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besonders alt. Was ist ihr Geheimnis?

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Der Demograf Michel Poulain entdeckte
die Blauen Zonen und erforscht sie
auch mit 72 Jahren noch

MICHEL POULAIN INTERVIEW

Prof. Poulain, you started your academic career with Astrophysics. Why did you quit it?

Michel Poulain: In my family it was not usual to go to university. But my teacher at school pushed me and encouraged doing this. My parents under the recommendation of my teacher agreed to register me in Physics. In 1969, I got an academic degree in Astrophysics and in this context, I travelled to Scandinavia in order to work on Nordic lights...

...fascinating, isn't it?

Poulain: Oh yes, an aurorae borealis gives the most beautiful light you can imagine. Thereafter I worked on satellites, and it became very technical. Preferring human relations, I changed direction and taught mathematics, chemistry and physics at secondary degree.

So how did you end up with Demographic Studies?

Poulain: I suggested to my wife who studied History at that time, to write a demographic-historical thesis on my village. We did it together, and my enthusiasm for Demography started. I started new study in demography at university and got a master degree and a PhD

You focus on longevity studies. How did you discover the Blue Zones?

Poulain: I was member of an international group of researchers who validated the age of persons. Very often, no correct document can attest of the veracity of the age of the very olds. In October 1999, we had a meeting in Montpellier, where a medical doctor from Sardinia reported that he had witnessed a phenomenon: That there was as many males as females among centenarians. We were sceptical, and already during the coffee break, it was decided that I should go to Sardinia and examine it.

You expected to proof him wrong?

Poulain: Yes. Our job is sometimes sensitive when we have to tell somebody that he is not that old... It was cold and snowing when I arrived. I went to the municipality and checked the birth certificates, and later toured around 40 villages, controlled the graveyards – because gravestones give good hints. And yes, I found many centenarians, male and female. They were not randomly, and formed a real

group in certain villages – for me it was a cluster. When I went from village to village, I drew on a map with a blue pencil; that was the beginning of the “Blue Zones”.

If you would have used a red pencil, we would name it now the “Red Zones”?

Poulain: Yes. What I discovered, was population and not individual longevity. For example, 3000 people live in the village of Villagrande Strisaili. In the last 20 years, there had been 44 centenarians and among them 22 females and 22 males.

What did your colleagues say?

Poulain: Still, they were not convinced because they expected me to prove that discovery was wrong. They even decided to send a counter evaluation mission to Sardinia without telling me in order to prove if I was correct or not. For a demographer, it is very difficult to admit that there are as many male as female centenarians, and plenty of them...

Why?

Poulain: Because this is very unique. In our countries, there are six to seven times more female centenarians. Everywhere on earth, female centenarians are more numerous and plenty of scientific papers that explain why women live longer than men.

So you found one Blue Zone. But why came it your mind looking for more Zones?

Poulain: I disseminated my discovery. On a congress in Vancouver, I met a researcher from Okinawa who invited me to visit his country. There I found longevity, too. And I had heard about similar conditions in Costa Rica and Greece, and undertook research there. From that time, the Blue Zones became a well-known scientific topic.

Were you following wrong tracks, too?

Poulain: Well, I examined areas in Georgia and in Ecuador, but the data did not qualify for Blue Zones. Currently, I do research in Cuba, but it needs a lot of time to identify a new Blue Zone.

What is the main secret you have found in the Blue Zones?

Poulain: It is the human dimension of exceptional long-living persons. In short, it is love and living simply. Moving naturally and avoiding using cars, eating wisely not necessarily only plants – but not too much. The food should be locally produced. Wine is not a must, but drinking one or two glasses a day will not harm you whereas it favours conviviality. More important are the relationships with family and friends.

All this could be adapted all over the world.

Poulain: Yes. We have to change our attitudes. How do we treat our old people, for example? We put them in nursing homes as soon as they become dependent and this is a crazy situation. Our societies are ageing, do we want to continue with this unhuman way? Consumption is growing, pollution is growing, noise, too – our world will collapse if we do not become less materialistic. There are villages in the Netherlands and in Belgium that try to adopt the seven principles that I have developed. There is a rising interest in many European countries for applying the mind of the Blue Zones, but not so much in Germany.

Why?

Poulain: I don't know. Other countries witnessed snowball effects, caused by scientific conferences and the subsequent media coverage. Until now, there was no such conference in Germany. I assume that most of the Germans don't know about the Blue Zones. I am sure it will come also.

Well, everybody wants to live longer, right?

Poulain: Yes, it is attractive for everybody. We could live a happier life following the mind of the Blue Zones. When I meet these centenarians in Sardinia, Ikaria, Costa Rica or Okinawa, they give me so much love, that I have to give it around me. You don't need a coach, just live large!

Did you change your life personally?

Poulain: Yes. I still do some physical exercise. I eat less and don't eat anymore red meat that is not so good for my health. And when I meet somebody for the first time, I try to be positive, curious and open minded.

If you want to adopt a healthy life like in the Blue Zones – do I have to be in the position that I can afford it financially? Must I be rich?

Poulain: No! There is a bank in the Netherlands, which asked me about financial security of the elderly. They wanted me to proof that money is largely needed when you get old. According to me applying the principles of the Blue Zones does not cost a lot ... you may survive with a really limited amount of money when, at contrary, money is often disturbing.