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 SLO 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, 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 bundles 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 clam?

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. When I contrast my life here with my lives elsewhere, I realize that what I relish most is not a bad thing. I am a librarian, after all, and what 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.

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 the over growth, property values remain high, raising the invisible economic fence (as one local journalist so aptly put it) surrounding SLO.

SLO, then, is hopelessly middle class. And hence, consciously cultivated. This middle class-ness, to my mind, is not a bad thing. I am a librarian, after all, and what occupation could possibly be more middle class than that? Middle class-ness is a wonderful thing. It promotes education, the arts, cycling, 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 insular 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 trek to and from the night shelter. To the north, the bright lights off Highway 1 isolate the community from its surrounding SLO.

And yet, there is a shadowy bubble of moderate happiness to the north as well. Friday Art After Dark, you may do well to ask yourself: at whose expense and at whose exclusion is my quantum of moderate happiness coming?