A
HUMAN FLOURISHING
ESSAY

All Men Are Created Equal

The Declaration's Unfinished Promise

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This essay is part of Human Flourishing's celebration of the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States of America. We gather this July as a nation with much to celebrate, and much work still ahead. That tension is precisely why Human Flourishing exists.

This essay was inspired by National Treasure: How the Declaration of Independence Made America by Michael Auslin (Avid Reader Press / Simon & Schuster, 2026), and by a podcast interview with the author that vividly captured the Declaration's extraordinary afterlife and its enduring relevance. We are grateful for his scholarship.

I. The Audacity of a Single Sentence

In the summer of 1776, a thirty-three-year-old Virginia lawyer sat in a rented room in Philadelphia and tried to explain the inexplicable: why a collection of fractious colonies, with no army to speak of and no guarantee of survival, had the right to declare themselves free from the most powerful empire on earth.

The sentence he produced may be among the most consequential in the history of democratic governance:

> *"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."*

Read it slowly. In 1776, none of this was self-evident. Hereditary monarchy was the norm. Aristocracy was assumed. The idea that ordinary people possessed rights no king could legitimately take was not a description of the world as it was. It described the world as it could be. It was, in the fullest sense, a proclamation of possibility.

Thomas Jefferson was not the obvious choice to write it. Quiet and politically untested, he was selected largely because he had a gift for language. What he produced exceeded anyone's expectation, including, perhaps, his own. He gave voice to an aspiration so large that it would take generations, at enormous cost, to even partially fulfill. And yet that aspiration, once spoken aloud, could not be unspoken.

Something irreversible happened the day those words were published. They entered the world, and the world was never quite the same.

II. The Miracle at the Table

Before we celebrate the words, we should marvel at the fact that any document existed at all.

The thirteen colonies that sent delegates to Philadelphia in the summer of 1776 were not a unified people. They had competing economic interests, profound regional differences, and deep mutual suspicion. New England merchants and South Carolina planters shared a continent but inhabited different worlds. Many delegates had never met. Some actively distrusted each other.

What they produced, in the sweltering heat of a Philadelphia summer, in a room with the windows closed for fear of eavesdropping, was a negotiated miracle. It required every delegate to subordinate some portion of what he wanted to what they collectively needed.

The compromises were real, and at least one was morally catastrophic. The original draft contained a passage condemning the slave trade; it was removed to secure the support of Southern colonies. We cannot look away from that fact. It was a profound moral failure, and its consequences would haunt the nation for nearly a century, and beyond.

And yet: without the compromise, there was no Declaration. Without the Declaration, there was no unified Revolution. Without the Revolution, there was no nation in which the argument over slavery could eventually be resolved, agonizingly, at the cost of 600,000 lives.

This does not excuse the compromise. It simply asks us to hold the full complexity of the moment: men of limited moral imagination, under extraordinary pressure, managed to agree on something extraordinary. The history of human progress is rarely cleaner than that.

> *The Declaration needed both inspiration and pragmatism to exist at all. That tension is not a flaw in the document but a lesson in how consequential things actually get done.*

III. The Words Escape Their Authors

Here is where the story becomes genuinely astonishing.

Jefferson wrote for a specific moment: thirteen colonies, one king, one rebellion. But the language he chose was not specific. It was universal. And the moment the Declaration was published, those words began doing work their author never fully anticipated, and, given his own contradictions, never fully deserved.

The words escaped him. And in escaping him, they became something larger than any one man.

Seventy-two years after the Declaration was signed, a group of women gathered in Seneca Falls, New York, to draft their own statement of grievances. Elizabeth Cady Stanton sat down with Jefferson's document and rewrote it, almost word for word, substituting "women" where the original had been silent. "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal." It was a powerful act of political judo. She did not reject Jefferson's framework; she held him to it.

Four years later, in 1852, Frederick Douglass, a man born into slavery who had escaped and taught himself to read, stood before an audience in Rochester, New York, and delivered what many consider the greatest Fourth of July speech ever given. He did not celebrate the holiday. He indicted the nation. But notice what he used as his indictment: the Declaration itself. Rather than burn it, he wielded it. He pointed to Jefferson's words and said, in essence: you wrote this. Now live it.

This is a pattern worth pausing on. Again and again throughout American history, those who were excluded from the Declaration's original promise did not reject the document; they claimed it. They picked it up, held it to the light, and said: these words mean us too.

The suffragists. The abolitionists. The labor organizers. The civil rights marchers. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech is saturated in Declaration language, not because he was naive about America's failures, but because he understood that the Declaration contained the leverage needed to demand something better.

A document that could inspire that range of courage, across that span of history, is more than a political artifact. It is closer to a living standard, one that each generation must decide, freshly, whether to meet.

IV. The Immigrant Insight

There is one chapter of the Declaration's story that tends to get overlooked in the debates over its legacy. It may be the most instructive chapter of all.

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and accelerating through the early twentieth, millions of people arrived on American shores from Ireland, Italy, Poland, Hungary, Germany, Russia, China, Japan, and dozens of other nations. They arrived speaking different languages, practicing different religions, carrying different customs. They also carried centuries of inherited division.

The Irish and the English had centuries of grievance between them. Eastern European ethnic groups had ancient enmities. Religious minorities had been persecuted across generations. These were not abstract historical facts. They were lived identities, inherited loyalties, and inherited hatreds. People knew who their enemies were. It was part of how they understood themselves.

And then they came to America, and something remarkable happened.

The Declaration, and the broader American creed it anchored, offered these immigrants something no ethnicity, no religion, and no ancestral homeland could offer: a values-based identity available to anyone willing to claim it. To become American was not a matter of birth. It was a matter of commitment, of adopting a set of principles — liberty, equality, the rule of law, the rights of the individual — and in doing so, joining something larger than the village you came from.

What immigrants left behind was not their culture. The food remained. The language lived on at home. The religious traditions, the music, the communal bonds, all of that endured and enriched the country that received it. America is more interesting, more creative, and more resilient because of everything its immigrants brought with them.

What they left behind was the inheritance of group enmity: the old grudges, the historical grievances, the hierarchies of belonging that told them their worth depended on which group they came from. They left behind the part of identity that makes enemies of neighbors.

> *This is the melting pot properly understood: not everyone becoming the same, but everyone choosing the same floor of shared values beneath a ceiling of genuine, celebrated difference.*

It is an idea so radical that we have perhaps stopped noticing how radical it is. Most of human history has organized itself around blood, clan, religion, and ethnicity. America

proposed something different: that you could belong to a nation not because of where you were born or what your grandparents believed, but because of what you were willing to commit to. The Declaration made that offer. Generation after generation of immigrants accepted it.

That story is not finished. It has never been without conflict or contradiction. But the pattern it traces, of people arriving with old divisions and finding in American ideals a new identity that rose above them, is one of the more remarkable social achievements in democratic history.

V. The Honest Reckoning

We cannot celebrate the Declaration honestly without sitting, briefly but genuinely, with its failures.

The men who pledged their lives and sacred honor to the proposition that all men are created equal owned other human beings. That is not a footnote. It is a central fact, and the contradiction embedded in it would tear the country apart less than a century later.

The Declaration's promise was extended slowly, unevenly, and only after tremendous struggle. Women waited nearly 150 years for the right to vote. African Americans faced a century of legal apartheid after the Civil War supposedly resolved the question of their humanity. Indigenous peoples were excluded from the Declaration's promises almost entirely. The gap between the ideal and the reality has been, at times, almost unbearable to contemplate.

But here is what the historical record also shows: the reformers who fought to close that gap almost universally turned toward the Declaration, not away from it. They did not say the document was irredeemably corrupt and must be abandoned. They said it meant more than its authors were willing to admit, and they demanded the nation live up to what it had already promised.

That is a remarkable thing. It suggests that the aspiration Jefferson articulated, however imperfectly he lived it, was genuine enough, and universal enough, to sustain generations of effort on behalf of people Jefferson himself could not fully see.

The Declaration set a standard its authors could not meet. And in doing so, it gave every subsequent generation the language to demand better. That may, in fact, be its greatest achievement.

VI. 250 Years of Evidence

Step back and consider what the arc of history actually shows.

This document, 1,320 words written in a rented room in Philadelphia, has survived a revolution, a civil war, two world wars, a cold war, and every generation's attempt to claim it for their own cause. It has been pressed into service by every kind of argument and every kind of cause, sometimes faithfully, often opportunistically, and occasionally lived up to by those willing to do the hard work it requires.

It has been cited by American presidents and by people marching against American presidents. It has been invoked by those defending the existing order and by those demanding that the order be remade. Its language appears in the founding documents of other nations. Its principles echo in declarations of human rights drafted by international bodies generations later.

A document that can sustain that breadth of use, across 250 years of history, is either hopelessly vague or genuinely universal. Perhaps it is both, and perhaps that is precisely why it endures.

We gather to celebrate this anniversary at a moment of real and serious division. Americans disagree, sharply and sometimes bitterly, about history, identity, policy, and the very meaning of the national story. It would be dishonest to pretend otherwise.

But it is worth noticing that even now, people on all sides of those divisions tend to reach for the Declaration when they want to make their deepest case. They argue about what it means and who it includes. They do not, for the most part, argue that it is irrelevant. That itself is evidence of something durable at its core.

VII. Why Human Flourishing Exists

Human Flourishing was founded on the belief that human beings are capable of more than their worst impulses: that we can build communities grounded in shared values rather than shared enemies, that we can hold our differences without being destroyed by them, and that the conditions under which people truly thrive are knowable and worth pursuing together.

The Declaration of Independence is, at its core, a flourishing document. Its three foundational commitments — life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness — echo what researchers, philosophers, and communities across history have long identified as the conditions for human beings to fully come alive. Jefferson did not invent human flourishing; he institutionalized its pursuit as a collective right.

Note, too, that Jefferson chose that phrase carefully. He did not promise happiness; he promised the freedom to pursue it. That is exactly the right promise. Flourishing cannot be delivered from above. It must be built, chosen, and sustained by people who believe it is possible and are willing to work toward it together.

That work is not finished. It may never be finished. And that, too, is part of the Declaration's legacy: it did not describe an endpoint. It described a direction.

> *The Declaration was never a verdict on what America was. It was an invitation to become what it could be. That invitation has not expired. It never does.*

Two hundred and fifty years on, the same choice faces every generation: accept the invitation or decline it. Choose to see in our neighbors a shared humanity worth building toward, or fall back on the older certainties of who is in and who is out.

The people who have carried the Declaration's torch — the suffragists who rewrote its preamble, the immigrants who crossed oceans to claim its promise, the civil rights marchers who held it up against fire hoses and billy clubs — did not carry it because they were naive about America's failures. They carried it because they believed the aspiration was real. They believed that human beings, at their best, could actually build the thing Jefferson described.

That belief is what Human Flourishing is for. That belief is what this anniversary is about.

We are, still, an unfinished experiment. We are, still, an invitation extended to everyone willing to accept it, not to be the same, but to commit to something together. Not to erase our differences, but to find beneath them a shared foundation strong enough to bear the weight of genuine community.

The Declaration does not ask us to be perfect. It asks us to keep trying. It asks us to hold the aspiration even when the reality falls short, and then to close the gap, one generation's worth at a time.

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Scott McIntosh is an engineer-turned-entrepreneur who built McIntosh Engineering to $50 million in revenue before co-founding MAC⁶, a thriving entrepreneurial community in Tempe, Arizona. He co-founded Conscious Capitalism Arizona as the third chapter globally and has been among the earliest investors and advocates for Heroic Public Benefit Corporation. A certified Positive Intelligence coach, longtime student of Stoic philosophy and ancient wisdom, and grandfather of four, Scott writes and speaks at the intersection of human flourishing, free enterprise, and the urgent questions that define our moment.

Selected Sources and Further Reading

On the meaning of "the pursuit of happiness" in the founding era

Carli N. Conklin, *The Pursuit of Happiness in the Founding Era: An Intellectual History* (University of Missouri Press, 2019). A scholarly intellectual history showing that the founders drew on four convergent traditions — classical Greek and Roman philosophy, Christianity, English common law, and the Scottish Enlightenment — and understood "the pursuit of happiness" as the right to pursue a life lived in accordance with virtue, in the older sense of eudaimonia.

Jeffrey Rosen, *The Pursuit of Happiness: How Classical Writers on Virtue Inspired the Lives of the Founders and Defined America* (Simon & Schuster, 2024). An accessible companion to Conklin, profiling six founders and tracing how their reading of classical moral philosophers shaped their understanding of happiness as a lifelong pursuit of virtue rather than the experience of pleasure.

On the conditions for human flourishing

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. The foundational Western account of eudaimonia — most often translated as "flourishing" — as the highest human good and the proper aim of human life. Widely available in multiple translations.

Martha C. Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Harvard University Press, 2011). With Amartya Sen, Nussbaum developed the capabilities approach — a contemporary philosophical framework identifying the conditions required for human beings to live lives they have reason to value. The approach asks not what people have but what they are actually able to do and to be.

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