

What is the “pursuit of happiness,” which the Declaration of Independence says is an inalienable right? It sounds like this is about freedom from governmental restrictions on your activities. So, in modern terms, it seemed to mean that the government can’t stop you from “doing your own thing.”

But that can’t be right. The Declaration says we have an inalienable right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The reference to “liberty” already covers the freedom to pursue your own goals, whether that’s your own happiness or something else. So, what did Jefferson mean by the right to the pursuit of happiness?

Important philosophers of the time extolled the rational pursuit of “true and solid happiness.” Locke argued that in “pursuing true happiness as our greatest good, obliged to suspend the satisfaction of our desires in particular cases.” In short, the pursuit of happiness seemed to have as much to do with fulfillment as pleasure. We can see this in a well-known quote from Ben Franklin, “Money never made a man happy yet, nor will it. The more a man has, the more he wants. Instead of filling a vacuum, it makes one.” True happiness, then, is something of more permanent value.

Today, we might wonder about whether the environment has anything to do with this “inalienable right.” At least in one respect, that might be because of its ability to provide a deeper and more permanent experience than consumer goods. We can get some sense of that understanding from the author of the Declaration.

Two years before writing the Declaration, Jefferson had purchased a parcel of land because it contained a remarkable feature — a 200-foot natural bridge carved out of the rock by a small stream. Jefferson described the bridge at length in his book on Virginia, where he called it “the most sublime of Nature’s works.” In terms of the experience of seeing the bridge, he talked about the mixture of fear and awe that it created.

Of the top of the arch, he wrote that “few men could walk over it to the edge and look over into the abyss. You involuntarily fall on your hands and feet, creep to the parapet and peep over it.” Yet, “if the view from the top be painful and intolerable, that from below is delightful in an equal extreme.”

For Jefferson, it seemed, the experience was almost religious: “It is impossible for the emotions arising from the sublime, to be felt beyond what they are here: so beautiful an arch, so elevated, so light, and springing as it were up to heaven, the rapture of the spectator is really indescribable!” For someone who also wrote in the Declaration of “nature’s God,” perhaps this confrontation with the natural world truly was akin to

something religious.

The significance Jefferson attached to the arch is also indicated by his efforts to preserve it. At one point, in desperate financial straits, Jefferson tried to sell the land, but he later thought better of the idea. In an 1815 letter, Jefferson wrote that he now had “no idea of selling the land. I view it in some degree as a public trust, and would on no consideration permit the bridge to be injured, defaced or masked from public view.”

I’m not sure we’ll ever know exactly what Jefferson and the other signers of the Declaration meant by the pursuit of happiness. But it clearly seemed to have been something other than the pursuit of wealth, and wonders of nature seem to have been part of it.