I read the books of moral philosophy on Jefferson's reading list, I found that the similarities were far more important than the differences. With the help of electronic word searches, I was surprised to discover that many of the books contain the phrase that appears in the Declaration: "the pursuit of happiness." And many cite the same source for their conclusion about the original meaning of the pursuit of happiness: Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*.

In addition to these surprises, working my way through Jefferson's reading list changed my understanding of the famous phrase. Today we think of happiness as the pursuit of pleasure. But classical and Enlightenment thinkers defined happiness as the pursuit of virtue—as *being* good, rather than *feeling* good. For this reason, the Founders believed that the quest for happiness is a daily practice, requiring mental and spiritual self-discipline, as well as mindfulness and rigorous time management. At its core, the Founders viewed the pursuit of happiness as a lifelong quest for character improvement, where we use our powers of reason to moderate our unproductive emotions so that we can be our best selves and serve others. For the Founders, happiness required the daily cultivation of virtue, which the Scottish philosopher Adam Smith defined as "the temper of mind which constitutes the excellent and praiseworthy character."[15] If you had to sum it up in one sentence, the classical definition of the pursuit of happiness meant being a lifelong learner, with a commitment to practicing the daily habits that lead to character improvement, self-mastery, flourishing, and growth. Understood in these terms, happiness is always something to be pursued rather than obtained—a quest rather than a destination. "The mere search for higher happiness," Cicero wrote, "not merely its actual attainment, is a prize beyond all human wealth or honor or physical pleasure."[16]

Why was Cicero's self-help book such a key text in influencing the Founders' understanding of happiness? Because it offered a popular summary of the core of Stoic philosophy. To achieve freedom, tranquility, and happiness, according to the ancient Stoics, we should stop trying to control external events and instead focus on controlling the only

things that we have the power to control: namely, our own thoughts, desires, emotions, and actions. In this sense, Stoic philosophy has many similarities with the Eastern wisdom traditions, including Buddhism and Hinduism. "Our life is shaped by our mind; we become what we think," said the Buddha in the Dhammapada, emphasizing the need to master our selfish impulses—including envy, arrogance, anger, and the pursuit of short-term pleasure—in order to achieve lasting well-being.[17] The Hindu wisdom literature, including the Vedas, Upanishads, and Bhagavad Gita, sums up a similar teaching on happiness in a phrase often quoted by Mahatma Gandhi: "Renounce and enjoy."[18] In other words, only by renouncing selfish attachments to the results of our actions, only by acting selflessly, can we conquer our ego-based emotions—including anger, fear, and jealousy—live in the present, and "live according to nature," as the Stoics put it, in harmony with the natural laws of the universe.

John Adams was excited to learn that Pythagoras, one of the founders of Greek moral philosophy, was said to have studied with the Hindu masters during his travels in the East,[19] and in his correspondence with Thomas Jefferson at the end of their long lives, Adams discussed the Hindu Vedas as a possible source of the ancient wisdom regarding happiness. For the Founders, the pursuit of happiness included reading in the wisdom traditions of the East and West, always anchored by the canonical text of the Bible, in an attempt to distill their common wisdom about the need to achieve self-mastery through emotional and spiritual self-discipline.

The Greek word for happiness is *eudaimonia*, meaning "good daimon," or good spirit, and the Greek word for virtue is *arete*, which also means "excellence." In *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle famously defined happiness as virtue itself, an "activity of soul in conformity with excellence."[20] These terms are confusing to us, because excellence and virtue aren't self-defining. For this reason, although *eudaimonia* is hard to translate, it might be rendered as "human flourishing," "a purpose-driven life," or, in modern terms, "being your best self." The Latin word for

virtue is "virtus," which also means valor, manliness, excellence, and good character. What Cicero and Franklin called "virtue," therefore, might be translated as "good character." Today, modern social psychologists use terms like "emotional intelligence," which they define as "the ability to understand, use, and manage your own emotions in positive ways to relieve stress, communicate effectively, empathize with others, overcome challenges, and defuse conflict."[21]

What I also learned from reading Cicero and the other ancient sources is that the Founders framed their quest for self-regulation and emotional intelligence through a psychological lens: the dramatic struggle between reason and passion. The Greek words for reason and emotion are *logos* and *pathos*, so for the Founders, *passion* was a synonym for emotion. The Founders didn't mean we should lack emotion; only that we should manage our emotions in productive ways. Cicero traces the distinction between reason and passion back to Pythagoras, who divided the soul into two parts: the rational and irrational. Pythagoras further divided the irrational parts of the soul into the passions and the desires, leading his disciples to suggest a three-part division of the soul: reason, passion, and desire. In his dialogue *Phaedrus*, Plato popularized Pythagoras's three-part division with his metaphor of a charioteer, representing reason, driving a chariot pulled by two horses. One horse, representing the passionate part of the soul, careened toward earthly pleasures; the other, representing the noble or intelligent part of the soul, inclined upward toward the divine. The goal of the charioteer was to use reason to align the noble and passionate horses so that both pulled in the same direction.[22]

In his writings on happiness, Plato argued that we should use our faculty of reason, located in the head, to moderate and temper our faculties of passion, located near the heart, and appetite, in the stomach. When all three faculties of the soul were in harmony, Plato maintained, the state that resulted was called "temperance," but, as Adam Smith noted, it might be better translated as "good temper, or sobriety and moderation of mind."[23] (The Latin word "temperentia," or temperance,

also means good temper, sobriety, and self-control; therefore, for the classical writers, virtue, or good character, was synonymous with temperance, or self-control.) Plato's theory of the harmony of the soul became the basis for the "faculty psychology" that was developed by Enlightenment philosophers such as Thomas Reid in the eighteenth century and that was at the core of the Founders' education. Faculty psychology held that the mind is separated into different mental powers, or faculties, including the intellect, the emotion, and the will. According to this view, the goal of education was to strengthen the intellect, or reason, so that it could moderate and control the will and the emotions in order to achieve the self-control that was key to happiness. Faculty psychology drew on Cicero's idea that we are born with certain innate faculties, including a moral sense, that could aid our powers of reason in calming our emotions. "[W]e must keep ourselves free from every disturbing emotion," Cicero wrote in his treatise *On Duties*, "not only from desire and fear, but also from excessive pain and pleasure, and from anger, so that we may enjoy that calm of soul and freedom from care."

In their private letters and diaries, public speeches and poems, the Founders talked constantly about their own struggles to control their tempers and to be their best selves by using reason to regulate their selfish passions. "Men are rather reasoning tha[n] reasonable animals, for the most part governed by the impulse of passion," Alexander Hamilton wrote in 1802.[24] John Adams's wife, Abigail, gave similar advice to their son, John Quincy Adams. "The due Government of the passions has been considered in all ages as a most valuable acquisition," she warned,"[25] emphasizing in particular the importance of subduing "the passion of Anger." Her conclusion: "Having once obtained this self government you will find a foundation laid for happiness to yourself and usefullness to Mankind."[26]

Nearer to our time, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg told me that her mother gave her precisely the same Stoic advice. "[E]motions like anger, remorse, and jealousy are not productive," she said. "They will not accomplish anything, so you must keep them under control."[27]

Ben Franklin summed up the classical understanding of happiness as a balance between reason and passion in his 1735 essay "On True Happiness." "The desire of happiness in general is so natural to us, that all the world are in pursuit of it," he wrote in *The Pennsylvania Gazette*. "Reason represents things to us not only as they are at present, but as they are in their whole nature and tendency; passion only regards them in the former light." Franklin concluded that we need to use our powers of reason to check our immediate emotions and desires so that we can achieve the harmony of the soul that allows us to flourish, emphasizing that "all true happiness, as all that is truly beautiful, can only result from order."

In his virtues project, Franklin defined *order* in terms of impulse control: "Let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time." And, in emphasizing the importance of delaying short-term gratification for long-term character improvement, Franklin was summarizing the essence of the ancient wisdom. The classical authorities viewed the pursuit of happiness as a daily version of the famous marshmallow test, an experiment on delayed gratification conducted at Stanford in 1972. Researchers gave the subjects, who were children, a choice between one immediate reward (such as a marshmallow) or two rewards for those who could wait fifteen minutes to receive them. The study found that children who were able to wait for two marshmallows rather than eating one immediately performed better in school years later and had better life outcomes.

Dr. Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*, published in 1755, is the leading source for how words were understood in the founding era. Johnson notes an older definition of *happiness* as "good luck or fortune," stemming from the Old English word *hap*. But his principal definition of happiness is "Felicity; state in which the desires are satisfied."[28] To illustrate the definition, Johnson cites a text that also appears in Franklin's autobiography and on Jefferson's reading list: namely, John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Johnson's selection comes from book 2, chapter 21, "Of Power," which repeatedly

uses the phrase "pursuit of happiness."[29] And Locke's point, which he takes from Cicero, is that we should control our desires through calm deliberation so that we come to realize that our true and substantial happiness will best be served by long-term self-regulation rather than short-term gratification.

In the course of working my way through Thomas Jefferson's reading list, I discovered that, throughout American history, the meaning of the pursuit of happiness has evolved in unexpected ways. The ancient wisdom that defined happiness as self-mastery, emotional self-regulation, tranquility of mind, and the quest for self-improvement was distilled in the works of Cicero, summed up by Franklin in his thirteen virtues, and used by Adams in his "Thoughts on Government." After Jefferson inscribed the idea in the Declaration of Independence, it showed up in *The Federalist Papers*, the essays Madison and Hamilton wrote in support of the Constitution, focusing on the promotion of public happiness. It was evoked by Presidents John Quincy Adams and Abraham Lincoln, as well as by the abolitionist Frederick Douglass, to defend the ideal of self-reliance and to advocate for the destruction of slavery. It became the basis of Alexis de Tocqueville's idea of "self-interest properly understood" and of Justice Louis Brandeis's idea of freedom of conscience. The ancient wisdom fell out of fashion in the 1960s and in the "Me Decade" that followed, however, when our understanding about the pursuit of happiness was transformed from being good to feeling good. But the classical ideal of happiness was resurrected and confirmed in the 1990s by insights from social psychology and cognitive behavior therapy, which found that we can best achieve emotional intelligence by developing habits of emotional self-regulation—training ourselves to turn negative thoughts and emotions into positive ones—through the power of the imagination.

After reading the books that shaped the Founders' original understanding of the pursuit of happiness, I set out to explore how they applied the ancient wisdom in their own lives. What I learned changed the way I