

AS
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the
five secrets
you must
discover
before
you die

JOHN IZZO Ph.D.

Bestselling author of *Second Innocence*

an excerpt from

***The Five Secrets You Must Discover
Before You Die***

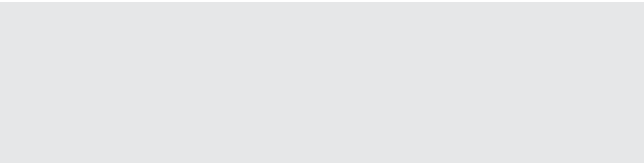
by John Izzo, Ph.D.

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prologue



The prologue of a book is a window from the world of the reader to the inner life of the author. It is a way to answer two questions: Why did the author write this particular book? What will this book offer me as a reader?

I wrote this book because of my lifelong search to discover what it means to live a full and meaningful life. From the time I was a very young boy I wanted to know the secrets to living well and dying happy. The songs I enjoyed, the movies I watched, and the books I read were always about the search for what really matters. More than anything, I hoped that before I died I would figure out what mattered. When I was eight, this search was given a greater sense of urgency when my father died; he was only 36. Life can be short, and we never know how much time we have to discover the secrets to happiness.

Early in my life I had the privilege to spend time with people who were dying and discovered that individuals die very differently. Some people end their lives with deep satisfaction and with few regrets. Others die with bitterness or with sad resignation at the life they might have lived. As a young person in

my twenties, I set out to discover what separated these groups of people.

Many years ago now, a middle-aged woman named Margaret told me that she had tried to live her entire life from the perspective of an “old woman sitting on my rocking chair on the porch.” She told me that whenever she had a decision to make she would imagine sitting on her porch as an old woman looking back on her life. She would ask that old woman to advise her on the path she should take. It was a beautiful image.

In my mind an idea began to germinate: Could it be that toward the end of life we discover things about life that would have benefited us greatly if we had discovered them sooner? Would we learn some important things about living with purpose and finding deep happiness if we talked to those who had lived most of their lives already and had found happiness and meaning?

Whenever I am going to take a trip, I choose hotels by using a website that taps into the experiences of hundreds of other travelers, people who have stayed there before me. In their candid reviews, I find the “real deal” about these hotels. Over the years I have found many a gem and avoided many a disaster through this simple method. It occurred to me that one could apply this same method to discovering the secrets to living well and dying happy.

I believed that if I could identify people who had found the meaning in life and listened to their stories, the secrets to living well would emerge. Over the last year, I sought to identify several hundred people who had lived a long life and who had found happiness and wisdom, with the goal of interviewing them to discover what they had learned about life.

It seemed to me that most of us know at least one person who has achieved a visible wisdom that others could learn from.

I began by asking 15,000 people across the United States and Canada to send me their recommendations. I asked them: Who are the wise elders in your life? Whom do you know who has lived a long life and has something important to teach us about living? The response was overwhelming. Almost 1,000 names were suggested. Through preinterviews we identified 235 people who represented a diverse group of people who others had identified as wise. My hope was to learn the story of these people's lives and to learn the secrets of life—the secrets we must discover before we die.

The people we interviewed ranged in age from 59–105. They were almost all from North America but were a diverse group in terms of ethnicity, culture, religion, geography, and professional status. Although many of the people we interviewed have achieved great success in their lives, our intent wasn't to seek famous people but rather extraordinary people from all walks of life. From town barbers and teachers, business owners, authors, and homemakers, from priests to poets, from Holocaust survivors to aboriginal chiefs, from Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Jews, and atheists, we sought to answer this question: What must we discover about life before we die? What do those who are nearer to the end of their lives have to teach us about living life?

We conducted one- to three-hour interviews with each of these people. Three of us conducted the interviews: Olivia McIvor, Leslie Knight, and I. We asked a series of questions that can be found in the final chapter of this book, questions such as: What brought you the greatest happiness? What are your regrets? What mattered and what turned out not to matter? What were the major crossroads that made a difference in how your life turned out? What do you wish you had learned sooner?

The book has four major sections. The first section will help

the reader understand the methodology we used and how we selected and later interviewed these people. The second section explores the five secrets that we learned from these 235 wise people. The third section explores how we can put these secrets into practice in our lives; one of the things we learned is that knowing the secrets is not sufficient. Indeed, what separates these people from many others is that they had integrated these secrets into their lives. The final section provides a list of the questions we asked each of these people (questions we hope readers will ask themselves and ask the wise elders in their lives) and a list of the best responses to the question “if you could give only one sentence of advice to those younger than you, on finding a happy and meaningful life, what one sentence would you pass on?” Finally, there is an epilogue discussing how the interviews changed my life.

Writing a book based on the lives of several hundred people presented a real challenge. Each life was unique and offered its own opportunity for learning. Since I believed that presenting the stories of several hundred people’s lives might overwhelm the reader, I made the choice to share personal experiences from a much smaller number (about 50) that were representative of the larger sample. I decided to use only first names, and you will find that many individuals appear numerous times, since their lives help to illuminate each of the secrets. Although I share specific stories from this smaller number, the reader should know that, with very few exceptions, the five secrets were common among all those we interviewed. In the chapter titled “The Secret to Life in One Sentence or Less,” I share wisdom from a broader number of people.

This is a book for people at every stage of life. It is a book for young people who are just starting out on the journey of life. Just as young internet-savvy people use the “net” to tap the experiences of others with products or travel locations, so

I hope you will find the life experiences of these people equally fascinating. Wisdom does not have to come when we are old; we can find it much sooner.

This is also a book for those in mid-life, like me, who want to ensure that we discover what matters before it is too late. It is also a book for those in their later years, who wish to reflect on their life experiences and discover ways to pass wisdom on to those who follow.

The title of this book was not chosen lightly. *The Five Secrets You Must Discover Before You Die* has two key elements. The first is the idea that there are indeed “secrets” to life. What I discovered in these interviews is that all happy and wise people eventually discover and live these five secrets.

The second element, “before you die,” reminds us that there is urgency to discovering what really matters. When I first suggested writing a book with the word “die” in the title, I got a strong reaction from many people. About half said that having the word “die” in a book title was depressing, but the other half said it was “necessary.” They said that the word “die” lets the reader know there is an urgency to discovering what really matters in life. In fact, one of the most common things I heard from these people was about how quickly life goes by. We all continue to believe we have forever to discover what we need to . . . but in the end, our time is really quite limited.

Although I had some clear ideas about what I would learn during the interviews, I knew as a researcher that it was critical to keep an open mind. We had to ask the questions, we had to learn about these people’s lives, and only then, when we were done, could we step back and ask what common wisdom could be learned from their life reflections. Yet one of the most profound things about what we learned is how clear it all became by the time we finished. In spite of the many differences

between these people (age, religion, culture, profession, education, economic status), the secrets to a well-lived human life were common. It seems that what really matters cuts across all the boundaries we often believe separate us from one another, such as religion, race, and status.

All three of us who conducted these interviews were profoundly moved by the experience. Since we did not provide the questions ahead of time, there was often a lengthy pause between asking the questions and hearing answers. Each of us noticed that in that pause we found ourselves reflecting on those same questions. What brought us happiness? What really mattered? When we reach the later stages of our own lives, how will we answer these questions? What will we wish we had learned sooner? It is my hope that while reading this book, you have that same experience. I hope that as you read the stories of these people's lives, you reflect on your own life and begin to discover in a deeper way your own path to fulfillment and wisdom.

There was one piece of personal unfinished business that also compelled me to conduct these interviews. My grandfather was one of the wise elders in my life. Everyone in my family told me that my grandfather was a deeply wise man who had both found happiness and whose life had touched the lives of many other people. My grandfather had three daughters whom he loved dearly, but he always had some regret about not having a son as well. When I was born, my mother said he told her: "John is the son I never had, and I will teach him the secrets to life." My grandfather died of a heart attack when I was only a young boy. I never got to ask him the questions in this book. Yet in the voices of these 235 people, I heard the voice of my grandfather. I know he is smiling wherever he is.

This book has a simple premise: We do not have to wait until we are old to become wise. We can discover life's secrets

at any age, and the sooner we discover them, the more fulfilling our life will be.

One of the “wise elders” I interviewed summed up the value of this endeavor. He told me: “If even one person can learn the secrets to happiness even a few years earlier because of what you are doing, it will have been worth it.”

So I hope you will enjoy this journey. For me, it was at times joyous, sometimes tearful, and in the end deeply instructive. My conversations with these extraordinary people changed my life, and I hope they will change yours.

chapter one

why do some people find meaning & die happy?

Nine-tenths of wisdom is being wise in time.
—Theodore Roosevelt

Wisdom outweighs any wealth.—Sophocles

Why do some people find meaning and die happy? What are the secrets to finding happiness and living wisely? What really matters if we want to live a worthy human life? These are the questions this book seeks to answer.

To live wisely, we must recognize that there are two fundamental truths of a human life. The first is that we have a limited and undefined amount of time—it may be 100 years, it may be 30. The second is that in that limited and undefined amount of time we have an almost unlimited number of choices of how to use our time—the things we choose to focus on and put our energy into—and these choices will ultimately define our lives. When we are born there is no owner’s manual provided, and the clock begins ticking the moment we arrive.

We do not like the words “die” and “death.” Many human activities are designed to shield us from the truth about life; that it is limited, that at least here in this place, we do not have forever. Some of you may have hesitated to pick up a book with the word “die” in the title, fearing somehow that something bad might happen to you for even recognizing the reality

of your own mortality. You may even find yourself a bit uncomfortable as you read these words, wishing I might move on quickly to another topic.

Still, it is the fact that we die and that our time is limited that makes discovering the secrets to life important. If we lived forever, there would be little urgency to discover the true paths to happiness and purpose since given the luxury of eternity we would surely stumble on them sooner or later. This is a luxury we do not have. At whatever age we find ourselves, death sits nearby. When we are young, we may feel that death is a distant and far-off reality, but having conducted memorial services for people of all ages, including a recent friend who died at 33 while traveling in Kenya, I suggest that death is always close at hand, reminding us to get on with life. Derek Walcott, the Nobel-Prize-winning poet from St. Lucia, called time the “evil beloved.” On the one hand, we know that time appears evil because it will take from us all that matters to us, at least in this life; on the other hand, time is also “beloved” because it is our very mortality that gives life a sense of urgency and purpose. Our time is limited and must be used wisely.

knowledge versus wisdom

Knowing how to use this one life to its fullest requires wisdom more than knowledge. Wisdom is different and fundamentally more important than knowledge. We live in a time when knowledge (the number of facts) doubles every six months, but wisdom is in short supply. Knowledge is the accumulation of facts, whereas wisdom is the ability to discern what matters and what does not matter. Unless we can discover what really matters, we cannot find true meaning in life.

In my first profession, it was as a minister in the Presby-

terian Church. When I was in my twenties I had the privilege of spending a good deal of time with people who were dying. Through those experiences I discovered that individual human beings die very differently. Some people die having lived a life of deep purpose with few regrets. These people come to the end of their lives with a deep sense of having lived a full human life. Others die looking back with bitterness at having missed what really mattered. Even as a young man I realized that some people found the secrets to life and some did not.

Death has never been an abstract concept to me. My father died when he was only 36 years old. He stood up one day at a picnic and that was it. His life had been far from perfect, and now it was over. There would be no do-over. By the time I was 28 years old I had conducted dozens of funeral services and sat with many people in the final days of life. I consider this intimacy with mortality to be a great gift. Maybe because of these experiences, I have always searched for the “secrets” to living a purposeful and fulfilling life. I vowed as a very young person that when my time came, I would not look back in regret for the life I might have lived.

My wife is a nurse by training, and from a young age she too was witness to the reality of our mortality. She worked in the operating room, in a pediatric cancer ward, and in the emergency room. We talk about death regularly. We try to live aware of its presence.

Leslie, my wife, almost died a few times in her life. She was born with a deformed heart and had several major operations beginning when she was a few days old, but three years ago we had an experience that reminded us anew of the fragility of our lives.

She was going into the hospital for a routine and non-life-threatening surgical procedure. To this day I can remember

our daughter Sydney, then ten years old, saying: “Mommy, you don’t really need to have that surgery, do you?” Leslie reassured her and the next morning was admitted for surgery.

What happened in the next 72 hours is still a blur to me. The surgery went well, she was groggy and then uncomfortable. The kids and I stayed with her at the hospital into that evening. The next day she felt a little better, and I left her room early in the evening so she could rest, telling her that I was going to get some things done at the office and that I’d come visit the next day about noon. We anticipated she would be home within a day.

The next morning I called the hospital around 11 a.m., and my wife was saying things that made no sense, talking to me in sentences that were unintelligible. Rushing to the hospital I soon discovered that in the middle of the night she had experienced a stroke at the age of 37. She was seeing triple and was being transferred to the neuro-intensive-care unit. Later that day, the neurologist asked me to make the hardest decision of my life thus far. “Your wife has had a stroke and we don’t know why. We have to make a choice now as to whether to put her on blood-thinning medication. It could save her life, or it could lead to more bleeding, depending on what caused the stroke. The decision is yours.” With the information available to me, I decided to authorize the use of the medication. The next several days were tense and frightening.

When something like this happens, we each have our own story. I cannot speak for my wife’s experience but the next few months set off a whirlwind of emotions for me. My life was busy and crowded with meetings and tasks. Even while Leslie was recovering at home, I continued to busy myself with these many tasks, and in retrospect I realize that I was not there for her in the way I would like to have been. I kept asking myself: Is this really the right way to live my life? What really matters?

A friend of mine, Jim Kouzes, told me that “adversity in-

roduces us to ourselves,” and I was not sure I liked the person I was meeting. While she slowly recovered and I sadly watched her daily struggle to regain the ability to do simple tasks once taken for granted, I struggled to think about the rest of my life. The stroke reminded both of us that life was fragile, but it also served as a wake-up call.

By the time the year was finished, Leslie was mostly back to normal, and I was very thankful. I felt we had been granted a reprieve. But we had been paid a visit. Our belief in the certainty of health and life was shattered by this experience. Life was short. And I began to ask myself: Have I really discovered what matters? If my time came now, could I say I had discovered the secrets to life? Approaching 50, and with my wife recovered from that stroke, I embarked on the journey that I share in this book, a journey to discover “the secrets.”

This book emerged from my desire to be clear on what matters, the secrets to a happy, purposeful life. As I have aged, I have found myself asking with a greater sense of urgency the questions that have been there all my life: What matters? What will I be thinking at the end of life? Since I have only so much time remaining, what is the wise use of that time? What are the secrets of happiness and purpose?

the two things we want most

It seems to me that there are two things we want most as human beings. Freud theorized that the primary human drives were to seek pleasure and to avoid pain. As the result of spending my lifetime not with psychiatric patients but meeting thousands of people across many continents and listening to their stories (first as a minister and later leading personal-growth sessions), I believe Freud was wrong, very wrong.

In my experience, the two things humans want most are to find happiness and to find meaning. “Happiness” is often thought of as a frivolous word, as in “don’t worry, be happy” (meaning blissfully unaware). We may think of happiness as a temporary state of feeling good brought on by pleasures such as good food and sex.

By “finding happiness” I mean that every human being wants to experience joy and a deep sense of contentment. We want to know that we have lived fully and experienced what it means to be a human being. Joseph Campbell put it this way: “I think that what we’re seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.”*

This does not mean a permanent state of bliss but a day-to-day contentment and joy that create the experience we call happiness. At the end of each day, and at the end of our lives, we want what my grandfather called a “good tired.”

But happiness is not enough for us as human beings. I believe we also want to find meaning. If happiness is about the day-to-day experience of contentment and joy, meaning is about the sense that one’s life has purpose. Victor Frankl, a student of Freud and a survivor of the Nazi death camps, suggested that the search for meaning is the ultimate human drive. We want, most of all, to know that it mattered we were here, to find a reason for being alive. Some call this a sense of purpose; others might say it is about leaving a legacy or finding a calling. To me, “meaning” is about connection to something outside ourselves. Meaning is about not being alone, because if my life has meaning, it is connected to something and someone beyond the self.

*Campbell, Joseph, and Bill Moyers. *The Power of Myth* (New York: Anchor, 1991), p. 52.

Happiness is about the moments of our lives; meaning is about our sense of connection. Perhaps if we were not mortal, happiness would be enough, but our mortality causes us to want to be connected, to know that it matters that we were here.

But how do we discover the secrets of happiness and meaning? How do we find the secrets of living well and dying happy?

Many of us stumble through the journey of living, learning as we go, eventually discovering what matters. Often we discover wisdom when we are old, when most of our life is behind us, when it is too late to act on what we have learned. What if we could discover the secrets of a happy and meaningful life before we are old?

I do not believe we have to wait until we are old to become wise. It seems to me that the secrets to life are all around us, witnessed in the lives of others, those who have found what we seek.

In this book are five secrets we must discover about life before we die. These secrets are the foundation of a fulfilling and purposeful life. They are a gift from those who have lived wisely to those of us who are still climbing the mountain.

are these really secrets?

Why do I call these discoveries “secrets”? Normally we think of secrets as something that few people know, and yet it is quite possible that as you read about the five secrets you may feel as though you were already aware of them. They will certainly not come as a stunning surprise. The dictionary defines a secret as “a formula or plan known only to the initiated or the few.” Although you may have heard these things before, what makes these five things secrets is that only a few people seem to live

their lives as if they were true. The secret is not that these things are new but rather that they are so universally common among the diverse group of people who others said had found happiness and purpose.

In *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy writes that “happy families are all alike; but every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” What I discovered in the interviews is that the happy people had the five secrets in common in terms of how they lived their lives. More importantly, I discovered that these people not only knew these secrets but had put them into practice in their lives.

Knowing the secrets is not sufficient. We all know things that we don’t put into practice: exercise is good for us, eating a balanced diet can lead to good health, smoking is bad for our health, relationships matter more than things, and so forth. Yet, many of us live life in daily opposition to the “wisdom” we already have. In this book I seek to answer two questions: What matters—what are the secrets of a fulfilling and purposeful life? How do we put these secrets into practice in our lives and keep ourselves on track? I think of these as knowing and going. Knowing is necessary, but it is not enough.

Before I share the five secrets and the practices to integrate them into our lives, let us examine the method by which I discovered the secrets.

this material has been excerpted from

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