The Pursuit of Happiness

For centuries happiness has enjoyed a privileged seat at our human table. It is considered a self-evident truth, a desire, a goal for society. What is happiness, how have its meanings changed, what makes it an enduring human value? Our course examines happiness in great works of philosophy, religion, psychology and social science, literature, and art. We will study and discuss these works in a seminar, considering happiness as an idea, experience, and comment on culture. What are the common and unique themes of happiness, how can we evaluate them, and what does the pursuit of happiness tell us about ourselves?

We will study works of Aristotle, Augustine, Beethoven, the Bible, Blake, Camus, Willa Cather, the Dalai Lama, Darwin, Descartes, Emily Dickinson, Emerson, Freud, Kant, Keats, Marx, Matisse, John Stuart Mill, Rousseau, Bertrand Russell, Sappho, Wallace Stevens, Thoreau, Wagner, Max Weber, and Walt Whitman.


Besides three brief papers, student will undertake a final paper related to a specific discipline or professional interest (happiness in education, economics, medicine, law, music, etc.). The final paper may be written individually or with several authors. This is an intensive writing course.