



Thoughts from Linda:

Ikigai
*The Japanese Secret to a
Long and Happy Life*

by Héctor García and Francesc Miralles
2017(translated version) from the Spanish
Ikigai: Los secretos de Japon para una
vida larga y feliz

“An uncommon joy”—this is the phrase these two authors use to describe the powerful energy that emerges from some of the eldest people on our planet, who live in a rural town on the north end of the island of Okinawa called Ogimi.

The population of this village is 3,000, and it has earned the term “The Village of Longevity” from researchers and the Guinness Book of Records. In the village, a small stone marker reads (roughly translated), *“At 80, you are merely a youth. At 90, if your ancestors invite you into heaven, ask them to wait until you are 100 – and then, you might consider it.”*

At the latest count, 15 of Ogimi’s 3,000 villagers are centenarians, and 171 are in their 90’s. Even in Japan, which has more than 70,000 people aged 100 or over, that is a remarkable statistic. By way of reference, the United Nations estimates that there are 573,000 people over 100 world-wide.

So, as we begin a new year, 2023, and many people are involved in that ritual of “New Year Resolutions” –many of which have to do with health and happiness—this book seems like a good one to highlight.

According to the Japanese, everyone has an *ikigai*—a reason for living, and finding that reason is the key to a long and happy life. This concept is fully explained in García and Miralles’s short, easy-to-read book. They note that *ikigai* is where our mission, passion, and vocation intersect and is one of the reasons we bring inspiration and joy to our lives. They note that the concept includes staying active for our entire life, as indicated by the fact that the Japanese do not even have a word for ‘retire’ in their

language. To quote a Japanese proverb: “Only staying active will make you want to live a hundred years.”

Both authors are global researchers and journalists with diverse backgrounds. Héctor García was born in Spain and worked at CERN in Switzerland before moving to Japan, where he obtained citizenship 15 years ago. When not writing, he works in the IT industry. Francesc Miralles was born in Barcelona, Spain, and has traveled the world as a journalist, musician, and author. He has written over 20 books, both fiction and non-fiction. He is best known for his work in young adult fiction, having won the 2002 *Gran Angular* award in Spain for his novel *Un haiku per l’Alicia*. The book, *Ikigai*, has been translated into 57 languages and, weirdly enough, has the strange honor of being the most translated book ever initially written in Spanish.

The authors initially connected over deep conversations on the meaning of life and man’s purpose. They explored the works of Victor Frankl’s logotherapy and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s approach to ‘flow.’ They discovered that no current English book adequately explored the concepts of *ikigai* and the underlying philosophies and decided to write one together. In the book, they highlight the fundamental principles behind Frankl and Csikszentmihalyi’s work and relate those to the Japanese approach to ‘Morita therapy,’ developed before Frankl’s work by Shoma Morita, a Zen Buddhist, and therapist in Japan.

The book lays out the story and philosophy of *ikigai* in nine chapters entitled: *Ikigai* (The Art of Staying Young While Growing Old,) Antiaging Secrets, From Logotherapy to *Ikigai*, Find Flow in Everything You Do, Masters of Longevity, Lessons from Japan’s Centenarians, The *Ikigai* Diet, Gentle Movements, Longer Life and Resilience and *Wabi-sabi*.

The Japanese characters that form the word *ikigai* itself mean “life” and “to be worthwhile.” In searching for how *ikigai* connects to longevity, the authors interviewed over 150 individuals. They revealed the results in the chapter dealing with the Blue Zones of the world, as initially analyzed by Dan Buettner in his book of the same name. *Ikigai* mentions five specific areas: Okinawa, Japan; Sardinia, Italy; Ikaria, Greece; The Nicoya Peninsula, Costa Rica; and finally, Loma Linda, California, where people live longer than anywhere on earth.

They focus their energy on Okinawa and have a fascinating chapter on the “Village of Longevity,” Ogimi, where they explain the strong connection of community and friendship to *ikigai*. They explain the concept of the *moai*—community groups, informal in structure but consisting of individuals connected for life, providing emotional,

physical, and, if needed, financial support to each other. In fact, for many Okinawans, serving their *moai* becomes their *ikigai*.

They tell a fascinating story of Steve Jobs in Japan, where he spent much time over his life. Most people are familiar with his devotion to calligraphy (known as *shodo* in Japanese) and its influence on the development of fonts in our world today. Still, few may know of his devotion to the excellence expressed by a Japanese technique practiced by Yukio Shakunga, known as Etchu Seto-Yaki, known by only a few. Steve Jobs bought many pieces of fine porcelain from Shakunga, a master in the art of ancient porcelain, in keeping with his devotion to precision and sophisticated simplicity in all detail. The authors do not go into Steve Jobs' *ikigai*, but the inferences are clear and interesting.

There is much to learn from this little book. The "ten rules of *ikigai*," distilled mainly from the long lives of Okinawans, are:

1. **Stay active; don't retire**—Keep doing things that bring you joy, bring beauty, or utility to others, even after your 'official' professional activity has ended.
2. **Take it slow**—Quoting an old saying, "Walk slowly and you'll go far."
3. **Don't fill your stomach**—Less is more when it comes to longevity. Use the 80% rule (stop eating when you have reached this degree of fullness.)
4. **Surround yourself with good friends**—Friends are the best medicine, and the concept of *moai* is instructional.
5. **Get in shape for your next birthday**—The body you move through life in needs a bit of daily maintenance to keep it running for a long time. Plus, exercise releases hormones that make us feel happy.
6. **Smile**—A cheerful attitude is not only relaxing, but it also helps to make friends.
7. **Reconnect with nature**—Though most people live in cities, human beings are made to be a part of the natural world.
8. **Give thanks**—To your ancestors, nature, and all things you are grateful for. Spend time every day with this practice.
9. **Live in the moment**—Stop regretting the past and fearing the future. Make the most of today.
10. **Follow your *ikigai***—There is a passion inside you, a unique talent that gives meaning to your days and drives you to share the best of yourself until the very end. As Viktor Frankl says, "if you don't know what your own *ikigai* is yet, your mission in life is to discover it."

This book gives a delightful start to a New Year and provides a guidebook for happiness, reflecting on the art and science behind 'staying young while growing old.' Add this one to your library.