What’s all this fuss about “Blue Zones”? Is it a modern version of the fountain of youth, some new scare tactic trying to sell books, merchandise, and other essential services, or a fad that will be over soon? Perhaps it’s a slick marketing tool designed to make communities sound more exciting and inviting or maybe its something that all progressive communities should strive to become? Because of widespread interest and questions like these, the purpose of this paper is to provide a brief overview of the “Blue Zone” concept.

As presented by author Dan Buettner (2008) in the bestselling book “The Blue Zones: Lessons for Living Longer from the People Who’ve Lived the Longest,” the concept is the result of an interest in studying areas of the world with larger than normal concentrations of people living long and healthy lives. Places where your chances of living to be 100 years old are three times higher than the average American. Four such areas across the world were identified, Sardinia, Italy; Okinawa, Japan; Loma Linda, California; and the Nicoya Peninsula, Costa Rica. By studying and researching these communities, perhaps common elements that have led to extraordinary health-related quality of life could be identified.

Over the course of their investigation, researchers found that each Blue Zone had their own formula for longevity deeply engrained in their culture. Thus, the secrets to a long life were really a culmination of “centuries of trial and error” (Buettner, 2008, p. 21). For example, the people of Sardinia, Italy tend to drink goat’s milk, have strong family values that emphasize taking care of each other, and get together each afternoon to laugh with friends. (Interestingly, the term “Blue Zone” was adopted when one of the first longevity demographers circled the area of Sardinia on a map with blue ink as he started to study the region.) Because of their strong religious beliefs, most of the inhabitants of Loma Linda, California engage in regular, low-intensity exercise, eat nuts at least five times a week, observe a weekly sanctuary in time, and eat a light dinner early in the evening. While differences were noted, there were also many similarities. These cross-cultural commonalities have been distilled into nine Blue Zone lessons that are hoped to maximize one’s potential lifespan.

The basic premise of the Blue Zone concept focuses on the reality that the process of aging is inevitable. Buettner (2008) uses the analogy of aging having “only an accelerator pedal” (p. 4). Since there is no brake, the goal is to keep from pushing down
on the accelerator and speeding up the aging process. Unfortunately, most modern Americans live a lifestyle that pushes the accelerator too hard and too often, resulting in a more rapid decline of our physical and mental capabilities. By staying off the accelerator, we “may gain back an extra decade of good life” (p. 5) and suffer fewer diseases that prematurely kill many of us. Keeping one’s foot off the aging accelerator is thought to be achieved by creating your own personal Blue Zone and incorporating some or all of these nine lessons into your daily life.

Lesson number one is to engage in regular, low-intensity physical activity. According to Buettner (2008), since the goal is to raise the amount of exercise over a lifetime the key is to make it part of your daily routine. Incorporate little things like taking the stairs, push mowing your lawn, taking a walking break, or riding your bike to work. People who live long healthy lives aren’t typically weekend warriors, run marathons, or force themselves to engage in activities they dislike. Rather, they incorporate physical activity into their normal daily routine.

Lessons two to four focus on establishing healthy eating habits. None of the centenarians in the study had ever been on a diet and none were obese. They simply ate and drank in moderation. Their first common eating habit was to eat until they no longer felt hungry, about 80 percent full (lesson two). This is in stark contrast with the typical American habit of eating until our stomachs feel full. Strategies for achieving the 80 percent rule include using smaller plates and glasses, eating slower, and eating your smallest meal of the day in the early evening. Another habit is to incorporate more plants and less meat in your diet (lesson three). Beans, whole grains, garden vegetables, and nuts should be staples whereas meat is to be consumed in very limited quantities. The final eating tip is to consume a daily drink or two (lesson four). The key appears to be consistency, moderation, and making it a social or relaxing event.

The fifth Blue Zone lesson is to develop a strong sense of purpose. We all need a reason to get up in the morning, a goal for living. Learning something new, a desire to see your children and grandchildren grow up, or the perception of making a difference in someone’s life can enhance this sense of purpose. Lesson six is taking time to relieve stress. The goal is to engage in the present, take time to smell the roses, and recharge your batteries. Slowing down adds richness to life and increases our sense of well-being (Buettner, 2008). It can be as simple as arriving early to appointments, putting down your Black Berry, doing Yoga, or spending time in meditation.

Lesson number seven is to actively participate in a spiritual community. According to Buettner (2008), the “simple act of worship is one of those subtly powerful habits that seems to improve your chances of having more good years” (p. 251). Attending religious services, whatever your belief, seems to influence how long a person lives. Lesson eight is learning to put your family first. Focus on investing time and energy in your family by sharing meals together, taking a family vacation, or celebrating holiday traditions. The ninth and final Blue Zone lesson is to establish a social network with people who have a similar healthy lifestyle. Good habits are much easier to adopt and maintain when the people around you are doing the same things. Identify friends and family members who will reinforce the correct habits. Spend time building friendships, developing social connectedness, and volunteering.

While some of these lessons have been known and recommended for some time, others are a little more unique. With a little effort and persistence all could be readily
incorporated. Buettner (2008) recommends that you start by picking one or two of the low-hanging fruit and work on incorporating these habits into your lifestyle for five to 12 weeks. Once firmly established, try to incorporate one or two additional strategies. The overall goal is to make a conscious choice to live the longest, healthiest, and most productive life possible. To achieve this, the Blue Zone recommendation is to take your foot off the aging process accelerator by adopting some of these strategies so that you can perhaps “add at least ten good years” to your life (Buettner, 2008, p. 4).

References