

## Happy To Be Here By Peter Mires

Is there an underlying geography to happiness in the world? I know that there are parts of our planet ravaged by war, disease, and famine. I know too that a huge disparity exists between the *haves* and *have-nots* in many quantifiable respects: gross domestic product per capita, life expectancy, literacy rate, to name but a few.

After all, people in some countries live for a year on what some of us make in day. That has to translate into happiness (or the lack thereof), right? This is the point when I start to equivocate, as several of my students have duly noted. Is there a measure, a single yardstick, to show that happiness is an ordinal scale by which countries are ranked?

Last year I read *The Geography of Bliss: One Grump's Search for the Happiest Places in the World*, by Eric Weiner. Intriguing title to be sure, and the author, as a foreign correspondent for National Public Radio, clearly has the credentials of participant observer in the international arena.

*The Geography of Bliss* is a travel book insofar as Weiner visits nine countries with a single agenda: What makes people happy (or unhappy)? His guidebook is the so-called "World Database of Happiness," compiled and maintained by a Dutch sociologist, which lists countries on a scale of 1 to 10 according to their relative happiness. The happiest of the world's nations: Iceland. The least happy: the former Soviet republic of Moldova. He goes to both, and others in between, in pursuit of the story of what is it exactly that makes us happy.

As a cultural geographer, I have to confess a certain amount of skepticism. We've been down this road before. The "National Character Studies" funded by the U.S. Department of Defense during World War II, and some earlier research in culture and personality by anthropologists such as Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, were required reading when I was a graduate student 30-plus years ago. My professors asked the question: Can we ascribe to a nation personality traits normally used to describe individuals?

One of my wife's favorite movies is *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. (I'm fond of the Disney classics myself.) I was somehow reminded of these characters (Happy and Grumpy among them) while reading *The Geography of Bliss*. I'm not put off by the term grump in the title. On the contrary, one of the acknowledged masters of travel writing, Paul Theroux (author of the bestseller *The Happy Isles of Oceania*), is, by all accounts, a curmudgeon. No, it is Weiner's take on the subject that interests me.

After many interviews, chance encounters, personal impressions, and immersion into a body of academic literature (including the works of geographer Yi-Fu Tuan), the author is able to conclude the following: "Money matters, but less than we think and not in the way that we think. Family is important. So are friends. Envy is toxic. So is excessive thinking. Beaches are optional. Trust is not. Neither is gratitude."

Admittedly, happiness, or what serious researchers call "subjective well-being," means different things to different people. It's also subject to change, both as we age and as circumstances (like the recent global financial meltdown) fluctuate. Nevertheless, I agree with Weiner that some places are happier than others. I also believe in the wisdom of Walt Disney: "When you wish upon a star, makes no difference who you are."

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