



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

emotions and health

In the October 28, issue of the *New York Times Magazine*, there was an interesting article about life on Ikaria, an island off the coast of Turkey. The article opened with the experience of Stamatis Moraitis, a Greek war veteran who had come to the U.S. after World War II. In 1976, he was diagnosed with lung cancer and given nine months to live. Rather than stay in the U.S. to receive treatment he decided to return to be with his Greek relatives on Ikaria. He did not die as predicted and in fact is still alive today. He underwent no treatment, he simply returned to what the author of the article, Dan Buettner referred to as “The Enchanted Island of Centenarians,” a place where it is not unusual to live well into the 90s.

The longevity of the inhabitants is ascribed to the lifestyle on the island, which includes all of the characteristics that are known to decrease stress and increase health, satisfaction, and longevity. They eat a diet that is largely vegetarian with plenty of beans and greens and olive oil. Their diet is low in meat and dairy (except goat milk) and includes moderate amounts of alcohol. They eat local honey, but little refined sugar and their breads are largely whole grain. They drink coffee and also herbal teas for comfort and their medicinal properties (which have been confirmed by western doctors). They exercise naturally through daily activities, walking, and gardening. And to top it off they look out across the Aegean Sea to a scene of great beauty.

But most important is the sense of community. People know each other and stay up late enjoying each other’s company. They sleep late and take naps and few people wear a watch. They work, but at a reasonable pace and for a reasonable number of hours. They live a very simple life style by our standards, with little need for most of the things that we work so hard to accumulate. They share and support each other and can count on support from others when they need it. Older people continue to have active sex lives and are engaged and valued by their community. Love is at the heart of community and being a part of a community is an essential part of health.

Sounds wonderful, doesn’t it? Unfortunately of course we cannot all retire to Ikaria. However we can try to make our own little version of Ikaria here. It will take some effort and most importantly, according to the article, it will require community support. We simply cannot do it alone. We must find a group and make a commitment to unplug from whatever does not serve us. This may require some

stretching—we may need coaches or therapists as well as friends to accomplish our goals.

We must re-examine our values! We can begin by writing down what we consider to be most important in this life, the values we want to pass on to our children. Then we need to take a step back and look at what we do with our time and money. Do our actions/purchases reflect our values? Research continually reveals that beyond meeting our basic needs for food, shelter, health care and a modest amount of discretionary income, more money does not make us happier. We must think carefully about what makes us happiest and make time for more of that! What does your utopia look like?

This is a perfect opportunity for this reminder. As we enter the Christmas holidays and think about resolutions for the new year, we can be mindful of the wisdom of Ikaria and make our own little place of refuge and love. We can spend less time shopping and more time with family and friends. We can indulge a bit, but remember to mostly eat healthily and rest as much as we can.

Several years ago in the aftermath of a hurricane, we were without lights and water for several days. Four families banded together in the evening at the home of the friends who still had power. We cooked together, washed clothes, showered and hung out. It was great fun. The night we drove into our neighborhood and the power was on, David and I cheered but our son, who was around 10 at the time, burst into tears. He knew it would bring to an end those wonderful evenings of sharing with friends. I have always remembered that. He knew what was most important. We need to listen to our hearts. What are we being called to do? Who do we long to see? Where do we need to make space in our lives in the new year? What brings meaning to our lives? We need to reach out to others who share our values and hold each other accountable for making the changes we desire.

We may all be familiar with the quote from the movie, *Moulin Rouge*: “The greatest thing you’ll ever learn is just to love and be loved in return.” However, research shows that we are actually happiest when we are showing love, giving love to others. It is nice to feel loved, but we are happiest when we are giving love! Fortunately there are a myriad of opportunities to give love in any day—from a smile to the homeless person on the street all the way to our children, parents, family, and friends. Build your community everywhere! May our hearts and lives burst with love for ourselves and others this holiday season and throughout the new year!

Karen Stewart, MA, and David Stewart, PhD, are psychologists who work with individuals, couples, groups, and organizations in their Durham practice at Suite 220 at 811 Ninth Street in Durham. Reach them at (919) 286-5051. Web address: www.stewartpsychologists.com