

## Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness

July 2, 2017 - By Joyce Ramay

Our theme for July is Liberation. So let us begin with excerpts from the Declaration of Independence –  
July 4, 1776 - Thomas Jefferson

“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**.

“That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the **consent of the governed**.

“That whenever any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely **to effect their safety and happiness.**”

Today we honor the **Declaration of Independence**. These words have influenced the hopes, dreams and actions of millions men and women around the world.

We all know some of the history of the Declaration. It's mostly **his-story** – 56 men got together and declared freedom from England. Freedom for men, and most particularly white men. But it was a huge risk that they took, for the penalty for treason was beheading. They believed so wholeheartedly in these principles that, as stated in the final words, they were willing to **“mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.”**

We appreciate those brave and dedicated men for what they did.

On holidays, we ask: what does this day mean in our personal lives? How is Independence Day relevant? Why does the event matter, not only to us, but also to our country and other nations?

Today, I begin by telling not **history**, but her-story – or rather, my story, of the 4th of July.

I remember my patriotic holidays in Owatonna, Minnesota – a town founded in 1854 in what had been Sioux territory. The city was named after a Sioux princess who had been cured at our local mineral springs. Our celebrations often included picnics, with roasted hot dogs, potato salad and cake, at the same Mineral Springs. During my earliest years, those gatherings were held mostly by children, women, and older men – since the men from 18 to 35 were away fighting in World War II. Those were solemn times, and often sad times for many of the people who came together.

In the middle of downtown was a band stand at Central Park, where the mayors spoke and the musicians played, and our town's only black man Harry Brown sang ***God Bless America***. If you have seen the ***Music Man***, you get the idea. Meredith Wilson, who wrote that musical, was from Mason City, Iowa, which was a few miles south of us. My brother Bill, who was 9 years older than me, played trumpet in the school band, so at home I was surrounded by American songs and marches, including those of John Philip Sousa. Later Bill joined the Air Force, and played in the national Air Force band, before taking up aircraft mechanics, which led him to being in the Korean War.

Sometimes we visited Geneva, a town of about 300 people, where my mother had grown up, to see her family. My great-grandmother Goodnature had been born on the 4th of July, 1856, in Springfield, Illinois. She remembered seeing Abraham Lincoln when he ran for President. Shortly after that, her family moved west to settle in Minnesota under the Morrill Land Grant program, which distributed acreage to white settlers – without regard to the Indians, of course.

My grandfather, who also lived in Geneva, told me about his grandfather, who had joined the Union Army with the Minnesota volunteers, and had served under General Sherman to save the Union in the Civil War. Grandpa Frost organized Geneva's festivities in an open lot across from his gas station, showing free

movies, and selling Cracker Jacks, Peanuts, Coca Cola and Ice Cream Cones. Those were wonderful times of celebration. We had a lot of family appreciation for American history

In 7th grade, I started attending St. Mary's Catholic school, where I had my best teacher ever – Sister Theonilla. She was in love with American history: the founding fathers, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution. She made us memorize parts of them, so that some of the words would be engraved in our memories. It was because of her that I later studied history at the University of Minnesota.

I remember a school pageant that she planned in which our chorus sang *America the Beautiful*, and I was dressed as the Statue of Liberty in a flowing blue silk gown, a crown on my head and a torch in my hand. She also had us memorize the poem that Doug just read from the Statue of Liberty – so that we would recognize that we were all immigrants who came from foreign lands, seeking liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

On the front table I have placed a replica of the Statue of Liberty. It was bought by my second husband, Pervez Murad, when he visited the United States in 1967 to attend a summer conference of international businessmen at Harvard. That is the year that we met. At that time, his homeland Pakistan was ruled by its first military dictator General Ayub Khan. Pervez was impressed by what he learned and discovered, both at Harvard and in travels around America. The freedom of our press, the openness of our society, the way that our government worked, and our civil rights movement – they all made a deep impact. The only souvenir that he took with him was this Statue of Liberty.

When he returned to Pakistan, he supported those who formed the Pakistan People's Party to oppose military rule. As a result, Pakistan had a democracy from 1971 until 1977. Then a second dictator, General Zia ul Haq, took over and hanged Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the leader of the People's Party.

General Zia helped to lay the foundation for religious fundamentalism and ruled ruthlessly until he died in a plane crash in the summer of 1988. That was shortly before Pervez returned to America, when we were married in October. In the same month, Benazir Bhutto was elected Prime Minister under the newly restored democracy. She was the first woman to lead a Muslim nation.

For many years, Pervez proudly displayed this Statue of Liberty in his home. We only had 2-1/2 years together before he died, but I stayed on in Lahore, and later married Haneef Ramay, who had been a founder and the leading ideologist of the People's Party. When we moved back to America, one of the only things I brought with me from Pakistan was this Statue of Liberty – it had been treasured by both Pervez and Haneef. They were genuinely inspired by the history of America, our founding fathers, and Thomas Jefferson, and they both did whatever they could to bring the dream of liberty to their country.

I am sharing this with you because we often don't realize how important America's history and example have been to so many people. A hundred countries based their own declarations of independence on the one that Jefferson wrote in 1776. Liberty truly matters, and America, has been a beacon light to the world, represented by the torch in this statue. It is a symbol of what is possible when people develop a love and respect for their brothers and sisters, and for liberty.

For most of my life I have been proud to be an American. We have abundant blessings, and despite our flaws, we have accomplished many wonderful things, and have had some truly admirable leaders. Now, however, I must admit, that I find it difficult to say the pledge of allegiance. I have found a way to do it in good conscience – at the end, where we say, “with liberty and justice for all” I say out loud two additional words – “I hope!”

What about **Happiness**? One of the things that I learned in my studies was that originally our Declaration was to include the inalienable rights of *life, liberty and property* – based upon John Locke's concepts.

But Thomas Jefferson was an enlightened person who knew there was something more important than economics – so he substituted *pursuit of happiness* in place of property. This was a radically new political vision - it was a revolutionary way of looking at human rights and the role of government.

**Pursuit of happiness** - Wow – what a difference that can make in our lives if we take it seriously! Joy and happiness matter more than property - money and houses and cars and material things.

I have been with quite a few people in their dying days, and none of them expressed gratitude for all the stuff they had accumulated. What they mentioned most often were the loves of their lives, meaningful relationships, and some transcendental experiences of sensing the beauty, grandeur and the sacredness of life and the universe.

Recently a friend from UUCFM sent me an email saying that she was preparing for her memorial service, if and when it would be needed. She asked for permission to use the words that I have after my name on my emails:

**To live is to love.**

**To love is to live.**

**Live and love completely.**

Of course I gave her permission and told her the story of those words. On New Year's Day, 2006, my husband Haneef Ramay died in Lahore, Pakistan. When I left the hospital, as I entered the door to our home, the phone was ringing – it was Benazir Bhutto calling from Dubai, where she was living in exile -during Pakistan's third military dictatorship, that of General Pervez Musharraf. She had heard immediately of my husband's death and expressed her condolences.

When I hung up the phone, I went to my room, took out a paper and pen, and wrote those words. I felt so profoundly grateful that we had lived and loved completely. It was all that mattered at that moment.

To put it another way, here is some wisdom from an email that Bill Benyak sent to me this week. "Life is not a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty and well preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside, thoroughly used up, totally worn out, and loudly proclaiming, WOW! WHAT A RIDE!"

Today, let us reflect upon Thomas Jefferson telling us that life and liberty truly matter if we use them to pursue happiness – not just for ourselves, but for everyone! And then contemplate on what really brings joy and happiness.

Rev. CJ McGregor gave a sermon on *Heaven on Earth*. Some of you have probably heard me say, "I'm living in paradise, and I didn't even have to die to get there." Take a look around yourselves today. You are surrounded by some marvelous, talented, and loving people. We are blessed with clean air to breathe. We have clean water to drink, and plentiful food to eat. We have so much to be grateful for compared with so many people on our planet. Every morning I start my day by opening the door, looking to the East, and saying, "Thank you, God. Thank you, Sun. Thank you for life."

But gratitude is only one of the steps towards happiness. We have to do our parts to protect and nurture all the beauty and life on our Earth. What good is life and liberty if we let life and liberty be destroyed for others? Don't they also deserve life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness? Don't we have an obligation to our children, our grandchildren, future generations, and all living plants and animals to do what we can to protect and enhance the many gifts that have been given to us?

We are not here just for ourselves. I read recently about two philosophers talking about the meaning of life. One said, "There is no meaning or purpose, all is random chance." The second said, "No. Humans do have a purpose. We are meant to be here to make dogs happy."

Think about it – that's a joke – but isn't it true in a sense? Part of my purpose in life is to be walked by my dog – to make him happy! If chameleons come in my house, instead of killing them, I catch them in a paper cup and place them safely outdoors – perhaps that makes them happy. I gather up the surplus mangos from my trees and place them by the mail box so that neighbors can be happy eating them.

And maybe, occasionally, I can do something that makes **you** happy.

The pursuit of happiness should be all encompassing – not just for you and me, but for everyone. And it does not always have to involve dramatic big projects – it can be done in many ways. Every day you are given choices on how to use your time, talent and treasures. You can waste them. You can use them for power, greed, and domination. Or you can use them in ways that bring happiness to others.

As we celebrate today, let us not forget those at home and abroad who do not yet share in rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We recently held an Adult Education Forum on Transcendentalist Frederick Douglass, a renowned former slave who became a friend of Emerson and adviser to Abraham Lincoln. Here are a few of his words on the 4th of July:

**“What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”** The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn. To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony.”

So we must never become too proud and self-congratulatory about our freedoms. Our minister, CJ McGregor has led three Teaching Tuesdays about White Supremacy.

I wish that more of you would have been present, to have your consciousness raised about the tremendous deficiencies that still exist, and to realize that now we seem to be going in reverse in this matter of rights for all.

Life does present challenges, struggles, temptations, disease and death. But you have a choice about how you face them. You not only have a choice, but you also have a responsibility to do whatever you can to make this a better world.

A few years ago, I gave a sermon on my *Declaration of Interdependence*. I believe that it's time to move beyond independence towards voluntary interdependence, in which we can truly apply all of our UUA Principles, by drawing upon all the Sources that are listed in our Covenant.

Recently some of you attended UUA General Assembly. I hope that you have come back motivated by a message like the one that St. Francis of Assisi received – “Rebuild My Church!” Now that is one way that we can pursue happiness together, for the greater good of all – cheerfully and with joy! Let us begin today to enrich our lives through love and service. May it be so!

Salaam, Shalom, Peace be Upon You.

**Closing Words** - Thomas Jefferson

**Our greatest happiness does not depend on  
the condition of life in which chance has placed us,  
but is always the result of  
a good conscience,  
good health,  
(good) occupation,  
and freedom in all just pursuits.**