

Living Like You Were In Tuscany.

Michael Arloski, Ph.D., PCC

Walking along a thousand year-old footpath through an olive grove above the crashing Mediterranean I am greeted...by everyone. "Buon giorno!" Locals, tourists from four different continents, we all greet each other with a smile and "Buon giorno!". I am walking because there are no cars in the villages along this rugged coastline, just the train that burrows through the rocky cliffs, boats, and the footpath. When I get to the next village there will be cafés with outdoor tables where olives from the groves I have hiked through will end up in oil and on the table and in many other forms. The menu will contain choices that would put an ear-to-ear grin on my cardiologist and conversation will be easy to strike up with others.

If I were a "local" I would no doubt be sitting in that café soon to be joined by friends and or family that all live nearby. We might share an espresso or perhaps a glass of wine. We would have our share of life's problems but at least we would not be adding to them so much by the way we live each day.

I contrast that with my experience in America, a land that I love as well. Here I chose long ago to leave the economically depressed area I grew up in. I have lived here in Colorado where I am today, however for eighteen years. I have built a network of friends who support me in many ways. I am active and very health conscious with exceptional opportunities in my community for a healthy and active lifestyle. However, people who do not know each other do not say "Buon giorno." They don't even say "Hello". The norm here, like in most of America at this point in our history, is to avoid connection with those you don't already know. Some of the people I greet are happy that I spoke and return the greeting warmly. Some are surprised. Some are frightened. I am definitely breaking the cultural norm, the taboo.

The norm here is to go everywhere in your car. The norm here is for restaurants to offer you a choice of both healthy and unhealthy foods on their menus. I can live a very healthy lifestyle here, but I have to work at it, I have to choose it.

I have chosen to move from where I grew up, but interestingly only some of my children have made the same decision. Some are still nearby and loving it, others would love to return. Each month we consciously have an extended family dinner at either our home or where one of the grown and on their own "kiddos" lives. We still have to schedule it. "Life" gets in the way at times. Yet we return to this commitment to family. A network of friends extends around us and we (again consciously) make sure to keep those connections lubricated by adequate contact and being there in times of need at whatever level of depth is truly needed.

Healthy eating choices are easier to make here than in many American cities, but I still have to be very conscious of my food decisions. In fact I have to raise my vigilance at times to what feels like a combative level. I read articles about how a certain “vegetarian special” sandwich at a national chain actually contains more fat than two “Big Macs” and know I have to keep my guard up. The healthier choices are out there, but I have to consciously seek them out.

In that Italian village or other places where so many norms of daily living support a wellness lifestyle, there is less need to be so health conscious, so effortful at being well. What I have found is that here, in America, I strive for that lack of effort, but I have accepted that the consciousness has to remain. I know that when I track how often I exercise, I exercise in more ways and more often. To move enough I have to compensate for the profoundly sedentary nature of my work. To eat well the consciousness has to be there both at home where planning and having good food on hand is essential, and out and about where selecting a healthy place to eat and making the best menu choices needs to be less of a challenge.

Dreaming of that sidewalk café where I can get an order of fresh seafood over homemade pasta while talking to dear friends is indeed a sweet image to hold. Now, how can I approximate it wherever I live? I may not have that sea breeze or the lilt of “Buon giorno” greeting me as I walk home, but what do I have? What blessings can I count and what is missing? What do I need to consciously infuse into my life right here where I am?

We are all part of where we live both culturally and ecologically. Our geography may determine if we go out jogging or cross-country skiing this Saturday. Our geography and our local economics may determine what kinds of choices we have at our local food stores and restaurants. Our culture, subculture, ethnic groups or even our family may put pressure on us to behave a certain way, to like certain things and disparage others. Many traditions have been lost while others persist in some way or another. Many foods, ways of living and being have become “Americanized” which sometimes is a kind of a homogenization process that pushes everything towards a middle ground that is acceptable, but all too-often simply rather indistinct, bland or even counter to our health. Huge portions of fatty, salty, or sweet food (an increasingly occurring American norm) serves only to attract customers, to both restaurants and emergency rooms.

Cultural norms are often hard to go against, but we can do so if we have a healthy reason to. We can go ahead and say hello, we can find like-minded folks who perhaps like to recreate in a physically active fashion when the norm may not be to do so. We may have learned that certain foods just don’t taste “right” unless there is lots of lard in them. We can learn that leaving the lard out still yields tasty food with less to worry about. We can even take this into the level of even greater challenge by, for example, choosing family and friends over work in

our priorities. Our new view of all of this is to examine what works for us and what works against us...against our health and well-being.

For centuries philosophers have asked that knowing we are mortal, how then shall we live? Today we might ask a version of the same question. **Knowing that our lifestyle determines so much of our health, how then shall we live?** What conscious choices must we continually make regardless of what the norms are around us and working with our circumstances as best we can?

Schizoid might be the term to describe our modern day world. We are simultaneously more health conscious than ever before and supporting and engaging in behaviors that work against our health. We stress and push in our work world. We find ourselves increasingly isolated in our communities and our workplaces. Our mobile society rips loose our attempts at connectedness and sometimes discourages us from setting those roots down in the first place. At the same time we are building new neighborhood developments with front porches again. We are setting aside lottery money for open space, for bike paths. While we keep the junk food industry growing and growing we also are building more and more natural food stores selling healthy and organic foods. We are eliminating smoking in public places and seeing astonishing reductions in smoking related health problems.

Modern day food distribution makes it possible to go to an “olive bar” in a grocery store in central Wisconsin and choose from eight different kinds. Even those of us who are not of Italian heritage have shifted towards using healthy olive oil in our kitchens instead of that white stuff our grandmothers scooped out of a can. We have so many more choices.

Today there is so much opportunity to live in a way that is healthy and well. There are so many healthy choices to choose from. How can we help each other remember how much choice we really have? We can go ahead and dream of that Tuscan villa or sunset over the Ligurian Sea, but our true choices are what are we going to fix for dinner tonight, and who have we invited over?