

“The Pursuit of Happiness”

Reading & reflection offered by Reverend Carolyn Patierno

July 1, 2012

From *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*

By Jeannette Winterson

As I try to understand how life works – and why some people cope better than others with adversity – I come back to something to do with saying yes to life, which is love of life, however inadequate, and love for the self, however found. Not in the me-first way that is the opposite of life and love, but with a salmon-like determination to swim upstream, however choppy upstream is, because this is your stream ...

Which brings me back to happiness, and a quick look at the word.

Our primary meaning now is the feeling of pleasure and contentment; a buzz, a zestiness, the tummy upwards feel of good and right and relaxed and alive ... you know ...

But earlier meanings build in the *hap* – in [Middle and Old English] the chance or fortune, good or bad, that falls to you. Hap is your lot in life, the hand you are given to play.

How you meet your ‘hap’ will determine whether or not you can be ‘happy’.

What the Americans, in their [Declaration of Independence] call ‘the right to the pursuit of happiness’ (please note, not ‘the right to happiness’), is the right to swim upstream, salmon-wise.

Pursuing happiness ... is not at all the same as being happy – which I think is fleeting, dependent on circumstances, and a bit bovine.

If the sun is shining, stand in it – yes, yes, yes. Happy times are great, but happy times pass – they have to - because time passes.

The pursuit of happiness is more elusive; it is life-long, and it is not goal-centered.

What you are pursuing is meaning – a meaningful life. There’s the *hap* – the fate, the draw that is yours, and it isn’t fixed, but changing, the course of the stream, or dealing new cards, whatever metaphor you want to use – that’s going to take a lot of energy. There are times when it will go so wrong that you will barely be alive, and times when you realize that being barely alive, on your own terms, is better than living a bloated half life on someone else’s terms.

The pursuit isn’t all or nothing – it’s all AND nothing. Like all Quest Stories.

.....

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.

Let's say right off – our founding document is sublime, yes. And yes, it is as flawed as it is sublime. The Declaration of Independence is flawed in its failure to assure that the rights deemed as “unalienable” were not immediately extended to all: indigenous people who were, after all, here first and who late in the document are referred to as “merciless Indian savages”; African people held as slaves; or women, whether indigenous, African, or white. It took the long span of a bloody century – and then some - for those wrongs to be righted. And still, the promise and the hope that was held up throughout the struggle for true equality was the one written and signed in Philadelphia in 1776.

And of course, there is still – and will always be, alas - work to be done to assure these rights are upheld. One need only take notice of the week just passed to witness how precarious is the definition of “unalienable”.

And still.

The audacity. The Declaration of Independence's audacity never ceases to amaze me. It's an audacity that solidified a particular American sensibility that the pursuit of happiness is an essential and self-evident human right just as sure as life and liberty.

But we get confused. “Don't worry! Be happy!” When really, what we are guaranteed is the pursuit – as pointed out by the smart British writer. The confusion may be what foments an unattractive sense of entitlement. Because the pursuit – the quest – is more essential than happiness itself. And the pursuit is what we are guaranteed.

Meaning. That's what we seek. For in meaning is the source of life ... the reason to throw your legs out from under the covers and begin the day.

Our charge is to handle the hand we have been dealt – the “hap” part of “happy”. And sometimes – who are we kidding – *most* times the pursuit, the quest is not a straight line or easy. But we learn. Let's just say that you are three treatments down in a six treatment chemotherapy regimen. It's going okay save for the difficult side effects that follow the first two treatments. But once that is resolved there is a sense of relief – fleeting as it is for different side effects present themselves. But these side effects are more easily handled, so yes, the sense of relief sticks and in this relief, there is meaning. Still, if someone were to say to me, “Don't worry! Be happy!” right about now, I would respond in a way that would embarrass you. But I'm on the path. I'm in pursuit. It is the hap that I have been dealt, surprising though it is, so down the path, up the stream I go.

And here you are. Heaven knows what burdens you bring and where they have placed you on your own pursuit. We're all salmon and we best swim upstream as best we can.

Are we *happy* salmon? The salmon swimming upstream is saying yes to life. That is all. That is all we must do each day: say “yes” to life and by doing so, saying “yes” to love of life. When we are dealt a surprising and difficult hand – and it happens all the time – it’s not the time to wonder if we’re happy or not. It’s the time to pull out a whole different kind of energy that we likely did not know we even had in our bag of tricks. It is time for a quest. You may barely be alive – emotionally or physically – but still, you’ll be mucking through and learning and finding meaning on your own terms and THAT, my friends, trumps happy (in the bovine sense of the word) any day of the week.

And Americans are all about the quest. To paraphrase the poet, “AFOOT and light-hearted, I take to the open road, Healthy, free, the world before me” ... off we go seeking. We all come to look for America and no matter how lost we may feel. We look up and out at the geography for we are in pursuit. We are in pursuit of meaning and yes, happiness. Because someone once told us that that is our right ... to take a look around and see what may bring a good life. A life of meaning. A love of life. And sometimes, even, a fleeting happiness.

Amen.