

“A thought-provoking guide to sustained happiness.”

—SHAWN ACHOR, AUTHOR OF *Before Happiness*  
& *The Happiness Advantage*

the  
five  
thieves  
of  
happiness

.....  
Bestselling author of  
*The Five Secrets*  
*You Must Discover*  
*Before You Die*  
.....

JOHN IZZO PhD

Foreword by MARSHALL GOLDSMITH

**If you enjoy this excerpt...**

consider becoming a member of the reader community on our website!

[Click here for sign-up form.](#) Members automatically get 10% off print, 30% off digital books.

## More Praise for *The Five Thieves of Happiness*

“The only things holding you back from complete peace of mind are mental, and this book shows you how to remove these barriers once and for all.”

—**Brian Tracy, author of *The Power of Self-Confidence***

“*Five Thieves* is a perfect complement to *Five Secrets*. Dr. Izzo gives us not only a pencil with which to sketch the good but now the eraser to rid the bad.”

—**Dr. Geoff Smart, founder and Chairman, ghSMART, and coauthor of *Who***

“In a world on the brink of either returning to the dark ages or entering the next great renaissance, John’s book comes along to help us remember that happiness is available to us all, despite our circumstances, if we become present to the things that are keeping us from it and choose it for ourselves.”

—**KoAnn Vikoren Skrzyniarz, founder and CEO, Sustainable Brands**

“Skip this book and you will steal from yourself. *The Five Thieves* offers a gift of awareness and a vision for finding peacefulness within ourselves and our society.”

—**Noah Blumenthal, bestselling author of *Be the Hero***

“*The Five Thieves of Happiness* is brilliantly conceived, beautifully written, and thoroughly engaging. John Izzo gently challenges, provokes, and nudges us to rethink our fundamental assumptions about the pursuit of happiness and how we may just be picking our own pockets of the well-being that we seek. It’s a sparkling gem of a book, rich in timeless wisdom and abounding in contemporary truths—a book that you will want to return to again and again as you ponder what it means to live a good life.”

—**Jim Kouzes, coauthor of *The Leadership Challenge* and Dean’s Executive Fellow of Leadership, Leavey School of Business, Santa Clara University**

“I continue to be inspired by John Izzo as a professional and as a friend. I hope that *The Five Thieves of Happiness* can help you as much as he has helped me!”

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

“Happiness is a choice, but it requires effort and wisdom to pursue. In this thought-provoking book, Izzo helps identify the biggest stumbling blocks so that you can find a clearer path to sustained happiness and meaning in your life.”

—**Shawn Achor, happiness researcher and *New York Times* bestselling author of *Before Happiness***

“A powerful guide to becoming world-class happy.”

—**Robin Sharma, #1 bestselling author of *The Leader Who Had No Title* and founder of The Titan Academy**

“Many people have spent many decades searching for the lost secret of happiness, but John Izzo is the one who found it and shows us how to steal it back, naturally! For anyone hoping to live better, this book is an essential—and perhaps life-changing—read.”

—**Richard Leider, bestselling author or coauthor of *The Power of Purpose*, *Repacking Your Bags*, *Life Reimagined*, and *Work Reimagined***

“Dr. John Izzo brilliantly depicts the five thieves that separate us from happiness. Not only does he powerfully explore what this means for each of us as individuals, but he elevates the conversation to the implications on society. This is a must-read for personal and societal transformation.”

—**Arthur Woods, cofounder of Imperative**

“A new book by John Izzo is a cause for celebration. That’s because Izzo tackles meaning and purpose in ways that are honest and hopeful. His latest book, *The Five Thieves of Happiness*, is no exception. In it, he challenges us to lean into our better nature and recapture a state that was ours to begin with: happiness. An important and entertaining read.”

—**Mark Levy, author of *Accidental Genius***

the  
five thieves  
of  
happiness

Other books by John Izzo:

*Stepping Up: How Taking Responsibility Changes Everything*

*Second Innocence: Rediscovering Joy and Wonder, a Guide  
to Renewal in Work, Relationships, and Daily Life*

*The Five Secrets You Must Discover before You Die*

*Awakening Corporate Soul: Four Paths to Unleash the  
Power of People at Work* (Fairwinds Press, 1998)

the  
five thieves  
of  
happiness

**JOHN IZZO** PhD



**BK**

Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc  
*a BK Life book*

# The Five Thieves of Happiness

Copyright © 2017 by John B. Izzo.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the publisher, addressed "Attention: Permissions Coordinator," at the address below.



**Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.**

1333 Broadway, Suite 1000

Oakland, CA 94612-1921

Tel: (510) 817-2277, Fax: (510) 817-2278

[www.bkconnection.com](http://www.bkconnection.com)

**BK**

## Ordering information for print editions

*Quantity sales.* Special discounts are available on quantity purchases by corporations, associations, and others. For details, contact the "Special Sales Department" at the Berrett-Koehler address above.

*Individual sales.* Berrett-Koehler publications are available through most bookstores. They can also be ordered directly from Berrett-Koehler: Tel: (800) 929-2929; Fax: (802) 864-7626; [www.bkconnection.com](http://www.bkconnection.com)

*Orders for college textbook/course adoption use.* Please contact Berrett-Koehler: Tel: (800) 929-2929; Fax: (802) 864-7626.

*Orders by U.S. trade bookstores and wholesalers.* Please contact Ingram Publisher Services, Tel: (800) 509-4887; Fax: (800) 838-1149; E-mail: [customer.service@ingrampublisherservices.com](mailto:customer.service@ingrampublisherservices.com); or visit [www.ingrampublisherservices.com/Ordering](http://www.ingrampublisherservices.com/Ordering) for details about electronic ordering.

Berrett-Koehler and the BK logo are registered trademarks of Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

First Edition

Paperback print edition ISBN 978-1-62656-932-4

PDF e-book ISBN 978-1-62656-933-1

IDPF e-book ISBN 978-1-62656-934-8

2016-1

Cover design by Nancy Austin. Interior design by Detta Penna. Composition by Gary Palmatier, Ideas to Images. Elizabeth von Radics, copyeditor; Mike Mollett, proofreader; Rachel Rice, indexer.



To Janice Halls,  
my partner in life who teaches every day  
what it means to claim happiness

## contents

	foreword	viii
	preface	xii
chapter one	happiness is our natural state	1
chapter two	the first thief: control	11
chapter three	the second thief: conceit	37
chapter four	the third thief: coveting	61
chapter five	the fourth thief: consumption	79
chapter six	the fifth thief: comfort	93
chapter seven	kicking the thieves out of your house	107
chapter eight	imagining a world without the five thieves	115
	notes	124
	acknowledgments	128
	index	130
	about the author	139

## foreword

In nearly four decades as an executive coach, I have worked with some of the world's most influential leaders—brilliant, highly accomplished people who have made a positive difference in the lives of millions.

Recently, I coached three physicians who are standout exemplars: Dr. Jim Yong Kim, president of the World Bank; Dr. John Noseworthy, president of the Mayo Clinic; and Dr. Rajiv Shah, administrator of the United States Agency for International Development. As part of my coaching, I suggested they ask themselves a series of questions each day, one of which is *Did I do my best to be happy?*

It's a pretty simple question, and these men are smart, experienced, and highly credentialed. Yet they weren't sure what to say. "Do you have a problem with trying to be happy?" I asked.

In separate conversations, all three of them answered with virtually the same words: *It never occurred to me to try to be happy.*

Happiness can prove elusive, even for the best and brightest among us. If we are like these dedicated doctors and leaders, it isn't even on our radar. I suspect that a different kind of misapprehension is far more common—hoping for or expecting happiness but failing to attain it. In this thought-provoking book, John Izzo asks why happiness is so hard to grasp and why it matters to be happy. He makes a compelling case that we do better individually and collectively when we understand the "thieves" that try to rob us of our innate contentment.

As a philosophical Buddhist, I find that this concept makes perfect sense. Buddha named five hindrances that hold us back in meditation and in life: sensory desire, ill will, sloth, restlessness, and doubt. In our culture today, we are hindered to a

great degree by John's thieves of happiness: control, conceit, coveting, consumption, and comfort.

The need for control is such a common issue among the leaders I coach and teach that I have developed an acronym to address it: *AIWATT*, which stands for, *Am I willing, at this time, to make the positive investment required to make a positive difference on this topic?* (If not, let it go.) Conceit, otherwise known as ego, is rampant in our fame-obsessed culture, and I have seen it do real damage in the lives of otherwise promising people. Coveting and consumption are nearly unavoidable in a consumer-driven economy as the great Western disease of *I will be happy when...* spreads around the globe. All of us, at one time or another, have been convinced that we'd be happy if only we could get that house, car, romantic partner, big promotion, or other object of our desire. Our need for comfort can lull us into the false perception that what we're doing is good enough, when in reality the world is demanding more of us.

If someone asked you to quickly name the five biggest thieves of your happiness, what would you say? It would be tempting to list your nasty boss, the spreadsheets you have to do, the bills you have to pay, or the terrible weather where you live. According to John's wise formulation, the thieves are all within us. That means we cannot blame anyone or anything outside ourselves if we aren't happy. It also means we have the power to connect with our inner happiness—though it takes great discipline to do it.

In my career and in my life, I place a high premium on happiness. I have been described in the press as a “happiness professional,” a moniker I wholeheartedly accept. But it isn't always easy to maintain. I need help to keep up the practice. I suggest to my coaching clients that they ask themselves questions that reflect their most important priorities in life. I do this,

too! Because I'm not always good at remembering the ritual, I have an assistant call me to read the questions to me over the phone, wherever in the world I happen to be. She always asks whether I did my best to be happy. I typically give myself a 9.3 or 9.4 out of 10. How do I achieve that?

Paradoxically, I don't. As John points out, happiness is not something to strive for. The only way to cure the disease is to choose happiness and meaning *now*—in the present moment. For example, in my book *Triggers* I write that we underestimate how much the environment affects us, and that is certainly true of me in an airport. For much of my career, I have been flying around the world to coach, speak, and teach. At first I was constantly beset by the aggravations of flying: planes leaving late, missing connections, being stuck in airports when I wanted to be anywhere else.

Then in 1984 I went to Africa with the American Red Cross African Famine Relief Campaign, a humanitarian mission on which I saw hundreds of people starve to death. It was an unforgettable experience that taught me something about being happy. Those people would have been overjoyed at the chance to be in an air-conditioned airport filled with places to eat and chairs to sit in. Before I came home, I made a commitment to myself: never complain because the airplane is late.

I fly every week. And every week I remember this commitment. Not long ago the computers were down in Chicago's O'Hare International Airport, and I couldn't get access to the lounge where I usually rest between flights. I started to get angry, but my long-ago commitment surfaced in my mind. *Be grateful. Be happy now. Don't wait.*

If you're stuck in an airport, or anywhere else you don't want to be, I hope you have a copy of this book with you. It will help you understand the inner forces arrayed against you.

Even better, it will guide you as you overcome those forces and connect to your deep, natural reserve of happiness.

Marshall Goldsmith

Author of *What Got You Here Won't Get You There: How Successful People Become Even More Successful*  
and *Triggers: Creating Behavior That Lasts—*  
*Becoming the Person You Want to Be*

## preface

I have been a student of happiness and meaning my entire life. From my earliest memories, what has fascinated me most is trying to crack the code of what makes life worthy, meaningful, and happy. It was what led me into my professions (Presbyterian minister then author-speaker), to pursue my degrees (sociology, psychology, and religious studies), to write my books, and to engage in the research that has taken up my adult life. It has been a quest of the head and the heart. My mind wanted to know the secrets to happiness, and my heart wanted to live them.

Many of you may be familiar with my fourth book, *The Five Secrets You Must Discover before You Die*. The book was based on something I called the Wise Elder Project, in which I asked people to identify “the one older person they knew who had found true happiness and had something to teach us.” After getting several thousand nominees, we interviewed 250 people between the ages of 60 and 102, with more than 18,000 years of life experience between them, who had only one thing in common: they were the happiest older person someone knew.

*The Five Secrets* helped me identify the secrets to lasting happiness, culled from the lives of this unique group. The response to the book was overwhelmingly positive. In letters and e-mails, people from all over the world told me that the five secrets made intuitive sense to them, but they also told me something else: knowing the secrets was not enough. In essence, they said, *I know what brings me happiness, but it's hard to put it into practice.*

Over the years since the book was published, it occurred to me that maybe the five secrets were only half the secret. When I interviewed those happy people, I was focused on what they *did* to find happiness, but later I started reflecting on what they had

*not* done. It might be that there was something else that happy people did differently. Upon deeper reflection I realized that the people I had interviewed didn't seem particularly obsessed with finding happiness. In fact, their happiness seemed to be a by-product of how they saw the world, rather than the result of any particular quest or what was happening in their lives. A question rose up in me: *Did happiness really have to be that hard?*

In 2015 I decided to take an eight-month sabbatical from my work as an author, speaker, and consultant, in part because I felt I still had not fully cracked the code of sustainable happiness for myself. It was while on sabbatical, walking the Camino de Santiago in Spain, that the idea of the thieves of happiness first came to me. It was something like a gift from my subconscious, something I had somehow known for a very long time and yet consistently missed. It was like a clue to a puzzle that I had been trying to solve for a long while or a whodunit movie when some tiny clue finally clicks and you know who the culprit is. The eureka moment was this: maybe happiness is our natural state, but there are mental thought patterns that we let rob us of our happiness.

Over the course of the following 12 weeks, as I walked the Camino and later trekked in the Sacred Valley in Peru, I reflected on the question *Who are these thieves that rob our happiness?* One by one I began to name them. I claim no special inspiration for the five, but I believe I culled them from the various traditions that have studied happiness.

Having been a lifetime student of both the spiritual and philosophical traditions, as well as the discipline of psychology, I knew that the answer to this question was likely already there for the finding. Psychology and spirituality have one important shared quest. They both seek to answer the question *How do human beings find happiness and meaning?*

Throughout this book I draw from the spiritual traditions, as well as the scientific studies of psychology, to discover who



these thieves are and how we can thwart them. All the thieves I discuss can be found in these traditions, though their names may vary. There could easily have been six or 10 thieves, but in the end I settled on the five that seemed to me the greatest robbers of our contentment.

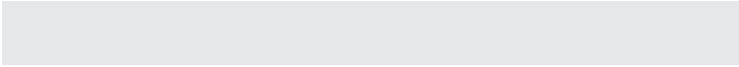
As I reflected on the thieves, I contemplated how the same phenomenon was likely true for society. Just as I believe that our natural state as individuals is happiness, so I believe that the natural human state is of harmony and cooperation. Despite the common belief that this is a dog-eat-dog world, recent research into evolutionary biology suggests that human beings have thrived and become the dominant species on the planet precisely because of our cooperative nature. It is our capacity to cooperate across large numbers of strangers that allowed us to conquer the world, so to speak.

As I traveled the world for four decades, the vast majority of human beings I encountered, in many diverse cultures across six continents, seemed to be good and decent people. Why then was the evening news filled with unimaginable horrors, and why were we running like buffalo off a cliff toward environmental catastrophe when it seemed so obvious that change was needed?

Maybe the same thieves who were stealing our personal happiness were also robbing our societal harmony. After all, what was society but an outgrowth of each of our inner worlds writ large. This is why all global or community change must begin in the heart of each of us.

Some of the thieves will at first seem obvious to you, and they should be. The fact that you recognize their names tells you that we sense their presence already. But knowing who they are and kicking them out of your house are two very different things. It is my intention to show you who these thieves are, help you see how they steal our individual and societal happiness, and give you practical methods to get them out of your life.

# happiness is our natural state



A thief is someone who steals what is rightfully ours. This book is about the thieves we allow to rob us of the happiness that is our natural state. We don't need to seek happiness so much as we need to get out of its way. These same thieves rob us of the harmony we are capable of as a society.

Happiness is all the rage today. Books about happiness proliferate everywhere, it seems. The science of happiness has become big business, as well as the subject of scientific exploration. University studies seeking to discover, through clinical research, how happiness is engendered and maintained have become common at vaunted places like Harvard and the University of Michigan. I have written extensively about happiness, as well as lectured on it around the globe. In spite of all this attention, we live in a world awash in books and lectures on happiness, but unhappiness is all around us.

Is it possible that the very pursuit of happiness has within it the seeds of unhappiness? The idea of needing to seek happiness has, at its core, the belief that happiness and contentment are

not our natural state, that somehow to find happiness we must go on a heroic quest to uncover that which will make us happy.

Even the label of being happy or unhappy can be a trap. By labeling ourselves as “unhappy,” we are already sitting in judgment of our inner state. Some research has suggested that the act of assessing one’s happiness on a consistent basis may actually lead to greater unhappiness, especially if we are feeling unhappy to begin with.<sup>1</sup>

## **happiness is not about happenings**

The word *happiness* was chosen for this book with some trepidation. The word has many meanings to many different people. There are other words that could have been chosen, such as *contentment*, *peace*, *virtue*, *fulfillment*, *meaning*, *harmony*, and *joy*. Yet *happiness* appears to be the word of our time, the word that somehow in pop culture has come to symbolize our desire for a sense of rightness about life.

It is no accident that the English word *happiness* sounds an awful lot like *happenings*. The word *happiness* in most European languages, from Greek to English, originally was synonymous with the word *lucky* from the Middle English word *hap* (which meant “chance”). In other words, if you were fortunate enough to have good things happening to you, the result was the feeling of happiness.

In keeping with the origin of the word, most of us believe that happiness is directly related to happenings, even though we know it does not explain why some people appear to experience happiness regardless of what is happening in their lives, whereas others are chronically unhappy even with many good things happening around them.

The ancient Greeks had a slightly different notion of happiness. In many ways Aristotle began the conversation about

happiness in the Western world when he identified it as the chief goal of a human life. The Greek word *eudaimonia* is more akin to the idea of human flourishing than the Middle English *happiness*. Though Aristotle granted that part of human flourishing came from external elements, such as health and wealth, he argued that happiness was more about living a life of virtue. He posited certain qualities of character that represented the more ideal state of a human, such as courage. The virtues were not so much moral qualities as they were ways of being that facilitate happiness. In other words, Aristotle introduced the idea that happiness was somehow related to an internal set of virtues or characteristics, which somehow filtered our experience.

Disconnecting happiness from happenings is critical to achieve lasting contentment. This is the happiness that each of us truly seeks—one that is not directly correlated with what is happening in our lives moment to moment but that has a robust lasting quality of its own regardless of outer circumstances.

## **happiness is our natural state**

It is my contention that happiness is our natural state. But how do we define happiness? Happiness, contentment, a sense of well-being, the feeling that one's life has meaning and purpose—all are concepts most of us understand intuitively. We know it when we experience it, when there is a sense of things being well. When I use the word *happiness*, I mean it to be “a deep sense of rightness about one's life and a sense of inner contentment about oneself in the world.” It is this very sense of the rightness of things that I argue is natural to us and is something that the thieves steal from us.

As was said on the first page of this book, one way to think about happiness is that we don't have to seek it so much as we need to get out of its way. We have been so trained to think that

we have to seek, long for, and work for happiness that it's easy to forget that the contentment we seek is always there, waiting for us to access it. Nature is a great teacher in this regard, which is why so many of the wisdom and poetic traditions ask us to approach nature as a role model. Research consistently shows that when humans are surrounded by nature, especially trees and other plants, we are happier and less stressed. There is a reason for that. Nature appears to us to have the natural calm we seek. Most of nature appears to simply *be*. It reminds us that we also have that within us. Lao Tzu is purported to have said that nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished.

The idea that the inner experience of happiness is our natural state can be found throughout the spiritual traditions of East and West. Whether or not you believe in the factual truth of any or all of the great spiritual traditions, together they represent humanity's collective quest for happiness over many millennia. My intention here is not to support or promote any particular religious viewpoint but to show that this notion that we already have happiness is not new.

The Judeo-Christian-Islamic creation story illustrates this through the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Given the way humans have always seen nature as a teacher, it is not surprising that one of the oldest stories in the West about creation places the first humans happy and living in a garden.

The two first humans can do anything they want in the garden except eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Metaphorically, the tree represents the part of us that judges and toils rather than experiences life. Before eating from the tree, the first two humans simply enjoyed the garden. They were, in essence, living in paradise, connected to their natural happiness much like the trees and plants.

A snake entices them to eat from the tree, and immediately they feel ashamed and realize they are naked. They cover up.

Rather than feel that they had all they needed, they suddenly felt they somehow needed something else to be happy. The divine creator finds them clothed and asks, “Who told you that you were naked?”

Rather than think of the physical act of being naked, the allegorical meaning is more like *Who told you that there was something you needed?* You are, after all, already in the Garden of Eden! Think about the image for a moment. In the West we use “the Garden of Eden” as a way of talking about a place where everything works. The initial thought of unhappiness, the sense that all is not just as it should be, does not come from any change in external circumstances but from a shift of internal perspective. The garden did not change, but the filter through which the garden is seen is what steals the natural sense of rightness.

The result of the act of eating the fruit of the tree is that humans are cursed to struggle from that point on. Sadly, many interpret this story as punishment when it is more about exile. Disconnected now from our true nature, which is to be happy, we lost the connection to our natural calm and, unlike the rest of nature, have been seeking happiness ever since.

In the Eastern tradition, yoga and meditation are used to quiet the mind to discover the inner calm that is already there. The original Sanskrit word for yoga means literally “to join” or “to unite.” Unlike our modern idea of happiness, the word *yoga*, which is almost 5,000 years old, suggests not a seeking but a uniting with what is already within us. Many modern people think of yoga or even meditation as an arduous task to earn our way to calm rather than as a means to clear the mind so that one can rediscover the deep calm that is already our nature. Though suffering exists in the external world, the inner calm we seek is already within us. So when I say that happiness is naturally ours, that is what I mean.

A quote widely attributed to Rumi, a well-known thirteenth-century Persian poet, Islamic scholar, and Sufi mystic, says that the inspiration you seek is already within you. Be silent and listen. Again and again we see this idea that the experience of inner calm and happiness is already present.

We have glimpses of this inner calm not only in nature but in our own experiences, as well. The baby's natural smile is the most emblematic symbol of that inner state, the way the baby reaches out with curiosity to touch an object or explore the world without judgment.

The stillness of sleep in its most sublime moments is another image of the inner calm we already possess. Many in the Eastern tradition have compared the sense of oneness and calm we feel in sleep with our natural state of consciousness. Famous people like Shakespeare and D. H. Lawrence have extolled the virtues of sleep. As most occasional insomniacs know all too well, it is when we clear the mind and let sleep come, rather than seek it, that the peace of rest occurs. Happiness, like sleep, requires us to get out of its way. There is a reason we say, "sleeping like a baby"; somehow we know that the baby intuitively rests in the calm at the center of everything, a sleep soon disturbed by incessant seeking.

## **enter the thieves**

But why use the metaphor of thieves to represent that which takes away our natural happiness and inner calm? A thief, by definition, is someone who takes away something that is already yours. In the case of happiness, the thieves are thought patterns and internal filters through which we see the world in a distorted way. They cloud our view of what is true and natural.

Most of the spiritual and wisdom traditions suggest the presence of distorted ways of seeing the world that must be avoided. In Buddhism there are the five hindrances: sensory desire, ill will, sloth, restlessness, and doubt. In the monastic tradition of Christianity, there are the seven deadly sins: pride, envy, gluttony, lust, anger, greed, and sloth. In Sikhism, the world's fifth-largest religion and one of its youngest, there is an idea that we as humans have a natural sense of the rightness of things, which Sikhs call *common sense*. Sikhism suggests that there are five thought patterns (which they actually call *thieves*) that rob us of the natural common sense we possess: lust, greed, attachment, rage, and conceit. All the traditions in essence teach us that we are naturally happy and in harmony, if only we tame these forces within us.

When I first mentioned this idea of the thieves of happiness to a friend, she immediately said, "So you mean the things we must avoid?" Yet this is not about having a list of things we must avoid, like items on a strict diet. A list of things we *must not do* could be as, or more, punishing than a list of things we *must do* to find happiness and contentment.

Rather it is useful, as I said, to think of the five thieves of happiness as thought patterns and internal filters through which we see the world.

As I reflected on the 250 happy older people I had interviewed for *The Five Secrets*, I realized that many of them had called out these thought patterns, though at the time I failed to grasp it. In essence, they told me that there are ways of thinking that will take you away from happiness. These thieves are not outside ourselves but rather filters that exist within us. To some extent the thieves are all very natural to us, but when these thought patterns "run the house" they radically change how we experience our lives.



## the thieves are disguised as friends

Like any good thief, the five thieves often come with great disguises. A good thief looks like a friend before he robs us. As we explore each of the five thieves, you will see how the robber comes disguised as a constructive force in our lives but winds up tricking us. That is why the first path to getting the thieves out of the house is to recognize them for what they are.

The ultimate goal is to get these five thought patterns out of our lives, both individually and corporately. After all, if you have thieves in the house, you have to get rid of them. The five thieves are *control*, *conceit*, *coveting*, *consumption*, and *comfort*.

## the thieves also steal societal happiness

Just as I argue that happiness is our natural state as individuals, the same can be argued for our species. There has been much debate over the centuries about the true nature of human beings. Are we inherently selfish or altruistic? Are we born to be miserable or to live in joy? Are we inherently loving or violent? Will we ultimately be a locust on planet Earth, taking away the earth's capacity to extend life? Or will we be like bees, bringing even more life to the earth than if we did not exist?

To answer the question of the true nature of the human species, it is worth pondering how *Homo sapiens* came to dominate the earth unlike any species in the history of life as we know it. Biologists such as Edward O. Wilson in his book *The Social Conquest of Earth* and Yuval Noah Harari in his book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* offer compelling evidence that what allowed human beings to thrive and conquer the earth is our unparalleled capacity to cooperate. Of course, humans competed with one another as well, and the history of war bears witness to this, but the real story of human progress is

that of compassionate cooperation. Unlike any other species, we learned to cooperate with large numbers of strangers to accomplish common ends.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, there is evidence to suggest that much of our darker nature is a later development. For almost all of human history, perhaps 99 percent of our existence as a species, we lived in foraging tribes known as hunter-gatherers. This was who we were before the advent of agriculture. Although the evidence is scant, it turns out that our image of our ancient ancestors as warring savages is likely about as far from the truth as possible. Evidence suggests that our ancient ancestors displayed little violence toward other human beings, were likely quite compassionate, and cooperated extensively, including routinely sharing food. They also tended to see themselves as deeply connected to nature rather than at odds with it. Modern hunter-gatherer tribes continue to display this cooperative spirit. Evidence suggests that it was the agricultural revolution and the notion of property that helped foster what most of us associate with our darker human nature.<sup>3</sup>

This is not to suggest that humans are all good. But our truest nature—the most central feature of our collective self—is that of compassionate cooperator, and therein lies the root of our success. Much like our natural happiness, this true nature is obscured by shrouds of misconception.

The thieves are therefore as relevant to our community life as they are to our personal lives. It is my hope to show that the very things that rob us of our personal happiness also stand in the way of humanity's claiming our rightful place as a constructive, creative, and positive force on the planet. The community and the world are inherently a natural outgrowth of our inner life.

The house of humanity is nothing more than an extension of the inner houses of us as individuals. The inner state of each of us affects the state of the world. If we want a better

world, each of us must work on the constructive nature of our own being. This is why all the spiritual traditions call upon us to work on our inner life before we try to save the world and why positive psychology suggests that prosocial behavior comes from inner happiness, not the other way around.

## **how i came to name the thieves**

Before we launch into understanding and confronting the five thieves, you may want to know how I came to name them. Obviously, there could be countless thought patterns that might rob us of our natural contentment. As I walked the Camino and trekked in the Andes, the various thieves coalesced for me. Drawing less on science and more on both intuition and the wisdom traditions, I began to see the thought patterns that appeared through the various strands in my interviews for *The Five Secrets*, as well as my own life.

Drawing on the ancient traditions, each of the thieves bears resemblance to the thought patterns found in the five hindrances of Buddhism, the seven deadly sins of monastic Christianity, and the five thieves of Sikhism. The traditions name them differently, but at the core it seemed that control, conceit, coveting, consumption, and comfort were deeply relevant to our time and true to the wisdom of the traditions.

It is my hope that people of all beliefs, both secular and religious, will find in these strands of ancient wisdom the timeless truths of what stands between us and the calm contentment we so desire and the highest potential of human possibility.

**If you enjoy this excerpt...**

consider becoming a member of the reader community on our website!

[Click here for sign-up form.](#) Members automatically get 10% off print, 30% off digital books.