

PROLOGUE

Ikigai: A mysterious word

THIS BOOK FIRST came into being on a rainy night in Tokyo, when its authors sat down together for the first time in one of the city's tiny bars.

We had read each other's work but had never met, thanks to the thousands of miles that separate Barcelona from the capital of Japan. Then a mutual acquaintance put us in touch, launching a friendship that led to this project and seems destined to last a lifetime.

The next time we got together, a year later, we strolled through a park in downtown Tokyo and ended up talking about trends in Western psychology, specifically logotherapy, which helps people find their purpose in life.

We remarked that Viktor Frankl's logotherapy had gone out of fashion among practicing therapists, who favored other schools of psychology, though people still search for meaning in what they do and how they live. We ask ourselves things like:

What is the meaning of my life?

Is the point just to live longer, or should I seek a higher purpose?

Why do some people know what they want and have a passion for life, while others languish in confusion?

At some point in our conversation, the mysterious word *ikigai* came up.

This Japanese concept, which translates roughly as "the happiness of always being busy," is like logotherapy, but it goes a step beyond. It also seems to be one way of explaining the extraordinary longevity of the Japanese, especially on the island of Okinawa, where there are 24.55 people over the age of 100 for every 100,000 inhabitants—far more than the global average.

Those who study why the inhabitants of this island in the south of Japan live longer than people anywhere else in the world believe that one of the keys—in

addition to a healthful diet, a simple life in the outdoors, green tea, and the subtropical climate (its average temperature is like that of Hawaii)—is the *ikigai* that shapes their lives.

While researching this concept, we discovered that not a single book in the fields of psychology or personal development is dedicated to bringing this philosophy to the West.

Is *ikigai* the reason there are more centenarians in Okinawa than anywhere else? How does it inspire people to stay active until the very end? What is the secret to a long and happy life?

As we explored the matter further, we discovered that one place in particular, Ogimi, a rural town on the north end of the island with a population of three thousand, boasts the highest life expectancy in the world—a fact that has earned it the nickname the Village of Longevity.

Okinawa is where most of Japan's *shikuwasa*—a limelike fruit that packs an extraordinary antioxidant punch—comes from. Could that be Ogimi's secret to long life? Or is it the purity of the water used to brew its Moringa tea?

We decided to go study the secrets of the Japanese centenarians in person. After a year of preliminary research we arrived in the village—where residents speak an ancient dialect and practice an animist religion that features long-haired forest sprites called *bunagaya*—with our cameras and recording devices in hand. As soon as we arrived we could sense the incredible friendliness of its residents, who laughed and joked incessantly amid lush green hills fed by crystalline waters.

As we conducted our interviews with the eldest residents of the town, we realized that something far more powerful than just these natural resources was at work: an uncommon joy flows from its inhabitants and guides them through the long and pleasurable journey of their lives.

Again, the mysterious *ikigai*.

But what is it, exactly? How do you get it?

It never ceased to surprise us that this haven of nearly eternal life was located precisely in Okinawa, where two hundred thousand innocent lives were lost at the end of World War II. Rather than harbor animosity toward outsiders, however, Okinawans live by the principle of *ichariba chode*, a local expression that means “treat everyone like a brother, even if you’ve never met them before.”

It turns out that one of the secrets to happiness of Ogimi's residents is feeling like part of a community. From an early age they practice *yuimaaru*, or teamwork, and so are used to helping one another.

Nurturing friendships, eating light, getting enough rest, and doing regular, moderate exercise are all part of the equation of good health, but at the heart of the *joie de vivre* that inspires these centenarians to keep celebrating birthdays and cherishing each new day is their *ikigai*.

The purpose of this book is to bring the secrets of Japan's centenarians to you and give you the tools to find your own *ikigai*.

Because those who discover their *ikigai* have everything they need for a long and joyful journey through life.

Happy travels!

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