

How to Live to 100 Secrets from the World's Happiest Centenarians by Elizabeth Lopez

This book is elegantly short and simple. The centerpiece is a set of interviews with eight centenarians living on that the Nicoya Peninsula in Costa Rica. Actually, to be specific, living in a "blue zone" on the peninsula – what appears to be an upland, forested area perhaps 50 miles from the coast.

"Blue zone" is a concept that would benefit from better explanation. The author assumes a familiarity with Dan Buettner's [[ASIN:B01NBSKHJR The Blue Zones of Happiness]], about five localities in Sardinia, Costa Rica; Okinawa, Japan; California; and Greece with extraordinary numbers of centenarians. In each place the blue zone is confined to a few towns or villages. As a Costa Rican, Doctor Elizabeth Lopez was drawn to investigate the centenarians of the Nicoya Peninsula.

She attributes longevity to genetics, culture and environment. Longevity runs in families. Longevity is associated with personality traits such as openness, extraversion and low neuroticism that are about 50% heritable. A culture includes networks of family and community relationships, religious faith, traditional (simple, somewhat repetitive) diet, and a low stress, highly social style of life. Environment includes fresh air and the absence of big-city stressors, traffic noise and the like. It is not surprising that four of the five blue zones are well off the beaten path. The fifth, Loma Linda California, is a center of Seventh-day Adventists.

There aren't any surprises, but it is comforting to find strong support for common sense. Lopez stresses the fact that a deep and unstudied faith is present in each of the centenarians interviewed. Four of the five blue zones are in traditionally Christian communities. My recollections of Okinawa are that it is likewise characterized by traditional religion, albeit in this case Shinto and Buddhism.

Doctor Lopez frequently mentions the Pura Vida philosophy of life in Costa Rica. Though it translates literally as "Pure Life," it is a feeling that cannot be translated, and cannot even be adequately expressed in words. It is an easy-going, unstressed approach to life unique to Costa Rica. Lopez does not mention the fact that Costa Rica is an outlier in Central America, having been settled by the Spanish rather later than the other countries of Latin America and having been singularly untouched by war. It is wealthier than its neighbors, though the residents of the blue zones appear to have led very simple lives, knowing neither want nor abundance.

Lopez' title suggests that we might learn from the example of the Nicoya Peninsula. This is true, but it would be extraordinarily difficult to implement in an American lifestyle. Americans would have to recast their relationships to family, not an easy thing to do. We would have to rethink the meaning of friendship, but friendships arise in communities, not merely through individual effort. We would have to rethink our relationship to work. As much as we complain about being overstressed, most of us would hate like poison to give up our high-tech tools and toys.

There may be other places on earth where one could equally well hope to reach 100. My Ukrainian wife's grandmother just passed away at 95; her great-grandmother made 99. Without the Holodomor, the Second World War and the Soviet Union more of their peers might have matched those numbers. What they shared with the people of Nicoya was a lifetime of hard work, a simple diet and a strong faith in God.

This is a straightforward book, a simple and enjoyable read. A five-star effort.