

THE WORLD NEEDS MORE SAGES

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Did you know more Americans turn 65 each day than are born? And by 2030, there will be more people over 60 than under 18? This generation of “elders” in the developed world is “the longest lived, wealthiest, healthiest, most highly educated and largest percentage of elder population in history,” said John Izzo, life coach and author of “The Five Secrets You Must Discover Before You Die.”

After listening to his TEDx talk, “The Defining Moment for a Generation in-Waiting,” I interviewed him for my podcast “Becoming a Sage.”

He explained how we are facing significant challenges: a warming climate, a growing income gap between the rich and everyone else, widening wars in Europe and the Middle East, and ongoing differences among various generations. These challenges cause anxiety for everyone, but the current generation of elders has the time, talent, wealth and political clout to influence how the world addresses them.

Throughout history, elders in cultures around the world were relied upon to think about the future, pass on their wisdom and make critical decisions as good ancestors for future generations. The best example is the Seventh Generation Principle, a Native American idea that suggests that decision-makers “should consider the potential benefits or hardships that would be felt by seven future generations.”

Izzo framed the critical question for elders like this: How do you want to continue to contribute to the world?

We talked about how the focus of life after 50 often shifts from one’s ego to one’s ability to contribute in new ways. He described how midlife has been extended in two directions. He coaches people in their 30s and 40s who have made a fortune by starting a business and selling it. Now they’re asking questions people usually ask in their 50s and 60s: What am I going to do now that I’ve made a living? What am I going to do with my energy, time, talent and treasures?

In Foster Group founder Jerry Foster’s book, “LifeFocus: Achieving a Life of Purpose and Influence,” he notes that as people age, they often choose one of three paths: indulgence, indifference or influence. Indulgence is focused on consuming and accumulating. Indifference is about not knowing what to do. Influence is about generativity, making the world a better place.

Richard Leider, the author of “The Power of Purpose: Find Meaning, Live Longer, Better,” writes that his research found that for many elders, “meaning is more important than money, and significance is more important than success.” As a baby boomer, Izzo generalized that many of his fellow boomers were involved in making social change and challenging norms that helped society make some necessary shifts. He explained how “some of us sold out and got caught up in the ‘consumer dream’ of materialism and wealth accumulation.” The latest research from Age Wave indicates that most boomers feel it’s more important in their next life chapter to be “useful” rather than “youthful.”

In conclusion, Izzo encouraged elders to channel their wealth, talent and wisdom to reinvent and solve societal problems. “Almost all people over 50 naturally move into the phase in which they think about how their kids are doing and how their grandchildren will do. It is time for this generation to expand their sphere of concern. While most older people are concerned about their ‘tribe’ succeeding in the future, they need to realize their tribe won’t succeed if the globe doesn’t succeed. Elders should reinvent themselves and help create a better society. Traditional wisdom is that as people become older, they get more conservative — protecting what ‘I’ have. We need them to think about protecting what ‘we’ have.”

The world doesn’t need this generation of elders to turn inward. We need them to become sages by using their wisdom to open their hearts and turn outward to make the world a better place.

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