is to be a part of this amazing institution? Have all of you come and listen to the podcasts and join and be lifelong learners? What we're inspiring people to do is be like all of you who are just taking the time to educate yourself because that it is making the best use of your talents. It is the definition of the pursuit of happiness. We need to have a radical movement for learning and exciting curiosity about the American idea and the Constitution and the declaration that will inspire people to wanna learn more.

[00:56:20] Jeffrey Rosen: Look, we don't know what will happen with politics. History turns on small contingencies, and wars begin and empires fall based on the smallest of happenstance or a few votes here, or a choice there. So no individual can say what's gonna happen with our democracy. These are very serious times, but we can empower ourselves and create this movement, this movement of curiosity and light and learning about the American idea, which will model exactly what the founders hoped for. Regardless of what happens with our democracy, we will elevate and inspire ourselves.

[00:57:05] Jeffrey Goldberg: This is called Notes on the Bhagavad Gita Book Two Self-Realization. Would you read that for everyone?

[00:57:10] Jeffrey Rosen: Neil Shaw is here. Neil is a friend and a member of our board. A couple of years ago, Neil said to me, read the Bhagavad Gita. I read it as a kid, and it's so meaningful, and it just summed up the core of the wisdom so beautifully for me. Self-realization, the wise see the eternal self in all. They have renounced every selfish desire, not once disturbed by grief or pleasures call, they live free from lust, fear and anger, always act without selfish attachment or desire for the fruits of your actions. Desire can burn to anger. Detachment allows an even minds satisfactions. Reality lies in the eternal, not in the impermanent we're seeing. Trained body, mind, senses, thoughts, internal and unite with a self in all being. Renounce selfish desire of I, mine, me. Enjoy freedom and immortality so glorious.

[00:58:28] Jeffrey Rosen: Hmm, so glorious. Gandhi summed that up in the phrase, renounce and enjoy. That's the core of the wisdom. Adams tried to sum up the core of the wisdom too. If you need any greater evidence that this is not a Christian or Buddhist or Jewish nation, but one founded on the deep connections among the great spiritual and wisdom traditions, you see Adams saying that it all can be expressed in the hymn of Cleon. He said, "My understanding, my faith at this point in my life is expressed in the myth of hymn of Cleon, love God and all his creatures rejoice in all things." It's just beautiful. It's so true. It's the truth that different people find in different ways and different traditions, but it summed up in that Gita poem so well.

[00:59:15] Jeffrey Goldberg: As we close, I would like to say in the most humble way that I too work on sonnets in my spare time.

[00:59:24] Jeffrey Goldberg: But unlike you I go to ChatGPT to write my sonnets for me.

[00:59:31] Jeffrey Goldberg: I want to read you my assignment to ChatGPT was, and by the way, I do recognize that ChatGPT could be the end of reality as we know that large learning models could be the end of reality as we understand it. It is yet another challenge to our democracy. I also have to say that, and this is the challenge of it. I can see the good in it, and I certainly can see how mesmerizing it is. So my assignment to ChatGPT was, "Write a sonnet about Jeffrey Rosen's love of the US Constitution, and also of sonnets." In approximately one second, this is what it came up with.

[01:00:17] Jeffrey Rosen: Okay.

[01:00:18] Jeffrey Goldberg: Are you ready?

[01:00:19] Jeffrey Rosen: No, I'm not.

[01:00:19] Jeffrey Goldberg: No, you're not, are you?

[01:00:20] Jeffrey Rosen: Definitely not.

[01:00:21] Jeffrey Goldberg: In Rosen's heart, the Constitution reigns. A cherished love, enduring and profound. It's words like poetry and flowing strains with freedom's melody, it's truths, resound, scary, right?

[01:00:33] Jeffrey Rosen: I'm out of business-sonnet business.

[01:00:36] Jeffrey Goldberg: Within its verses, liberty is found in every clause, a promise to uphold. A beacon for the nation ever bound to justice rights in virtues, manifold. This is where it gets really interesting. Yet in his soul, his soul, another love takes hold. The sonnets form with elegance and grace. in 14 lines, a story to unfold a timeless art in its own sacred space. So let Jeffrey weave his passions hand in hand, the constitution's love and sonnets grand.

[01:01:08] Jeffrey Rosen: Wow. Thank you, ChatGPT. That's amazing.

[01:01:12] Jeffrey Goldberg: It's miraculous and terrifying. It's true.

[01:01:17] Jeffrey Rosen: What's so impressive about that? It incorporated the formal rule that I learned from Barry Edelstein, which I didn't. The third verse, there's supposed to be a verso or switch where you start with one argument. So it had the switch. It sandwell too, the meter was nice.

[01:01:32] Jeffrey Goldberg: No yeah, we're in trouble.

[01:01:34] Jeffrey Rosen: Absolutely.

[01:01:34] Jeffrey Goldberg: But you can make yourself more human by reading this book. You will learn so much. It is an incredibly lively read. It exposes you in the most enthusiastic and erudite way possible to the thinkers who influenced the thinkers who created our reality today. Jeff, it's great. It's a great accomplishment. We thank you very much for having me here and for doing this.

[01:01:40] Jeffrey Rosen: Thank you so much. Thank you all for coming. Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you.

[01:01:49] Tanaya Tauber: This program was held live at the National Constitution Center on February 19th, 2024, and was presented in partnership with the Atlantic. This episode was produced by Lana Ulrich, Bill Pollock, and me, Tanaya Tauber. It was engineered by advanced

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