

AS
SEEN
ON
PUBLIC
TV

the
five secrets
you must
discover
before
you die

JOHN IZZO Ph.D.

Bestselling author of *Second Innocence*

praise for *five secrets*

“This book is rich with anecdotes and insights that broaden your perspective on life and deepen your commitment to live your very best.”

—Brian Tracy, author of *Maximum Achievement*, *Eat That Frog!* and *Flight Plan*

“Instead of wishing at the end of life ‘If I only knew then what I know now’ you can know it now! This book has incredible wisdom from people who have real perspective.”

—Marshall Goldsmith, author of *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*

“John Izzo has revealed key fundamental truths from our elders, which he has presented in a way that is absorbing and often moving. This is not just another simple meaning-of-life book; it is a carefully researched and edited exploration of a road map to fulfillment for an era that needs it more than ever. The author infuses personal meaning into each chapter, and we feel as though we are going on a personal journey with him. The journey is joyful, heartfelt, often tearful, moving, but always presented with meaning and purpose.”

—Janet E. Lapp, Ph.D., psychologist, author, and host of the CBS series *Keep Well*

“Have you ever wanted to sit down with someone who is really wise and ask him or her some fundamental questions about life? How about sitting down with more than 200 wise people? That’s what John Izzo did and he offers truths here that you can’t afford to ignore. Prepare to be surprised, provoked, encouraged—and changed forever. You will want to keep this book as a constant companion. It is a gentle reminder that it is never too late to live the truths that lead to wisdom, grace, and deep happiness.”

—Dr. Kent M. Keith, CEO, The Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, and author of *Anyway: The Paradoxical Commandments*

“John has written a book that takes the obvious and turns it into the essence. When you have finished reading *The Five Secrets* you will find yourself with a new point of view about the rest of your life. And you will love it!”

—Joel Barker, futurist

“John Izzo is a masterful storyteller. He educates us by weaving a fascinating mosaic of stories that make his point. Let this book be your mentor!”

—Beverly Kaye, Founder and CEO, Career Systems International and co-author of *Love It Don't Leave It: 26 Ways to Get What You Want at Work* and *Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay*

“*The Five Secrets You Must Discover Before You Die* is a magically engaging book: lyrical, poetic, and perceptive. Through deeply moving stories from wise elders, John Izzo masterfully unravels the mystery of what it means to live a full and meaningful life. This book is a joy to read, and it will be an even greater joy to live the profound yet simple lessons revealed in this remarkable book.”

—Jim Kouzes, co-author of *The Leadership Challenge* and *A Leader's Legacy*

“I was deeply moved as I savored the wisdom found in *The Five Secrets You Must Discover Before You Die*. This book brings to light much of the lost wisdom of our elders, providing practical ways to live with greater meaning and focus. John Izzo, who courageously puts the word ‘die’ in the title, offers us profound and simple wisdom for living, for getting to the heart of what it means to be more fully human.”

—David Irvine, author of *Becoming Real: Journey to Authenticity* and *The Authentic Leader*

“The things we think we know are usually the things we most need to be helped to remember. This book prompts us to refocus on the principles on which we build the well-lived life.”

—Max Wyman, author of *The Defiant Imagination*

“If you read only one book this year, please make it *The Five Secrets You Must Discover Before You Die*. Dr. Izzo has done a monumental service for all of us in synthesizing fundamental keys to living a happy and meaningful life. This is extraordinary wisdom literature.”

—Larry C. Spears, President Emeritus and Senior Fellow,
The Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership

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The Five Secrets You Must Discover Before You Die

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dedicated to my grandfather,
Henry Turpel,
whose ring I wear and
whose legacy I carry on

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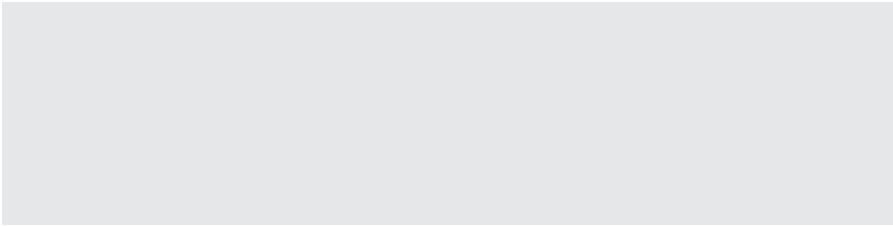
Thanks to my grandfather, Henry Turpel, whose life has always inspired me and who died before I was able to fully tap his wisdom. It seems to me that I heard his voice in the lives of these special people.

Thanks to the 235 people who took the time to share their life stories with us. I wish I could have included your entire lives in this book. Many of you have become friends and, as you reminded me, friendship matters more than almost anything else. To those who we were not able to quote directly, please know that even if you are not quoted directly, your wisdom has shaped the message of this book.

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John Izzo

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.