

Andean Longevity Secrets

I am writing this month's column from Puno, a small city in the high Andean plateau of Peru on the shores of Lake Titicaca, the highest navigable lake in the world at an elevation of 12,500 feet. The southern shore of this sky blue lake was the cradle of Incan civilization. I am here to understand some of the spiritual mysteries of these people and to learn their secrets of longevity. In particular, I am interested in Taquile, an island situated in the northern end of Lake Titicaca, and the Island of the Sun, a much larger island on the Bolivian side of the lake to the south.

Taquile has been populated by Quechua-speaking natives for thousands of years. Across the island in small family communities are a people who live active and productive lives into their late 90s. What is their secret? One way to learn is directly from the oldest and healthiest among them.

I arrived by private boat to a rarely visited part of the island and walked across hills strewn with boulders to a small community of Taquile natives dressed in colorful

hand-woven clothing. After a meal of thick soup made of quinoa and lake trout, Don Gregorio's grandson, Jesus, ran off to fetch him. They walked more than an hour over hilly terrain strewn with rocks and boulders to meet with me.

While I waited, I mentally reviewed what I know from my studies on aging about island people. Longevity research in Okinawa and Sardinia, both islands like Taquile, only much larger and surrounded by salt water oceans while Taquile is on a fresh water lake, as well as the Dominican Republic, Cuba, and other Caribbean Islands known for their centenarians suggest that there are common factors that keep people healthy and robust in to advanced age. Would I find these same factors on Taquile? If there were commonalities, could we apply them to our modern urban lives to live longer and healthier?

Don Gregorio arrived just as the sun was setting. He is the local shaman or *yatiri*, as they are called in this part of Peru, and at 96 years old still practices his craft of healing and performing blessings and offerings to the

earth called Pachamama. Don Gregorio is a no-nonsense gentleman and immediately got into the work at hand. After formalities, we settled onto the straw-covered floor to talk about his world view, share his special form of shamanic healing, and learn about the wisdom of a long, productive life.

What I learned came as no surprise. The residents of Taquile practice a way of life as exemplified by Don Gregorio's life and teachings that not only has supported their survival for thousands of years, but promotes health and longevity, goals that we modern Americans could find valuable.

A few weeks later, I was on the largest island of the lake, The Island of the Sun. Here, I worked with Don Faustino, an Aymara *yatiri*. Aymara is the language of the people who live on the southern half of Lake Titicaca and in Bolivia. I asked within his memory, how old did people live. His answer was remarkable, and yet didn't come as a surprise. Don Faustino informed me that when he was young man, there were several super-centenarians, those who have lived over 110 years. One he recalled was still farming at 120 years old.

However, as he explained, little by little, outside influences penetrated these once self-sufficient people. First, refined wheat flour and breads as well as other refined carbohydrates like white rice were introduced. Then, sugar and, more recently, sodas with their high sugar content became common. Traditional grains like quinoa are still grown, as are Andean potatoes, and consumed. But, he explained, within three generations, the longest lived individuals were in their 80s. Still robust and healthy, these octogenarians were not to be compared to those who attained 100 years and older of previous generations.

On these islands, I found men and women living productive and active lives in their 80s and 90s with evidence that people lived to be 120 years old within recent memory. What are the longevity secrets of the Andes?

A spiritual view of the world factors at the top of the list. They believe that life is organized by universal principles that include a living landscape in which humans interact and form an integral part of a complex ecosystem. Pachamama is the great supportive earth mother, nourishing all of her children including plants, animals, and humans. A supportive stable community of family and peers who share these principles helps, too. The bottom line is that there is



Don Gregorio (96 years old) and grandson, Jesus.

little mental stress. This is true not because life is idyllic, as it is not on these barren and cold islands, but because they have a sense that life is ordered fairly. Through work, honesty, and the assistance of others, the continuation of life is maintained. This they call Ayni, the principle of reciprocity, a practice that helps them live in harmony with each other and the earth.

Daily physical activity is an essential element in their health. They work daily in small plots farming potatoes, lima beans, and grains like quinoa. There are no tractors or other machines to make farming easier. Like their ancestors, agriculture involves walking to their plot, climbing hills, and lifting stones and sacks of potatoes, sheaves of grains, and other heavy objects. Bottom line: They get lots of daily exercise, which promotes healthy blood circulation and metabolism and maintains muscle strength and mass well into advanced age.

But Andean life is not all work and no play. In the evening, they perform traditional dances accompanied by drums and Andean flutes. Their year is divided into times of work interspersed with regular festivals, some lasting weeks at a time. They know how to rest, relax, and have fun.

They consume a variety of herbs and high-enzyme content beverages. Chicha, a thick, fermented, natural beverage with low alcohol content, is consumed daily. This traditional beverage prevails throughout the Andes and is consumed in large quantities. It can be made from potatoes, corn, or other grains. The nutritional and antioxidant value of this brew is high. In fact, Peruvian purple corn, when made into a chicha, has more than four times the antioxidant value as red wine.



Dr. Williams with group and local Lake Titicaca natives.

They also chew coca leaves. Coca leaves provide alkaloids, vitamins, and minerals that help them endure the harsh elements of wind, cold, and rain. It is considered sacred in these parts, a bridge between humans and the high mountain peaks where the spirits dwell. Its compounds improve digestion, sharpen mental clarity, and make breathing easier at high elevations. Some meat is eaten, but protein is largely from fish. The fat content of their diet is low and largely from vegetable oils.

Their diet is composed of 60 to 70 percent high-fiber complex carbohydrates like potatoes, squash, beans, and grains like quinoa (which has a protein content of 15 percent). Unlike wheat or rice (which are low in certain amino acids like lysine), quinoa contains a balanced set of essential amino acids for humans, making it a complete food. This means that unlike with wheat protein, one does not need to supplement it with complementary foods, such as legumes, containing the other essential amino acids. It is a great source of dietary fiber and minerals like phosphorus, magnesium, and iron. Since it is gluten free and considered easy to digest, quinoa is well absorbed and assimilated.

So, what is the Andean message? First, there is really nothing new to what constitutes the foundation stones of longevity. Second, this foundation appears to be universal for all people in various parts of the world. Third, if it is indeed universal, then if we emulate the key components, we, too, should be healthier and live longer.

Remember, positive longevity is a choice. Choose wisely and live long.

10 Steps to Longevity

- Manage mental stress.
- Embrace an all-encompassing empowering belief system that connects you with nature.
- Eat high-fiber complex carbohydrates (and avoid refined carbohydrates).
- Eat small portions of complete protein (mainly fish) at least twice daily (and avoid fatty cuts of meat).
- Emphasize vegetable oils (and avoid processed fats and oils like margarines and spreads).
- Consume large amounts of enzyme- and antioxidant-rich fluids (as found in herbal teas and vegetable juices).
- Achieve and maintain normal weight.
- Exercise daily for fitness, muscle mass and strength, and flexibility.
- Don't drink distilled alcohol, but favor wine and beer in moderation.
- Rest when you are tired, and get sufficient sleep each night.

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