Klaus Brinkbäumer and Samiha Shafy

HOW TO LIVE SMARTLY, JOYFULLY, HEALTHILY, EXUBERANTLY, HAPPILY – AND VERY LONG

The Wisdom of Centenarians: A World Tour

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Overview:

These are the big questions: How can you lead a fulfilled life? What aspects of our life can we control – and how? What, when all is said and done, are people who have grown very old proud of? And what fills them with regret? How do relationships shape our lives, what influence do culture and diet, exercise, genes, and education and affluence have? Klaus Brinkbäumer and Samiha Shafy travelled to Sardinia, Okinawa (Japan), and Loma Linda (California) to find out why so many more people in these places live a whole lot longer than everybody else. Their journey then took them across Europe and beyond, to Russia, China, Thailand, Hawaii, African islands and the US East Coast. How can you lead a fulfilled life? Turns out scientists have some ideas, but the truly interesting answers are coming from the centenarians themselves.

About the Authors:

Klaus Brinkbäumer, born in 1967, is a journalist, TV presenter, and author. He studied at the University of California Santa Barbara and started his journalistic career at Munich's *Abendzeitung*. For 25 years, he worked for *Der Spiegel* as a reporter, author of numerous cover stories, and its America correspondent (2007-2011). During this period, he was regularly interviewed in the US media. He became the magazine's deputy editor-in-chief in 2011 and editor-in-chief in 2015. Brinkbäumer has been awarded numerous journalistic prizes, including the Egon Erwin Kirsch Prize, the Nannen Prize and the German Reporter Prize, and was

named editor-in-chief of the year in 2016. Since April 2019, he has been writing for the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* and working on documentary films.

Samiha Shafy, born in 1979, studied environmental sciences at the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule (ETH) in Zurich and Lausanne. She worked for the *Tages-Anzeiger*, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, and *Vanity Fair* before joining *Der Spiegel* as a science editor in 2007. In 2011-12 she was a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University, and in 2013, she became a foreign correspondent for *Der Spiegel*, where she writes about geopolitics and climate change.

Brinkbäumer and Shafy are currently based in New England. Their son Alexej was born in New York City in February 2019.

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SOLVING THE MYSTERY, I.

He could have died a long time ago, he should have died a long time ago, which is why even though now he intuits many things (because he knows what he's doing) and knows even more things (because he's proven them), that everything to do with luck is screamingly unfair is something he felt and lived through firsthand. He sensed it, knew it, and then he experienced it: without luck, you don't stand a chance, and it certainly was a close call.

Dr. Makoto Suzuki was 52 years young when he had his heart attack. He just fell over at work. His knees bent, he sank to the ground, he lay in a coma for seven days. And as is so often the case in life, today it must be said: All this could have easily turned out in a completely different way.

But he was lucky.

And that's why at the end of our long journey into the world of the very, very old we finally arrived at Makoto Suzuki's home on Okinawa, in the south of Japan.

In December 2018, Dr. Suzuki, an 85-year-old scientist, still in the office on a daily basis, in the clinic, in the laboratory, still searching for insights – this Dr. Suzuki is the scientist who made the discovery that Okinawa, this always comfortably warm archipelago of 161 islands in the south of Japan, is an almost blessedly lucky place: The people here become older than other people. Much older. And there are many people who become much older here.

But why?

"Ikigai," says Makoto Suzuki.

And then: "My ikigai is the search for precisely this secret."

"Ikigai" is a big Japanese word. It means the reason for being, it means true fulfillment. Why do we get up in the morning?

What do we really want?

What carries us, what supports us, what is truly important to us?

Ikigai means our passion, our calling, our mission, our vocation (hopefully), and it means our love. Ikigai is the art of unconditionally and calmly doing exactly what is meaningful, what makes us happy. And thus ikigai is also the art of not being stressed and distracted. Ikigai does not stop: In Japan there is no word for “pension” or “retirement,” because it is in the nature of “ikigai” that a vocation never ends – at least not before death. Ikigai is our *raison d'être*, as the French would put it.

So the man who first discovered the secret of Okinawa and has been exploring it ever since sits in an inconspicuous low-rise building ten kilometers north of Naha, the administrative headquarters of Okinawa Prefecture. You have to find the parking lot behind the house, the back entrance, the stairs, the first floor, and then you have to take off your shoes as in most rooms on Okinawa.

Suzuki is a small, slender, bent man who wears round glasses and a loose, blue shirt with an open collar. He collects his files on shelves, hundreds, thousands of files, from all the hundred-year-old Okinawans. He sits there calmly, but his hands knead his mobile phone.

Today, he says, he is too old to go north, but today many of these old and very, very old people live in the nursing homes of Naha. 40 years ago he did precisely that: He drove to the north.

When talking about Okinawa, that is, the main island of this realm of often tiny, regularly flooded islands, it would be correct to say “Okinawa Hontō,” or Okinawa main island, which we shorten in this book for the sake of readability: Okinawa. Okinawa, once a kingdom of its own named Ryūkyū, has only belonged to the rest of Japan – 515 kilometers away – since 1871. It has 1.2 million inhabitants and is exactly 107 kilometers long and between three and 31 kilometers wide. There is still a huge US military base here, which is still controversial: almost every election is about how to deal with the Americans, in how harsh or mild a manner, and also why Okinawa is not taken so seriously in distant Tokyo.

The climate: subtropical. The average temperature is around 23 degrees Celsius, because in summer it's usually 27 or 28 degrees and in winter 17 or 16. “There’s rainfall about half the year, a total of over 2000 mm. In autumn Okinawa is regularly hit by typhoons.” You can find all this on Wikipedia.

For Makoto Suzuki, the project of his life that came to him at the beginning of the 1970s was rather accidental. He was a cardiologist in Tokyo at the time, and his

unique career just began when he was invited to Melbourne, Australia. And that's how life plays out: An invitation to Okinawa followed while he was in Melbourne. It was complicated to come here because Okinawa was still occupied by the US military. He was only allowed to stay for two days, but he liked this tropical island, and a little later Okinawa was returned to Japan. Dr. Suzuki was now allowed to come back and stayed, then he founded a medical school.

An assistant told him, "It is said that people who are one hundred years old live in the north." Dr. Suzuki took his stethoscope and got on the northbound bus and road to Tokuno Shima. There he hardly understood the language, which, according to all the experts, was a very peculiar dialect. He stood alone on a market square. Nobody there. Then a few people. "And a woman with a bamboo basket came and invited me to her house. Gave me tea. She looked like a seventy-year-old, and I told her I was looking for centenarians. She said she was one hundred years old."

That's rare, Suzuki told her.

No, not so rare, we have many centenarians here, two or three more in this village, the old woman said.

That was the beginning. In 1975, the Ministry of Health and Welfare in Tokyo decided to fund the "Okinawa Centenarian Study" and appointed Suzuki as project leader.

There were 32 centenarians on Okinawa at the time, almost 45 years ago, 660 in all of Japan. Since Japan has 47 prefectures, there would only be six centenarians for Okinawa's population. And, the real miracle: 28 of those 32 were perfectly healthy. Alert. And satisfied.

Why? Was it the magic word: ikigai?

The reason for living?

"Yes, ikigai," says Suzuki, "they all had a reason. A meaning. Happiness, if that exists. But at that time I didn't know anything about it. I only knew: what a riddle, what a secret! How special! That's why I decided to start with this work. And I wouldn't have thought it would take so much time to fill my own life so completely."

Today, in December 2018, there are exactly 1,197 people living in Okinawa who are at least 100 years old. Much is different compared to 45 years ago. More than half now live alone in their homes, lie in bed or are even senile, Suzuki says. Not even half

of them are still active, “the sense of family and nutrition have also changed here, as everywhere else in the world.”

It is non-sensical, it is absurd. The world is getting smarter, and the world is getting stupider at the same time. Many people know how to live contentedly for 100 years and yet behave in such a way that they will never make it. Dr. Suzuki is right in the middle of the blissful region where everything blooms and grows that is healthy and tastes good to boot, but he sees young people running to McDonald’s today and to Kentucky Fried Chicken tomorrow. “They eat far too much meat, drink too much, aren’t active enough, even here.” In all the hard years, in the war and afterward, people here ate sweet potatoes from their own fields – prosperity has brought American fast food to Okinawa.

And are men perhaps dumber than women?

One finding of the past ten years is that the life expectancy of Okinawa women continues to rise, but that of men does not. “Young men like sake. They're not so much interested in the length of life, they live in the present, exclusively,” says Suzuki, “and of course they don’t want to live in the country at all.”

If you sum it up, Makoto Suzuki learned these ten lessons in the four and a half decades of his work:

1. The right diet is important, a kind of diet culture. Vegetables, tofu, fruit: everything that is healthy grows on Okinawa. Tobacco, alcohol, and caffeine are taboo.
2. Small portions are smart, so small plates are common on Okinawa. “*Hara hachi bu*” is what it’s called here: Eat only until your stomach is 80 percent full. In Okinawa, average adults eat just under 1,900 calories a day; in the USA they eat twice as much.
3. Staying active is important. This doesn’t have to be a sport, but people have legs so they can walk. And people can swim, and if they can’t, they can learn.
4. Mental and social health are important. Let’s work with this Japanese word ikigai for now before we get into the details. At some point you have to be able to leave defeats and grief behind. This leads to spiritual health. Suzuki met a centenarian who had lost her husband and four children in the war. The woman told him: I’m exhausted. I can't talk about the war anymore. But today I have something to eat,

something to drink, and none of that happened during the war. It is unnecessary to only think sadly of yesterday. I'm doing well.
5. Never being stressed, but always meaningfully busy … this balance is healthy.
6. Curiousity is crucial. People understand and learn what they are doing, and if it is always the same, people eventually become dull and bored. Even brain cells age (this process begins between the ages of 20 and 30). A new language, a new game, a new hobby or new details of everyday tasks – "we must also be active in the spiritual sense," says Suzuki.
7. Family and friends are important. There is the Moai system on Okinawa: people come together, eat together, discuss, try to solve problems together. The Moai tradition is still cultivated today in Naha: Groups of people with common interests meet once each month. They all give a small contribution, with which everyone in the circle can be helped. Moai is the modern family because loneliness is bad and isolation kills.
8. Concentration is a new key to happiness in old age. Modern people are all too distracted. Multitasking is regarded as a talent. According to Suzuki, "Putting the phone down and fully devoting oneself to something is very, very healthy."
9. We have to do what we really want to do as often as possible for as long as possible. And we should do what we have to do as briefly as possible. And humor helps.
10. Don't forget: People should sleep – and this too should be done completely, devotedly, without a smartphone on the bedside table. Your cells and thus the whole complicated body should recover during sleep. At night, nothing but sleep should be our ikigai.

The people of Okinawa have fewer – and later – cancer and heart attacks than other people. Compared to the USA, there are five times less cardiovascular diseases and four times less prostate and breast cancer. They get dementia more rarely and later. Their sex hormones are even more numerous in old age.

According to Suzuki, in the West, diseases are only noticed and treated when they are there. The people of Okinawa are preventative.

Suzuki presented his first results and theses in 1986 at a congress of gerontologists in Hamburg. Germans, Italians, and Americans were there, many pathologists, and the scientists got a first idea that there are these few special places

where people live differently, perhaps happier, possibly demonstrably longer than elsewhere. A journalist painted blue circles around Okinawa and Sardinia, and this is how the technical term “blue zones” was created.

Why there, why not elsewhere? What is the blue zones’ secret to success?

We were interested in this when we started our trip around the world to the oldest people, and above all we are interested in the even bigger questions: How do you live a long, above all a good, fulfilled life?

What aspects can we influence – and how?

What are people who become very old proud of, and what do they regret?

So how do they look back at their 100 years at the very end – and what can we learn from that?

Suzuki couldn’t travel so much after his heart attack, but the world had become curious, which is why the world now came to him. He was visited by Bradley and Craig Willcox, two young scientists from Canada. They were enthusiastic, joined his projects in 1994, and the three of them wrote the book “The Okinawa Program,” which became an international bestseller. We’ll hear about the Willcox brothers later.

Makoto Suzuki says he could live to be 100 years old. He undoubtedly knows how it works: he eats vegetables, tofu, and fish, calls himself a “semi-vegetarian.” And he loves his family, his wife, his two daughters, his two grandchildren. Without question he has found his ikigai. He gives lectures, still works in cardiology, still interviews (if he doesn’t have to drive too far) the hundred-year-old Okinawans. He spends plenty of time outdoors, because Okinawa is bright and the sunlight is healthy for us: vitamin D strengthens the immune system and bones and protects against diabetes, high blood pressure and allegedly, according to Suzuki, even against some cancers. He doesn’t play sports, but on weekends he works on his farm, watering, sowing, harvesting.

“That should be enough,” says Dr. Suzuki.

ROGER'S JOURNEY, I.

The old man is very old. Consequently, it's a long time ago that he was young. This is a banal realization, on the one hand. But it is also shocking, on the other. How quickly it all passes, how quickly so much is over for all time.

The old man remembers exactly the child he was, he also remembers his parents' divorce. He was eight years old then, and afterwards he had to stay with his father, who was a lawyer and had no idea how it worked: being a father.

"Ages ago, so infinitely long ago, and yet so near," the old man says and talks about his eleven pets, about his sister Nancy, who is long dead, just like of course all the pets and unfortunately all the other people. The list of the dead is long, and it is extended on a nearly daily basis.

Green trousers, a blue sweater, a blue shirt and round glasses are worn by the old man who has white hair and a white mustache, swollen fingers, swollen knees, who walks bent and sits bent, but is alert, quick-witted, sarcastic and perceptive, a New York observer for decades, a New Yorker through and through: Roger Angell, 95, when we first met.

Will he become 100?

He'd like to.

He doesn't have to.

He knows very well, as mentioned, that they are all long gone, his family, his friends, even a daughter, and also all the dogs, one after the other. So now Andy, the new Fox Terrier, lies on the couch and smacks and grunts. And his master knows that it could come to pass that he, Roger, doesn't wake up tomorrow morning, or that a heart attack hits during a walk in Central Park, or that he falls, just like that, and that after such a fall the decay accelerates.

"Professional athletes are driven by their own pride," says Angell, "but nothing drives me anymore. Staying alive would be a good idea. But pride no longer occupies me. My eyes occupy me, they're worn out, that's a big loss." He thinks a little, then says, "Oh, whatever will happen, will happen."

We're here because Angell can talk and write about all this damn aging and possibly even dying like no other, so funny and so ruthlessly, the old man has been writing for the *New Yorker* for over six decades. We visit him in his apartment on

Madison Avenue on the Upper East Side in Manhattan because we hope he will live to be 100 years old and we want to accompany him on this journey.

There is a grand piano in the apartment, and sheet music by Schubert and Schumann on it. Books and CDs on the shelves. Parquet. White armchairs.

“In truth, the *New Yorker* was my life. My loadstar. My identity. My home. It was always there. And I never wanted to do anything but write for the *New Yorker*.” Roger Angell was an author and editor, always switching. As a literary editor, he was responsible for Alice Munro, Vladimir Nabokov and John Updike, as a reporter he wrote about everything that happened. Even as a writer he tried to write some short stories, but “I didn't have enough to say for novels or short stories,” he says.

He has been there for all the great editors-in-chief at the *New Yorker*, including Tina Brown, who advised him to write more personally and directly, and now David Remnick, who is so present and powerful, expanding the paper around podcasts, blogs, all the daily digital journalism. And all of them, all the editors-in-chief, gave Roger Angell time and space for research and writing: what a reporter needs, even if that reporter is 95 years old.

His first piece for the periodical of his life was short: about a plane crash, he had happened to be nearby. Angell wasn't hired immediately afterwards, which he felt was the impertinence of The New Yorker, which is why he went to Holiday magazine and made himself famous. And after ten years the *New Yorker* called, and Roger Angell's real life began. The one filled with meaning.

There was also a second one, as a fan of the New York Yankees. He was more like a lover, the word sounds higher than “fan.” And because Angell was supposed to write personally, with passion and feeling, he wrote wonderful baseball stories, most recently about the insanely self-destructive Alex Rodriguez, about the tireless Mariano Rivera, about the manager Joe Torre whom Roger Angell admired above all, “because he never embarrassed his own players. Joe was a speaker, a narrator. In my life as a reporter, I’ve collected the speakers and narrators because they fill your notebook.” Angell then became famous as a baseball writer.

During the last strike, when the players wanted more money and the owners of the clubs were against it, Angell wrote a story about fathers and sons. “The fathers loved the game so much and couldn’t play it; the sons had the young women, the fame. Elegant, powerful, youthful, they smashed the ball out of the stadium.” It was a

story of envy: the sons, of course the baseball pros, and the fathers, the club owners. In truth, it was all about transience, youth, and growing old.

The old man says he was never a fast writer. Always only one project, one story, one text at the same time, and then the second, the third version, word for word and sentence for sentence. Linear, that's what he calls this way of working, which was perfectly in keeping with the essence of baseball. "A lot of time passes in baseball, and only one thing happens at a time, the throw, the swing, the strike or hit, perhaps five seconds of action, then time passes again. In ice hockey, a lot more happens at the same time, but it'd be a mistake to think that baseball is simple. Or writing."

There were turning points in this old man's life, decisive moments.

At some point, when still in school, Roger decided to skip afternoon classes and go to the movies. A revelation. And from then on every day, he skipped in the afternoon and off to the cinema, preferably two films after another. He never confessed it to anyone, and this is how he learned to tell stories.

He graduated from college in 1942, was immediately drafted, was in the Pacific, but not in danger.

Then his first marriage, too quick, too early, a young woman in the editorial staff of the *New Yorker*, Evelyn. A brave woman, despite diabetes, she was the boss of the young family, around 20 years long. Two children. And finally the divorce.

The suicide of his elder daughter, much later, without explanation, without announcement.

The second marriage. It is the privilege of the hundred- or nearly hundred-year-old that a 20-year-old marriage can be followed by a 48-year-old marriage. The marriage to Carol, the woman of his life, whom he met at the *New Yorker*, held. "We were great together. Carol was both very modest and thoroughly self-confident," he says. Carol was an opera lover, which is why Roger feared she would leave him for Pavarotti … oh, he still misses Carol today.

Despite Peggy. Peggy brings in the tea, Peggy is his third wife and by no means inferior to Roger. An English teacher who also writes and edits an art magazine. The two met for the first time many years ago, but then they were both married. Then Peggy's husband Harvey died. Then Carol died.

Roger wrote a postcard to Peggy. Peggy brought Roger a roasted chicken. For two years now they had been married at the time of our first encounter, January 2016. They smile, of course this late wedding was right, they say, every single day is now nicer than it would be if they were alone.

May we ask how old you are, Peggy?

Peggy: “67.”

Roger: “What?”

Peggy: “I forgot to tell you that.”

The lovers giggle.

Oh, a life full of landmarks, so many decisions, there were actually hundreds of those moments, in which a completely different direction would have been possible.

Only there was no career plan, the career simply happened. When he was young, this old man had this longing for the *New Yorker*, and when he had finally arrived there, he did what he liked to do.

But there were important people. His mother, his father, his stepfather.

The father was the active one. He dragged his son to museums, to tennis, to canoeing, to baseball. Then the son wrote a short story about a father who had a heart attack while playing tennis, and a little later on, the heart attack happened in real life.

The mother was an editor at the *New Yorker*. Supportive, certainly loving, but not a big hugger. Very, very involved with the *New Yorker*.

And the stepfather was E. B. White, the poet and *New Yorker* author, his role model, the grandmaster. Angell still hears the sound of the typewriter. E. B. White, what a hero. There was a second house in Maine, where the stepfather kept chickens. There he was a farmer. And in the middle of it stood E. B. White and the typewriter.

And today: aging. A reason to be grateful, of course, old age is good fortune, but it is also a plague. “You have lost so many friends. All the old people want to be 17 again, want to live as they used to, and they can’t,” Roger says. He would also like to have back the New York of yore: the city that wasn’t so noisy yet, where there were still neighborhoods, in other words, cobblers, plumbers, market stalls and shops, and not just rich people here on the Upper East Side. Roger moved into this apartment in 1972, it was the New York of Vladimir Horowitz and Woody Allen (who was then still a stand-up comedian, very fast, very precise, all so long ago). “What a social mix,” says Roger. “Some people in this city were just at peace with themselves and

harmonious," says Peggy. Well, "if I'm honest," he says, "I still love New York. It's just different today than it was back then."

The *New Yorker* is also different. Less personable, less warm. The collegiality is gone, everyone sits quietly at their tables. "It's Remnick's *New Yorker* now, a global approach, texts from everywhere," says Roger, who still has a desk in the editorial office but has not been a full-time employee since 1994.

There's a Sinatra CD playing.

Regrets ... he has a few.

But then again ... too few to mention?

No, he regrets some things greatly because they were important. Roger Angell says he was not very careful with the most important personal relationships. He showed little empathy and much arrogance towards his parents. And no, his parents were not the only ones affected by his arrogance.

Three reasons for Roger Angell turning 95: Genes, luck, doctors. More specifically, the stents in his blood vessels. He did not live particularly healthily, still loves steak and ice cream. "When I was a young man, people were ancient at 60," Roger says. Ten years ago, he started memorizing poems, he masters 30 of them. We listen to him recite Walt Whitman.

For him, hardly being able to read is the greatest loss of his late years. Roger and Peggy enjoyed "The Odyssey" over the past few days as an audio book, and it was exactly that, a pleasure.

So do these two literally make the best of it? It seems so.

What doesn't stop: humor. On the way to Central Park, very slowly and step by step, Roger Angell sees some weeds by the wayside and says, "Come on, let's smoke that." Peggy needs ten seconds before she understands, but then they both laugh.