No Time to Die

A Critique on the American Lifestyle

[Jillian Beaster]

Introduction: What is a "Blue Zone"?

Early is on time, but on time is late. Living paycheck to paycheck? Just pull yourself up by your bootstraps and you're sure to succeed. These phrases, common in the United States, indicate the notoriety of the American lifestyle, as we have seemingly started to equate stress to success. Although it feels like it, this toxic mentality is not shared across the world. Dan Buettner, founder of the concept "Blue Zones," classified five primary areas across the globe with higher average longevity, above average health and higher quality of life: Okinawa, Japan; Sardinia, Italy; Nicoya Peninsula, Costa Rica; Loma Linda, California; Ikaria, Greece. Often, people residing in blue zones move naturally instead of vigorous exercise, as Buettner found that "movement is engineered into their daily lives."[1] For example, instead of going on runs or to the gym, they will sustain a garden, walk from place to place and use manual tools for their labor. In addition, an average blue zone diet consists of plant-based and nutritionally rich proteins such as beans and whole grains, with an average of two to four glasses of wine per day.

Located in the North Aegean Sea, The Greek Island of Ikaria varies greatly from the United States. Buettner discusses some key principles of these blue zones, with a focus on Ikaria, and argues that their activity, purpose, diet and connections are what sets them apart from the rest of the world. The benefits of lifestyles that hold different concepts of time, values the well-being of the collective and prioritizes health is lacking in American society, in turn impacting overall

1 Roundtable on Population Health, Board on Population Health and Public Health Practice, and Institute of Medicine, "Lessons from the Blue Zones®," in *Business Engagement in Building Healthy Communities: Workshop Summary* (Washington D.C.: National Academies Press, 2015), https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK298903/.

well-being and showcasing the need for reevaluation of the American way of life.

Section I: Time and Stress

Being part of a capitalist society, young Americans are immediately introduced to a rigorous perception of time, preventing us from breaking out of the production and time efficient mindset. Often, Americans live in anticipation of the future, and therefore have a craving of meeting that future as soon as possible. Take cellphones for example; instead of walking to talk to someone in-person (as done in Ikaria), we "shoot someone a text," to reach the individual as soon as possible. Our need for time efficient mechanisms to complete simple tasks can also be seen in cars, grocery stores, dishwashers and laundry machines. Pakistani author Syed Zafar believes the controlling power of time is uniquely Western, juxtaposing his wife's American culture with his own. In an anecdote from his life, Zafar and his wife arrived at a Pakistani musical on time, but the program was delayed several hours, frustrating his wife, while many Pakistanis still arrived hours after the initial starting time.[2] Buettner interviewed an Ikarian physician, Dr. Ilias Leriadis, who mentioned that "'no clock is working correctly [on the island]…we simply don't care about the clock here,'" conveying the stark contrast between Ikarian and American culture, and the toxic relationship between Americans and the clock.[3] Our culture is not centered around taking a second to breathe, as for many, that second could be used for something more "productive." Many Americans fall into the inevitable trap of giving too much influence to time, but in a culture where our lives are structured around the clock, it is hard to forge a less time-bound routine.

Though significantly less prominent than in the United States, stress, in Ikaria, still exists, but tactics to slow down the day are implemented and exercised. For example, "activities such as prayer, ancestor veneration, napping, and happy hour" are respected because they reduce stress.[4] The impact of creating a relaxed culture will positively influence stress levels, as the fixation on time is alleviated. In the blue zones, maintaining a lifelong sense of purpose is "[ikigai], [or], the reason for which you get up in the morning," and helps octogenarians and upwards active in their communities, adding to their life expectancy and overall fulfillment.[5] Something as simple as slowing walking pace between locations can impact time-related stress and allow a form of relaxation into the American day-to-day.

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2 Syed Zafar, "It's About Time," *Carnegie Mellon University*, last modified September 23, 2010, https://www.andrew.cmu.edu/course/80-241/guided_inquiries/articles/its_about_time.html.

3 Dan Buettner, "The Island Where People Forget to Die," *The New York Times*, October 24, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/28/magazine/the-island-where-people-forget-to-die.html.

4 Roundtable, "Lessons from the Blue Zones®."

5 Buettner, "The Island Where People Forget to Die."

Section II: The Collective vs The Individual

In America, the mentality of success is often "every man for himself," with heavy emphasis placed on the individual, leaving many people feeling isolated and struggling with mental health. According to Richard Weissbourd, psychologist and lecturer at Harvard, "[Americans used] to view… individual and collective well-being as powerfully entwined," but we have migrated towards a more individualistic society.[6] This shift is primarily due to American corporations becoming hyper-fixated on profit and less concerned with employee well-being. These combinations have caused a steady decline in American quality of life, as day-to-day life has become more and more of a competition, and "while [competitive] people always existed in society, they were usually identified and treated as outliers that needed to be constrained, not as examples of American greatness."[7] A national survey conducted by Making Caring Common indicated that 34% of Americans aged 18-25 suffer from serious loneliness, and a significant part of the American population is polarized, furthering American unhappiness.[8] The prioritization of efficiency over well-being shows the growing disconnect in priorities, and the pursuit of success rather than happiness.

Conversely, in Ikaria, the stress of time, as well as the fear of loneliness, is virtually absent. Dr. Leriadis states that "[an Ikarian community member] is not likely to ever feel the existential pain of not belonging or even the simple stress of arriving late. Your community makes sure you'll always have something to eat, but peer pressure will get you to contribute something too…even if you're antisocial, you'll never be entirely alone."[9] This boosts quality of life, as a sense of belonging heavily impacts the human experience. Ikarians work to uplift community members in many ways, for example, '"for the many religious and cultural holidays, people pool their money…and if there is money left over, they give it to the poor. It's not a 'me' place. It's an 'us' place,'" said Leriadis.[10] This strong sense of belonging helps any individual feel more comfortable with themselves, as they are accepted in the environment around them, and therefore feel safer, happier, and connected with their community.

Section III: Health and Diet

The fast pace of American life is expressed even in our food culture, as fast-food has replaced home-cooked and nutritious meals, simply because of time constraint. America is not necessarily known for its healthy eating habits, as pop

6 Richard Weissbourd and Chris Murphy, "How Government Can Help Americans Find the Common Good Again," *Time Magazine*, April 11, 2023. https://time.com/6269091/individualism-ahead-of-the-common-good-for-too-long/.

7 Weissbourd, "How Government Can Help Americans Find the Common Good Again."

8 Weissbourd, "How Government Can Help Americans Find the Common Good Again."

9 Buettner, "The Island Where People Forget to Die."

10 Buettner, "The Island Where People Forget to Die."

culture like Super Size Me and the monopoly of fast-food corporations is visible across the world. Because of the previously discussed battle with time, "saving time and effort in shopping for and preparing food will continue to be important for many Americans…[resulting in] changed food patterns, fewer homemade dishes…increased purchase of prepared or convenience foods and frequent eating away from home," perpetuating the reliance on fast food.[11] Rachel Harrison from the NYU School of Global Public Health discusses that dependence on fast foods is directly correlated with lifelong health issues, as "ultra-processed foods are industrially manufactured, ready-to-eat or heat, include additives, and are largely devoid of whole foods…higher consumption of ultra-processed foods is associated with obesity and heart disease."[12] The rising production of sugary candy, beverages and foods almost kicks Americans as they are down, as they tend to be more accessible and efficient than healthy options.

Instead of buying products at a grocery or convenience store, Ikarians are primarily self-sustaining. A typical meal is "almost always beans (lentils, garbanzos), potatoes, greens (fennel, dandelion or a spinach like green called horta) and whatever seasonal vegetables their garden produced; dinner was bread and goat's milk," as well as remedial teas consumed nightly.[13] The Ikarian diet is comprised of homegrown potatoes, beans, greens, as well as locally produced goat milk and honey. Like Mediterranean diets, olive oil and vegetables are a main component, rather than diary and meat. Buettner found that "[these] dietary tendencies [are]…linked to increased life spans: low intake of saturated fats from meat and dairy [is] associated with lower risk of heart disease; olive oil… reduced bad cholesterol and raised good cholesterol," as well as additional benefits reaped from greens, goat milk, wine and coffee.[14] Contrary to the United States, Ikaria has "the cheapest, most accessible foods [that] are also the most healthful."[15] Since Ikarians typically grow their own food, they also have a better concept of what they are consuming.

Section IV: An Anecdote on Terminal Sickness and Blue Zones

In his New York Times article "The Island Where People Forget to Die," Buettner introduces the story of Stamatis Moraitis, who lived in the United States, and whose return to Ikaria extended his life by adopting a nourishing diet and returning to a cleaner atmosphere. Moraitis, Ikarian native and Greek war veteran, came to the United States in 1943 for treatment from a gunshot wound during his

11 Institute of Medicine, *Ensuring safe food: From production to consumption* (Washington: National Academies Press, 1998), 53.

12 Rachel Harrison, "Americans Are Eating More Ultra-Processed Foods," *NYU School of Global Public Health*, October 14, 2021, https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2021/october/ultra-processed-foods.html.

13 Buettner, "The Island Where People Forget to Die."

14 Buettner, "The Island Where People Forget to Die."

15 Buettner, "The Island Where People Forget to Die."

time in the Greek armed forces.[16] Eventually, he settled down in Boynton Beach, Florida, marrying a Greek-American woman and starting a family of three children, working every day to achieve the American Dream. Then, in 1976, Moraitis fell ill, and was given nine months to live, confirmed by nine different American doctors. Buettner describes that Moraitis debated receiving severe cancer treatment in United States, but ultimately decided to return to Ikaria. Moraitis lived a fulling 30 more years. His return to Ikaria was extremely beneficial for Moraitis, as he never took drugs to combat his cancer, nor did he undergo any chemotherapy, "all he did was move home to Ikaria."[17] Moraitis says, "I've done nothing else except eat pure food, pure wine, pure herbs…the clean air, the atmosphere, the food, all of them together…here it is clean, you breathe clean oxygen."[18]

Conclusion

Though the blue zone lifestyle is incompatible with the American way of life, it is still possible to incorporate certain practices into day-to-day life. In the United States, we live in a society that prioritizes profit over prosperity, so the stress present in our lives is not any fault of our own. Evaluating aspects of your life that cause you stress is the first step to achieving a blue zone lifestyle. Slowing your breath, walking slower, and becoming more mindful of the food you are consuming can help to reduce unnecessary stress, potentially increasing lifespan. Because of its more relaxed structure of time, a focus on the community, and care of health, Ikaria and the other blue zones serve as examples of near utopian societies. The Ikarian emphasis on human happiness and connection are paramount to the concerns of time and money plaguing other communities. Americans deserve a life with a little more relaxation and joy, and taking inspiration from blue zones can help us achieve a more fulfilling life.

16 Buettner, "The Island Where People Forget to Die."
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