

The Five Secrets You Must Discover Before You Die

By John Izzo, Ph.D.

The Big Idea

Based on a highly acclaimed public television series, this book takes the reader on a heartwarming and profound journey to find lasting happiness. John Izzo interviewed over 200 people, ages 60-106, each of whom was identified by friends and acquaintances as “the one person they knew who had found happiness and meaning.” From town barbers to Holocaust survivors, from aboriginal chiefs to CEOs, these people had over 18,000 years of life experience between them. He asked them questions like, what brought you the greatest joy? What do you wish you had learned sooner? What ultimately mattered and what didn't?

Here Izzo shares their stories – funny, moving, and thought-provoking – and the Five Secrets he learned from listening to them.

Why You Need This Book

This simple book will make you laugh, bring you to tears, and inspire you to discover what matters long before you die.

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.

With this 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.

THE FIRST SECRET: BE TRUE TO YOURSELF

How do we really live true to ourselves? The secret is to live with intention, to consistently and regularly ask three critical life questions:

- *Am I following my heart and being true to my self?*
- *Is my life focused on the things that really matter to me?*
- *Am I being the person I want to be in the world?*

One will learn from the old people that wisdom means reflecting more, asking again and again whether your life is going in the right direction, and making constant adjustments to move closer to the life you deserve to live.

What separates those who live well and die happy from most of us is that they continually asked themselves whether they were living the life they wanted to live and following their heart toward the answer. The first secret is to be true to you, yourself, and live with intention.

Here are four questions to think about each week to help you live this secret:

- *Did this week or day feel like my kind of week/day? What would make tomorrow or next week feel more true?*
- *Was I the kind of person I want to be this week? In what way do I want to be more like the kind of person I want to be tomorrow or next week?*
- *Am I following my heart right now? What would it mean for me to really follow my heart right now?*
- *How do I want to live this secret more deeply next week?*

THE SECOND SECRET: LEAVE NO REGRETS

Regret is possibly the one thing we all fear the most; that we might look back on our lives and wish we had done things differently. When we have lived life fully and done what we hoped to do, we can accept death with grace. What we fear most is not having lived to the fullest extent possible, to come to the end of our life with our final words being "I wish I had."

To leave no regrets, we must live with courage, moving toward what we want rather than away from what we fear. To leave no regrets we must overcome the inevitable disappointments that life hands us.

Here are four questions to think about each week to help you live this secret:

- *Did I act out of fear today or this week? How do I want to be more courageous tomorrow or next week?*
- *Did I act on my convictions this week? How do I want to act on them more deeply this week?*
- *What step would I take in my life right now if I were acting with courage, not fear? What might I do differently right now if I were living from the perspective of an old person on the porch looking back at my life?*
- *How am I responding to the setbacks in my life right now? Am I stepping forward or retreating?*

THE THIRD SECRET: BECOME LOVED

Love is a word with a great deal of baggage. It is necessary to make a distinction between the emotion of love and the choice to love. Love is commonly perceived in our society as only an emotion. The secret to a happy and purposeful life was to choose to be a loving person, to become loved.

We live out this secret in three ways:

First, love your self

Unless we fundamentally choose to see ourselves as worthy, we cannot find happiness. The love of self is fundamental to being a spiritually human being. For some of us, self-love may come naturally because our upbringing and early experiences gave us a deep sense of our own self-worth, but for others the love of the self comes with difficulty.

Make love a priority

The second part of this secret is to choose to act with love toward those closest to us and to make loving relationships a priority in our lives.

Choosing to see others with kindness

The most important thing to be discovered about this secret, to become loved, is that when we choose to become loved in all the encounters of our lives, when we choose love and kindness as our way in the world, happiness finds us. When we give love away it comes back to us in the form of happiness.

Here are four questions to think about each week to help you live this secret:

- *Did I make room for friends, family, and relationships today/this week? Did I allow things to be more important than people?*
- *Was I kind and loving today/this week to the people closest to me? How do I want to be more loving to them tomorrow or this week?*
- *Did I spread love and kindness in the world today/this week in each interaction? Did I act as if each stranger was someone for whom I could make a difference?*
- *Which of my wolves did I feed today/this week? Did I spend time with people who lift my spirit? Did I act with love toward my self today/this week? Did I engage in negative self-talk/self-hypnosis? Am I planting flowers or weeds in my self-conscious mind?*

THE FOURTH SECRET: LIVE THE MOMENT

If life goes by quickly, then one of the secrets to happiness is to get more out of the time we have, to find a way that each moment and each day become great gifts. Thoreau called this "improving the nick of time."

At its simplest, live the moment means to be fully in every moment of our lives, to not judge our lives but to live fully. It means that we must not focus on the past or the future but experience each moment with gratitude and purpose. It means that we recognize that we have the power in each moment to choose contentment and happiness.

Living the moment does not simply mean to take each moment as it comes, it means something far more significant. See each day as a great gift.

Living in the present means recognizing that we have no power over the past or the future, none at all. The past has already occurred and is behind us. Whatever happened, we have no power to change it. Any regrets we had, and any joys, are forever frozen in time. Focusing on the past, especially on regret, has the power only to rob the present moment of its happiness. When we find ourselves in regret about the past we must tell ourselves that we have no power over it, none whatsoever.

Living the moment is easy to say but hard to do. To practice living the moment we must train our minds, often over a number of years. Meditation is great practice for training our minds to be present.

Here are four questions to think about each week to help you live this secret:

- *Did I fully enjoy whatever I was doing this week or day? Was I really “here,” or did I just show up?*
- *Did I take every pleasure that was available to me today/this week (really smell the flowers), and did I walk with awareness through my life or just run?*
- *What am I grateful for today/this week? Did I find myself saying “I would be happy if...”? Did I choose contentment and happiness this week?*
- *Did I live in the present today/this week, or did I let tomorrow or yesterday steal the day’s happiness?*

THE FIFTH SECRET: GIVE MORE THAN YOU TAKE

Happy people are always givers not takers. They may not have been as selfless as Mother Teresa or Gandhi, but they discovered that the more we give, the more we find happiness.

One of the reasons that giving more than we take is one of the secrets to happiness and purpose is because we have a great deal of control over what we give. Each day, we have the power to give without limit. We can choose kindness, to serve, to love, to be generous, and to leave the world better in some way.

When we give more than we take we connect ourselves to a story bigger than our selves. And in the act of doing so, happiness finds us.

Here are some questions to think about each week to help you live this secret:

- *Did I make the world a better place this week in some small way?*
- *Did I remind myself this week that I am making a difference even if I don’t see it?*
- *Was I kind, generous, and giving this week? How do I want to be more that way tomorrow/next week?*

- *Was I focused on the needs of the “small self” this week rather than the “larger self”?*
- *How do I want to live this secret more deeply next week?*

A FINAL LESSON: IT’S NEVER TOO LATE TO LIVE THE SECRETS

As you contemplate the five secrets, try to resist the temptation to judge your life. Instead, ask: How can I embrace and live the five secrets more deeply? The judging mind paralyzes us either by giving us a false sense of perfection or by giving us a deep sense of inadequacy. We have lived the life we have lived, and now we have the opportunity to grow.

It is never too late to embrace the five secrets found in this book and to change the legacy of many years. Even one year lived wisely can erase many years of regret.

Stop judging the life you have lived and get on with the life you still may live. Whatever mistakes you have made and no matter how many regrets may litter your past, plant a new tree today. Begin to live the secrets now or simply live them more deeply.

THE SECRET TO LIFE IN ONE SENTENCE OR LESS

The people interviewed shared in one sentence or less, the secret to a fulfilling and happy life. In some cases, they went over the one-sentence limit, but putting a lifetime in one sentence isn’t easy.

Here are some selected secrets to life:

There are ten-minute funeral lines and ten-hour funeral lines. Live your life so that when you die people will want to stay and tell stories about the kind of life you lived and how you touched them. – **Ken Krambeer, town barber**

Recognize that you are born with the capacity to be in the world and not dependent on the circumstance in which you find yourself; don’t take yourself seriously, don’t get trapped by the ideas in your head; they are not the same as the reality. – **Donald Klein, psychologist**

Don’t count on cramming. I always told my students – if you follow your heart, leave a legacy, and focus on what matters, it will be ok. – **George Beer, physicist, retired professor**

Love someone deeply and be loved by someone deeply; be passionate about yourself and your curiosity and exploration and really GO FOR IT. – **William Hawfield**

In order to find a more purposeful life you must let go of what society and people think of you and look inside yourself through some discipline – prayer, meditation – to find out what matters most to you and pursue it. – **James Autry, poet and author**

If you are unhappy, get busy doing something for someone else. If you concentrate on yourself you will be unhappy, but if you focus on helping others you will find happiness. Happiness comes from serving and loving. – **Juana Bordas, author**

Banish the word “boredom” from your vocabulary, and wherever you are make the most of that moment because you won’t get it back. – **Max Wyman**

Kneel down and kiss the earth, be thankful that you exist, love yourself and those around you, and enjoy the hell out of being alive. – **Craig Neal**

Remember you are part of something larger than yourself. – **Anthony Holland, actor**

Find your passion and pursue it. – **Lea Williams, author and educator**

Find something you love doing and make it your career. – **Paul Hersey, author**

My mother told me “to thine ownself be true”. It is an important advice and will pay huge dividends if you learn what is true for yourself. Be true to what matters to you. This requires reflection and you can’t think while watching *The Simpsons*. – **Jim Kouzes, author**

Learn to love people, because if you do, it will carry you to all kinds of places – see the good in other people always. – **John Boyd, painter**

I cannot give one sentence of advice to others because first I would have to know them, so I say know yourself and know what you want to create in your life and hold that in front of yourself ALWAYS. – **Elsa Neuner**

Eat healthy, be physically active, invest your energy in making wherever you are a more just and happy community. – **William Gorden, professor of communication, activist**

Always see the good in people, and you won’t get hurt because everybody has so much goodness in them. Don’t envy other people, because you have different gifts and blessings. – **Eileen Lindsay**

Learn to step out of the boat more. – **Don**

Live everyday for what it is, don’t worry about what will happen, the next day will take care of itself, what will be will be, learn to accept and wait for the next day to happen. – **Esther**

Never dwell on the negative in your life, bad things happen all the time, even in bad situations look for the good and you will find it. – **Rufus Riggs**

Live your passion and be of service to others. – **Laura Lowe**

Get an education, find out who you are, where you came from and where you want to go, and don’t forget who you are. – **Ralph Dick, native chief**

You need to learn who you are inside, figure out what your feelings are, understand that; the key to self-knowledge. If you know who you are, then you are grounded throughout life. If everything is a mystery to you, then you are going to be in trouble. – **Mark Sherkow**

Don't draw the curtain too soon; there is always an encore or fourth act. – **Joci James**

Remember the Lord God has His eyes on you and His hand on your shoulder. – **Robin Brians**

Know thyself and have the courage to follow that. – **Clive Martin**