

All Is Well

THE ART {AND SCIENCE}
OF PERSONAL WELL-BEING



Marilynn Preston

Author of America's longest-running healthy lifestyle column

Introduction

It was 1972, in Chicago, and my husband and I made a bold and crazy decision to take our 10-speed bicycles to France and ride through the gorgeous vineyards of Bordeaux and Burgundy. We had no idea what we were getting into.

I decided I'd better "get in shape"—whatever that means—so one day I walked over to the park across from our apartment and went for a run. Only a few blocks, just to see how it felt.

I'll tell you how it felt. It was a near-death experience. My lungs nearly exploded. My heart was in my throat, the size of a honeydew. My legs—in complete shock—grew roots. I stumbled home and collapsed on my bed. I was out of breath, out of condition, and out of excuses: How could so little physical exercise make me feel like such a big lump of nothing good?

I somehow survived, loved that first bike trip to France, and came home with a bottomless curiosity to know more about my body and how to keep all its moving parts juiced and happy.

I've always been fascinated by the miracle that is the human body, how it works and plays. I grew up saying I wanted to be a doctor but never took a single pre-med course. After getting a Masters degree in journalism, my first job was in New York as a science writer for Medical World News. But at the time of my Doomsday running experience, I had a dream job at the Chicago Tribune, reviewing movies, theater, TV, and interviewing way too many Hollywood celebrities.

I was also writing feature stories on pretty much whatever interested me, which allowed me many trips to La-La Land in the '70s to research these new things called "holistic health" and "integrative medicine" and the "mind-body connection."

It was all happening in California. In Chicago, in 1976, yoga and yogurt were interchangeable terms and most people considered the mind-body connection another name for the neck.

After a few years of deeper exploration, including a five-part series on Pyramid Power, I went to Mike Argirion, the features editor at the Tribune, and pitched him on a new kind of medical column.

The traditional doctor columns were all about pills and pimples, headaches and hemorrhoids, but I wanted to talk to readers about fitness, wellness, injury prevention, stress reduction, smart eating, deep breathing, and a bunch of other subjects that now fit under the expanding and sustainable umbrella of "healthy lifestyle."

Back then, healthy lifestyle wasn't even a concept. Fitness was just beginning to creep into the consciousness of the nation, right up there with CB radio and needlepoint. Jane Fonda was in leg warmers, going for the burn, Jim Fixx was inspiring a running revolution, farmers markets were just for selling pigs and only tough guys belonged to gyms.

Argirion liked my idea. "Bring me some samples," he said, and immediately I reached out to Dr. David Bachman, team physician for the Chicago Bulls, a highly respected sports medicine doc. Smart, easy-going, open-minded.

"It's a column for people like me," I explained to him, "ordinary mortals who want to live healthier, happier lives and need some sound advice about being active and getting fit without damaging vital parts or giving up red wine."

David liked the idea, too, so we teamed up. I created and wrote the column, and David made sure we were giving out safe, sensible, up-to-date information. It started off in the Tribune's Outside section in September 1976 as a weekly Q&A column and I named it "Dr. Jock" (after Dr. Spock): "I'm a runner with knee pain. What do I do?" Or "How can I lose 10 pounds by Christmas?"

It was a hit in Chicago and soon after became a nationally syndicated column running in dozens of newspapers around the country. David and I did a book together, "Dear Dr. Jock: The People's Guide to Sports and Fitness" (published by E.P. Dutton), and after he moved his practice to the ski mountains of Colorado, I collaborated on the column with Dr. Mitchell Sheinkop, a competitive triathlete and another outstanding sports medicine expert in Chicago.

Meanwhile, I was becoming a sports medicine expert myself, journalistically speaking, going way beyond the 10,000 hours mark, researching for columns, interviewing doctors and scientists, reading books, taking courses, living the life, and giving lots of healthy lifestyle talks and workshops. In 1996, I became an ACE certified personal trainer, and then a certified Wellcoach many years later. And after 40 years writing what's become America's longest-running fitness column, I've never stopped being curious about what it means to live a vibrant, exciting, healthy, and happy life. (My latest discovery is the standup desk.)

A lot of what I've learned is in this book, 40 chapters with titles that sound like directives but are really just guidelines. If there's one thing I've learned for sure, it's you can't tell another person what to do.

Well, you can, but it doesn't work. It's not an effective way to help people change. And helping women and men and kids of all ages make positive, powerful changes in their lives is at the heart of "All Is Well: The Art {and Science} of Personal Well-Being."

Link Mind and Body. Live a Big, Juicy Life. Be Your Own Uncle Sam. Explore Endlessly. Think In Pictures. Mind Your Menus. Practice De-Aging. Live Long, Die Happy. Some essays will resonate. Others may sound like California dreaming. All are intended to help you discover what *you* personally value when it comes to living your best life, because that's the only way lifelong change is going to happen.

It's up to you, dear reader. I can inform, inspire, educate, amuse, cajole, and otherwise cheer you on, but when push comes to shove—two excellent ways to burn 100 calories—you're in charge of your own personal well-being. And that's the good news because the more you take charge, study up, and stay vigilant, the greater success you'll experience.

As for my successes over the years, and my failures, I am nothing but grateful. I eventually left that dream job at the Tribune to create and produce a nationally syndicated TV series on sports, fitness and adventure called "Energy Express." It ran in 120 cities, won two Emmys, was honored for excellence by the Women's Sports Foundation and NATPE (National Association of Television Programming Executives) and in the early 2000's, I decided to make Energy Express the name of the column too.

I've done many other things in my work life, including running a successful TV production company and having two plays produced, with a third one in the wings. I've performed on camera as the co-host of two TV series, including "Stay Tuned," a never took off rip-off of "Siskel & Ebert & the Movies" but with two TV critics. I am the founding chair of a life-changing nonprofit called Girls in the Game, and I still work as a relentless board member, helping girls get the healthy lifestyle training they need to become strong, powerful women. I was also the managing partner of a startup that staged the world's first Internet auction of independent films, and I wrote and exec produced a documentary in 1986 called "Adventure Travel in Israel."

I'll stop now.

The one true red thread that runs through everything I've done and believe in lives on in my ongoing column, and now, this book: Be active. Practice kindness. Eat real food. Live your best life. Be happy. Be grateful. Help others.

All is well.

—Marilynn Preston



You always remember the First Time. And my first time experiencing the sensational connection between mind and body happened the weekend I turned 30. It was an aikido workshop led by the late, great co-founder of the Human Potential Movement, George Leonard. "Make your arm strong!" he said. I stretched my right arm out, and powered it up, squeezing as hard as I could until it was straight and strong. George pushed slightly, and down it came, like a child, poking at a balloon. Whoa! What just happened? George suggested a visualization. "Now release any tension and imagine you're sending a beam of light through your arm, past your fingers, beyond the wall, down the street..." Strength through relaxation. I was a woman of steel. It was a mind-blowing, life-changing experience. If I can do this, I remember thinking, what else is possible?

Link Mind and Body.

I want to tell you three real-life stories to make one big point about the mind-body connection. It's real. It's not waiting to be proven some day—it *has* been proven, with scientific rigor, time and time again. Your mind and body are communicating with each other right now, inside you, hormonally, chemically, energetically, whether you're aware of it or not.

Becoming aware is a process of self-discovery. All sexes and ages are welcome. When you sense the connections between your thoughts and emotions, and how your body might be expressing them—back pain, indigestion, fatigue—it's a stunning aha! moment.

You won't blame yourself for every illness or accident, but you'll become open to discovering if there are lessons to be learned, especially about the effects of stress on your health, healing and well-being.

True story one: Sandy's husband died some months ago. They'd been together for nearly 25 years, a warm and compatible second marriage for both. Sandy depended on Bill, and Bill depended on Sandy, in a way that made them excited to be with each other, each trying to make the other happier.

Shortly after Bill died, Sandy stumbled and broke her foot. It was agony added to misery and Sandy didn't understand why it happened.

"I know that Bill is watching over me...so why did I have to fall?"

In time, she answered her own question.

"I was moving too fast. I couldn't bear to be in the house without him, so I sold it right away and moved to a smaller place, and I've been making a lot of fast, reckless decisions ever since."

Sandy decided her broken foot was a sign to slow down, move more cautiously. It's not taking away her deep grief, Sandy says, but her mood is better, and she's making smarter decisions.

Story two: Lew is 87, his wife, Bonnie, is 86, and they've been living happily, independently, outside Chicago, in a house they never want to leave. On a recent Sunday night, Bonnie was taken to the hospital because she had difficulty breathing. It's not a new problem but it's a scary one. Lew spent the day with her in intensive care and came home to an empty house. He had some supper, put himself to bed, and woke up after a few hours, unable to move his legs. This had never happened before. Lew called a neighbor, who called 911, and after two days of hospital tests, his doctors could find nothing physical to explain his sudden paralysis.

"I didn't want to go on without her," Lew figured out the next day, after his legs returned to normal. "That's why my legs wouldn't work."

Lew is home now, and so is Bonnie, both grateful to be together again.

"The body is an amazing thing," Lew says. "It knows more than I do."

Story three: A married couple—tired of cold winters and in love with Northern California—went to look for a home in Marin County. They were all super expensive, so the couple decided they'd sell another piece of real estate they owned before buying something new in California.

But then the tireless realtor took them to see the house of their dreams.

"This is it!" they cheered, lost in real estate rapture. "We'll never find a better place!"

They bid on the house without waiting for the other property to sell, which involved a risky bridge loan among other negatives. But what the heck, they high-fived: no guts, no glory.

The night before signing the offer, the wife suddenly felt the worst pain of her life gripping across her chest, lurching down her right arm. She hadn't fallen, lifted weights or done a crooked handstand in yoga.

"Is this a heart attack?" she wondered. "No! It feels deeply muscular, like someone is twisting my arm."

Her partner jumped to the exact right conclusion.

"We're not buying the house! Look what your body is telling us. If you can't move your right arm, you can't sign the offer. Forget it. We'll wait until the time is right."

The next day the wife saw a wise body worker, fluent in neuromuscular stress, and by noon, her arm was 95 percent better.

And she used it to hug her most understanding partner.

ENERGY EXPRESS-O! All Is One

“Body is not stiff, mind is stiff.”

—K. Pattabhi Jois



GOING DEEPER

Decide for yourself that you want to experience that mind-body connection. There are many paths, but reading about it won't take you there. You need curiosity, an open mind, a teacher and a training that helps you plug into the electrifying flow of energy that develops when your body and mind work in harmony.

Yoga is famous for it. So is training in martial arts, including Qigong, tai chi, aikido, taekwondo, karate. The Alexander Technique can take you there, and so can Feldenkrais, somatics training, and Pilates.

What about fishing? Yes! Hiking in a forest? Absolutely! Posting your 20th tweet of the day? Not so much.

Once you have that felt sense of a body-mind connection, you'll want to keep coming back to it, time and again. It never gets tiresome or boring. Instead, it becomes a way of seeing the interconnectedness of *all* things, inner and outer, humans and rocks, the sea and the stars.

Start where you are. Even if you've never felt the connection before, it is there, waiting for you.



I plan to grow up to be a magnificent elder. Look at the old lady in the punky haircut, they'll say, loved and loving at 93, still hiking, still laughing, still dancing till dawn (OK, midnight). A long life is part luck, part grace and—what else? I'd always wondered. And then I discovered the Blue Zones. The mystery of exceptional aging is no mystery at all. There are guidelines to be followed, insights to be shared, rules we can respect. One of my favorites involves waking up every morning with a passion and a purpose that gives your life meaning. When that ends, so will you.

Live Long, Die Happy.

This is the time of year I live, play and work on a tiny, remote Greek island with no airport and fewer than 3,000 residents, goats included.

It's a beautiful, magical, revelatory place. Be happy for me. A generous spirit is a sign that your healthy lifestyle training is paying off.

Of course, I take the World Wide Web with me, so anxiety is never far away. And neither is the island of Ikaria, one of the world famous Blue Zones, seven well-studied communities where surprisingly large numbers of people live into their 90s and beyond, and are vigorous, healthy, and relatively happy right to the end.

I can see Ikaria from my terrace, high above the Aegean, sipping a glass of cold retsina, chipping away at a chunk of freshly made feta cheese with wild oregano on top. It's a form of research. It inspires me to ask this age-old question:

Why do some people live so much longer than others?

Genetics play only a small part in longevity, 20 percent or less. Much more important are your personal lifestyle choices: What you eat and drink; the amount of physical activity you do; the time you spend with family and friends; how you handle tension, trauma, the ticking of the clock.

Ikaria—25 miles long, 5 miles wide, with healing hot springs that have made it a tourist attraction since 600 B.C.—has been studied up one mountainside and down the other. Blue Zone researchers want to determine what keeps Ikarians living so long, so well, with so little heart disease and diabetes, and virtually no dementia.

Let me repeat that last part before I forget: In Ikaria, dementia is practically unknown. In the U.S. dementia is rampant, costly, and incredibly scary.

In the U.S., only one in nine baby boomers will live to the age of 90, according to Dan Buettner, head of the Blue Zone movement. On Ikaria, one

in three live to 90 and beyond.

Amazing. What do they know that we've forgotten?

You can find the answers in great detail at BlueZones.com. However, here's my summary, after spending some sweet days, walking and talking my way around Ikaria. I hope you're not too busy to read it:

Take your time. To live longer, slow down. On Ikaria, wristwatches are as useless as speed bumps. Ikarians are famous for moving at their own pace, working when they want to work, chilling when they want to chill. I learned that on my first visit there, having lunch with friends at a wonderful little taverna in the port of Agios Kirikos. We all ordered Greek salads. Some of us are still waiting.

Eat your greens. Over 150 kinds of wild greens grow all over the island, and Ikarians enjoy them in a variety of unusual salads and pies. It takes just the slightest bit of courage to stick your fork in. The island greens are a super source of antioxidants and are eaten, like almost everything else, with a splash of olive oil.

Drink herbal tea. Ikarians drink endless cups of tea made from wild mint, chamomile and other local herbs high in compounds that significantly lower blood pressure and decrease their risk of heart disease and dementia.

Take a nap. Ikarians take daily naps (about 30 minutes) at least five times a week. Blue Zone researchers calculate this lowers their risk of heart attacks by 35 percent! In a few of the mountain villages, they sleep by day and work and play through the night. Why? Because they want to.

(FYI: "Based on interviews," says Blue Zones expert Dan Buettner, "we have reason to believe that most Ikarians over 90 are sexually active.")

Keep moving. Many Ikarians live in mountain villages that require vigorous walking. They keep terraced gardens, tend to animals, and get lots of exercise every day without thinking about it.

Connect to community. Ikarians maintain strong social ties to their families, neighbors, and villages. They wake up feeling they have a purpose in life, whether it's tending to the great-grandchildren or feeding their chickens. They take time every day to meet face to face with friends, sipping Ouzo, shooting the breeze.

Eat the Ikarian way. Ikarians thrive on local fresh food, all of it organic and unprocessed. They avoid dairy but consume gallons of goat's milk, as yogurt or cheese. Their version of the gold-standard Mediterranean Diet is high in fruits and vegetables, beans, whole grains, potatoes, and olive oil. They drink a glass or two of local wine—absent nitrates and pesticides. (Some folks think it tastes like rotted leaf mulch; I like it. It could be a case of mind over matter.) And they benefit hugely from daily doses of their local honey, a thick amber-colored concoction rich in anti-bacterial and anti-inflammatory compounds.

Each of these Blue Zone guidelines could be a book. There is so much more to say, to do, to be. Maybe another time. You're free to go now. Time for a life-extending nap.

ENERGY EXPRESS-O! The Blue Pearl Zone

“In the end, all that really matters is the state of your heart.”

—Swami Chidvilasananda



GOING DEEPER

Choose one of the Blue Zone rules and plug it into your own life, no matter where you live or how old you are.

Slow down? More exercise? Guilt-free naps?

If you can't decide, try this one: Give yourself four olive-filled weeks on the Mediterranean Diet. I choke on the word diet, but in this case, it's come to mean a lifestyle choice, a super healthy way of eating that has nothing to do with denial and deprivation and everything to do with consuming real food, in moderate amounts, with a focus on fruits and vegetables, olive oil, whole grains, lean meats and fresh fish. There are many variations, but the core principals are the same, including a modest pour of red wine and enough time to slow down and savor every sip.

The Med Diet isn't for everyone. But in study after study, it keeps coming out on top as a way of eating that is good for all sorts of Westerners who want more energy, less bloat, and, over time, a comfortable, sustainable weight.

It's not about being thin. It's about eating real food, with real taste, and real advantages to your health and wellness.

If you come to love the Med Diet, and it becomes part of your lifestyle, bravo.

Next step? A week on Ikaria, possibly two.

