

Henry quoted Joseph Addison's play *Cato: A Tragedy* about the need to choose freedom over slavery. "Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery?" he asked. "Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!"<sup>30</sup> How could Henry justify urging white Americans to throw off what he called the chains of British slavery while he himself continued to enslave Black Americans? He didn't even try. Henry considered it "amazing" that he and his fellow Americans, who were so "fond of Liberty," also allowed slavery, a practice "as repugnant to humanity as it is inconsistent with the Bible and destructive to liberty." And Henry admitted that it was avarice that made him choose not to follow his moral principles: "Would any one believe that I am Master of Slaves of my own purchase!" Henry asked. "I am drawn along by [the] general inconvenience of living without them. I will not—I cannot justify it."<sup>31</sup>

In addition to changing the way I thought about the Founders, my reading also changed the way I thought about how to be a good citizen. Following the classical and Enlightenment philosophers, the Founders believed that *personal* self-government was necessary for *political* self-government. In their view, the key to a healthy republic begins with how we address our own flaws and commit to becoming better citizens over time. In *The Federalist Papers*, Madison and Hamilton made clear that the Constitution was designed to foster deliberation so that citizens could avoid retreating into the angry mobs and partisan factions that can be inflamed by demagogues. Ancient Athens had fallen because the demagogue Cleon had seduced the Athenian assembly into continuing the war with the Peloponnesian League; Rome had fallen because the people were corrupted by Caesar, who offered them luxury in exchange for liberty. Only by governing their selfish emotions as individuals could citizens avoid degenerating into selfish factions that threatened the common good. The way for citizens to create a more perfect union, the Founders insisted, was to govern themselves in

private as well as in public, cultivating the same personal deliberation, moderation, and harmony in our own minds that we strive to maintain in the constitution of the state. Madison would have urged us to think more and tweet less.

In this sense, the Founders believed that the pursuit of happiness regards freedom not as boundless liberty to do whatever feels good in the moment but as bounded liberty to make wise choices that will help us best develop our capacities and talents over the course of our lives. They believed that the pursuit of happiness includes responsibilities as well as rights—the responsibility to limit ourselves, restrain ourselves, and master ourselves, so that we achieve the wisdom and harmony that are necessary for true freedom.

“Obviously freedom must carry with it the meaning of freedom to limit oneself,” the composer Leonard Bernstein said of Beethoven’s choice of a single note in his *Eroica* Symphony. “Freedom is not infinite, not boundless liberty, as some hippies like to think—do anything you want, anytime, anywhere you want to. No, freedom isn’t that. It means being free to make decisions, to determine one’s own course.” Bernstein went on to connect Beethoven’s struggle to balance freedom and harmony in the symphony with the same freedom of citizens to govern themselves in a democracy. “In Beethoven, as in democracy, freedom is a discipline, combining the right to choose freely, with the gift of choosing wisely.”<sup>32</sup>

Citing Cicero’s famous analogy between “harmony in song” and “concord in the State,” John Adams, too, compared the harmony of a well-tempered state constitution to the harmony of a well-tempered orchestra.<sup>33</sup> “As the treble, the tenor, and the bass exist in nature, they will be heard in the concert,” Adams wrote in his *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*. “[I]f they are arranged by Handel, in a skilful composition, they produce rapture the most exquisite that harmony can excite; but if they are confused together, without order, they will ‘Rend with tremendous sound your ears asunder.’”<sup>34</sup> This was the classical understanding of the pursuit of happiness: the freedom

to make daily choices about how to balance emotion and reason that lead to truth, order, harmony, and wisdom, aligned with the divine will or the natural harmonies of the universe. The Founders understood the importance of our spiritual nature, and for many of them, the pursuit of happiness was a spiritual quest.

This book is an attempt to travel into the minds of the Founders, to understand their quest for the good life on their own terms. By reading the books they read and following their own daily attempts at self-accounting, we can better understand the largely forgotten core of their moral and political philosophy: that moderating emotions is the secret of tranquility of mind; that tranquility of mind is the secret of happiness; that daily habits are the secret of self-improvement; and that personal self-government is the secret of political self-government. It’s not a surprise that the Founders often fell short of their own ideals of moral perfection. But what is a surprise is the seriousness with which they took the quest, on a daily basis, to become more perfect. In his autobiography, Franklin called the great moral errors of his life “errata,” or printers’ errors.<sup>35</sup> And he remained hopeful, as he wrote in an epitaph he drafted for himself, that life was like a manuscript whose errors, in a “new & more perfect edition,” could always be “Corrected and amended By the Author.”<sup>36</sup>