Is San Luis Obispo really happy?

BY BRETT BODEMER
PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK VELASQUEZ

The business of rating the happiness of a place, whether San Luis Obispo or anywhere else, pretty much eludes all validity. The best evidence for such a claim would be self-reported, but even then there are trapdoors. The people of x say they are all infinitely happy? Well, maybe the people of x are all liars. Or maybe they have actually convinced themselves that they are happy, and well—if perception is reality—then they are happy.

None of this, by the way, tells us if they are happier than people in any other locale. This conundrum presents a case of Ludwig Wittgenstein visits the Central Coast: how do I know that your tooth aches and how do I know that when you say that your tooth aches that it aches in the same way as mine, or that you even mean the same thing that I mean when I say that my tooth aches? There are also hurdles of definition and calibration. Is happiness job satisfaction? Joy? Does a single hour of euphoria equal three months of bovine contentment? Does the instant ecstasy of religious martyrdom trump the accumulated contemplations of a 500-year-old claim?

Despite this cloud of unknowability, SLO nonetheless found itself recently rated as one of the three happiest places on the planet, sandwiched between the nations of Denmark and Singapore. I ponder this rating as a SLO newcomer, having previously lived in Seattle, Honolulu, and Hanoi. I was a veritable pioneer in banning public smoking. And doesn't its idyllic topography owe much of its charm to zoning laws?

So what does SLO have in common with tropical Singapore? As it is clearly not the climate, I will venture to say instead that it is the element of concerted social control. In Singapore, some years back, a man was sentenced to public caning for failing to wash his hands after using the restroom. Although SLO refrains from public whippings, it flexes legislative muscles of social control, outlawing, for instance, drive-thru restaurants. SLO used to have a prison guard at the Men’s Colony. We are the things I do not find.

Traffic, for instance. Once last year—I remember it well—I sat through the same light twice. Or standing in long lines in the grocery store. Nor do I miss extremes of temerature: in tropical Hanoi I bathed in a perpetual halo of personal sweat, and in frigid Seattle I had to battle the obligatory biannual snowstorm. I do not miss grappling with worn traction devices in early morning darkness, scraping my knuckles raw just to get to work. By contrast, SLO has two seasons, brown and green, with gentle, chameleonic shifts between.

Moderation may in fact be the single trait that makes SLO so livable. This trait transcends mere climate, and applies to topography as well. Its modest hills, softly rounded here, and slightly craggy there, leave ample room for vertical vistas of sky and horizontal avenues of space. The gently inclined roads curve, and eschew sharp twists. A temperate fog often burns off to yield a temperate blue day.

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And Denmark? Well, Denmark is socialist, and so, in a sense, is SLO. SLO's economy is sustained by two state factories. I am a librarian at Cal Poly, my next-door neighbor is a prison guard at the Men’s Colony. We both make payments on our condos with monies drawn from the 8th largest economy in the world. Remove these factories (and throw Diablo Canyon into the mix, if you like) and SLO collapses economically like a jack-o-lantern in November, like Pontiac or Detroit, or Seattle in the '60s, when Boeing nearly turned out the lights.

One might counter that none of this accounts for SLO's fine showing in the happiness sweepstakes, but that rather, the high rating stems from its flourishing arts scene. Yet when all is said and done, this cultural milieu is nothing more than an ecotoplasmic manifestation of SLO's economy. Consider, for instance, the recent survey that revealed SLO as the third most expensive place to live in the United States—third most expensive city not in absolute numbers, but in the ratio of cost-of-living to income. Here the trait of moderation again rears its head. There are fewer super-rich in SLO, and few poor, but mostly middling and upper-middling residents. Because so many people want to live in SLO, and because SLO has strict control over growth, property values remain high, raising the invisible economic fence (as one local journalist so aptly put it) surrounding SLO.

SLO, then, is hopefully middle class. And hence, consciously cultivated. This middle class-ness, to my mind, by the way, is not a bad thing. I am a librarian, after all, and whatever occupation could possibly be more middle class than that? Middle class-ness is a wonderful thing. It promotes education, the arts, bicycle riding, eco-friendliness, and my favorite of all virtues—politeness.

So forget Denmark and Singapore. SLO is really a little Switzerland, cushioned between the France of San Francisco and the Germany of L.A. It benefits from the power and tribulations of its neighbors, creating for itself a placid space of insured and shared cultivation.

Yet returning to the question of self-reporting, a shadow surrounds the purported happiness of SLO. To the south, near Broad and Orcutt, at twilight and dawn, the homeless with their bags trudge to and from the overnight shelter. To the north, the bright lights of Highway 1 isolate the city from the city. We are the things I do not find.

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