

The Pursuit of Happiness



Film title: The Pursuit of Happiness

Director: Gabriele Muccino

Screenplay: Steven Conrad

Starring: Will Smith, Jaden Smith, Thandie Newton

Distributor: Columbia Pictures (USA); Sony Pictures Releasing (UK)

Cinema Release Date: 15 December 2006 (USA); 12 January 2007 (UK)

Certificate: PG-13 (USA); 12A (UK)

Summary: 'You want something. You go get it. Period.' (Chris Gardner)

Chris Gardner is after the American Dream: 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' (probably the most famous phrase from the United States Declaration of Independence). Having spent his entire life savings on portable bone density measurement machines, which he hopes to sell in order to support his family, Chris soon finds himself in crippling debt and a struggling marriage. Most doctors consider the machines too expensive, and month after month his wife, Linda, is working double shifts to try and pay the rent and tax bills. Eventually Linda walks out leaving Chris to care for his five-year-old son, Christopher. Slipping deeper and deeper into debt, the pair are evicted from their apartment, then from a cheap motel. Finally, after spending a night sleeping in a station toilet, they end up queuing each day for space in a hostel.

Walking past the Stock Exchange one day, Chris spies a contented looking man stepping out of a shiny Ferrari. As he looks up, everyone going in and out of the building is smiling and laughing, looking happy. Chris applies for an internship, but when it's revealed that the six-month training post carries no salary, he has a tough decision to make. The desire for a better life for him and his son spurs him on and he accepts. It's a heartbreaking journey as Chris pursues his dream of happiness, but he hangs on to the belief that if you want something badly enough, you will get it in the end.

Background

The film is based on the true story of Chris Gardner, who did go through extreme poverty before ending up as a multi-millionaire. Some of the details were altered for the film: Linda, for example, is a mixture of the two women in Chris's wife, and solving the Rubik's cube is fiction added to the plot.

Will Smith saw the real Chris Gardner interviewed on 20/20, the American human interest program. Watching Chris walk into the bathroom in which he and his son had slept captured Smith's attention and at that point he decided that he wanted to tell this story. When Smith met Gardner he felt an instant connection, particularly with the idea that a person has command over their future, whatever their situation. Christopher, Gardner's son, is played by Will Smith's real-life son, Jaden.

Questions for discussion

1. Did you like this film? Why/why not?

2. What is happiness?

3. Chris wants a better life for him and his son. What do you think he sees as happiness for his son? Do you think he makes the right decisions to achieve this?

4. *'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.'* (United States Declaration of Independence).

This declaration seems to equate happiness with safety and security. Do you agree with that?

Do you think this is what Chris Gardner sees as happiness?

5. Do you think that people have an unalienable right (i.e. a right that should not be taken away from them) to happiness? Why/why not?

6. *'And it was at that time that I thought about Thomas Jefferson writing that Declaration of Independence. Him saying that we have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And I thought about how he knew to put the 'pursuit' in there, like no one can actually have happiness. We can only pursue it.'*
(Chris)

Do you think anyone can achieve happiness? Why/why not? Is pursuing happiness better than achieving happiness or not? Why?

7. *'You want something. You go get it. Period.'* (Chris)

'I've always believed that my dreams and my desires can command and bend time and space to be the things that I want them to be. On a very natural, on a very human level, Chris Gardner displays that same ability.' (Will Smith) (movies.about.com)

Do you believe that you can always get what you want if you try hard enough? How can these comments be squared with Chris's statements quoted in the previous question?

8. How do you feel about Chris's goals in life? To what extent do you identify with them in your own life?

9. What do you think we should pursue in life? Is happiness one of those things? Why/why not?

10. Why do you think so many people in our society see happiness in purely material terms?

What are the implications of this for your pursuit of happiness?