



WISDOM  
AGE

RESEARCH ACTUALLY PROVES THAT  
*WE GET SMARTER AS WE GET OLDER.*  
FIVE OF OUR FAVORITE WOMEN (*over 65*)  
SHARE THEIR ADVICE FOR *LONG & HAPPY LIVES.*

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## BONNIE TROMPETER, 67

MODEL OF RESILIENCE

So far in her life, Bonnie has faced a series of personal challenges including multiple divorces and the death of a child. Now, in her 53rd year of modeling and reunited with (and married to) her college love, Bonnie says she's happier than ever.

### ON GRATITUDE

"We're all blessed with certain attributes, whether they're looks or ambition or whatever. We can't take them for granted. If you always feel grateful, it's much easier to age."

### ON SPIRITUALITY

"I met an Episcopalian monk when I was about 40. He taught me how important it is to enrich your spirit and figure out where it's going. My daughter died in a car accident, and this helped me accept it. I realized that she had completed her cycle in life, and the tragedy was part of my own journey. It's made me more warm and compassionate toward others."

### ON AGING BEAUTIFULLY

"It's upsetting to see some of the things that happen to my body as I get older. To remain healthy and youthful, I do yoga, eat nutritiously, and don't drink. Sunscreen and a hat in the sun are a must, and I see my dermatologist regularly. Makeup also ages you, so I use a tinted moisturizer as a base."

### ON PATIENCE

"Don't get married and have a baby at 20. Live and see the world and develop yourself as a person. I've been married four times and been through three financially devastating divorces. My current husband is my college sweetheart—we reconnected at our 25-year reunion. If we'd married back then, who knows if we really would have appreciated each other? When I hear girls who are 35 say there is no hope for them to find a husband, I say there is *always* hope. You just have to wait for your right moment."



**T**here's an African saying: "The death of an old person is like the burning of a library." I wholeheartedly agree. When I pass a silver-haired man or woman on the street, I always wonder if there is a juicy Hollywood tell-all in that library, or maybe a surprisingly funny Depression-era memoir. Is there a heartrending narrative about being the only black sheep in a family of over-achievers, or maybe a potboiler about falling in love against the backdrop of Nazi Germany? Because if so, I'd like to read them.

This curiosity prompted me to write my book *How to Live: A Search for Wisdom from Old People*. I interviewed hundreds of 70-plus-year-olds and heard all kinds of examples of philosophical and intellectual dancing in the end zone. The spiritual teacher Ram Dass, then age 76, told me that his severe stroke was "a blessing" because it made him a better teacher; a 72-year-old Iraq war protester said she spoke out so if her grandchildren ever asked her what she did about the war, "I'd have an answer." A waggish retirement home resident advised, "Always read stuff that will make you look good in case you die in the middle of it."

My findings weren't far from philosopher William James's observation: "The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook." For some, it is a matter of learning from a lifetime of mistakes, or having the ability to finally turn off the distracting noise created by envy or self-hatred or guilt. For others, it is the clarity that comes along with a sense of diminished time. Though the realizations these folks made were the products of individual and highly specific circumstances, they often had the universal quality of eternal

verities: share the wealth; don't try to change what can't be changed; the guy who orders a second drink before he's finished with his first may very well have a problem; a bag of a dozen plain bagels and one garlic bagel is really a bag of garlic bagels.

I also heard a lot of variations on the theme, "trust your instincts." No one illustrates that tenet better than Saleh Kalathalay of the Moken tribe, a group of Indonesian fishermen. On the morning of the 2004 tsunami, he noticed harbingers of doom—the way the ocean tide receded, the way the buzzing of the cicadas on shore dropped off abruptly. Intuiting danger, he told his tribesman to climb a local mountain and saved dozens of lives.

As it turns out, judgment and inhibition are stored in our brain's prefrontal cortex, which doesn't finish developing until we're about 45, as well as in the parietal lobes, which aren't mature until we're closer to 50. So as we age, we not only have a greater store of experience—we're able to access those associations quicker than ever.

Psychologist Gisela Labouvie-Vief has written about how older people sometimes discard fact-based truths in favor of larger ones they've learned simply by living. In one study she cites, seniors were told to place miniature houses on a simulated meadow, and then asked if the arrangement would change the amount of grass to be mown. Some of the test-takers did not give the officially correct answer—that the configuration would not affect the square footage—but said that if the houses were positioned too close together, the awkward patches of lawn would take more time to mow.

This enviable grasp of the big picture causes many of us to turn to older folk for counsel—even if we don't know them personally.

The Elder Wisdom Circle ([elderwisdomcircle.org](http://elderwisdomcircle.org)) is a group of more than 600 advisers, age 60 to 105, who offer free one-on-one advice online. A mother who feels neglected by her successful 35-year-old son is encouraged to learn more about his profession and to invite him over for dinner more often. A high school student who constantly sweats the small stuff is counseled to do something physical or creative when he needs to dissipate his stress, surround himself with people who are not overly critical, and "never underestimate the power of hormones!"

My own adviser has been my mother. She had lived happily with her husband (my stepfather) for 31 years when his battle with substance abuse started to get the better of him in 2007. So at 80, she divorced him, sold her half of their house to him, and moved into a retirement community. The courage she displayed in overhauling her life will forever be lodged in my memory. She realized what she could and could not overlook in her marriage. As she told me, "At my age, you have to do things faster." I think about these words often, especially when wanting to turn a new acquaintance into a friend or approaching a crossroads.

In the last century, we've added almost three decades to the average life expectancy. Now we happily find ourselves with a wealth of people over "retirement age" who are still thriving, creating, and, above all else, teaching. Here, we highlight five admirable women age 67 to 100 whose insights show that everything really does all add up in the end. So don't worry—if you haven't figured it all out yet, there's still plenty of time.

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HENRY ALFORD's book about manners, *Would it Kill You to Stop Doing That?* (Twelve), comes out in January.

“IN MOST  
CASES,  
THE ART OF  
BEING  
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IS THE ART  
OF KNOWING  
WHAT TO  
OVERLOOK.”



## JUDITH JAMISON, 68

### DANCE LEGEND

Judith was recently named the Artistic Director Emeritus for Alvin Ailey, a dance company she first joined in 1965.

#### ON RETIREMENT

“To me, ‘retirement’ means ‘done.’ It means, ‘OK, I can finally go to sleep.’ You should do what you do for as long as you can do it and then pass it on to the next great person to continue your dream.”

#### ON CONFIDENCE

“By the time I was 6, I was taking my first dance classes. You can imagine the climate for young black ballet dancers in 1949, but I somehow knew that everything and anything was possible. That mantra was already in me, so nothing seemed overwhelming. We don’t all have to perform, but we all have this living movement inside of us.”

#### ON HUMILITY

“I’m just Judy. I’ve always surrounded myself with people who can do some things that I can’t. You should think of your body as a powerful machine. You’re the boss, but you have to have people around you who understand that we’re all on this ship together—you can’t sail it all by yourself. That’s the only way to grow.”

#### ON KEEPING YOUR MOUTH SHUT

“Today everybody always wants to blab everything about their personal lives, and that’s just unbelievable to me. Somehow the meaning of personal got lost in the fray. I won’t blame it all on reality TV, but something has happened to our psyches. I grew up in a society where there was such a thing called ‘family business.’ That’s what kept families really tight.”

#### ON EVOLVING

“It’s never too late to reinvent yourself—to do whatever it is you need to do to rekindle your life. For example, I recently became vegan. I now brew kombucha and grow my own food in my apartment.”

## RUTH KOBIN, 100

INDEPENDENT SPIRIT

Ruth is a former model and actress who lives alone in Manhattan and uses a cane only at her daughters' request.

### ON STAYING ACTIVE

"You're never too old to start doing exercise of any kind. I took up Pilates at 85. It's amazing what the muscles will respond to if you work them. Every morning I roll out my mat and do my stretches and lifting. Now my body requires it. It tells me, 'Get that mat out and get down there!'"

### ON LOVE

"I've been married twice. The first was for 13 years, and the second lasted 33 years and was the happiest. We met at a cocktail party when I was in my mid-40s, and it ended up being a real romance story. I didn't believe you could fall in love at first sight until that moment. We spent decades dancing and entertaining. He was my true love."

### ON COMMUNICATION

"Life is so much easier when you communicate. One of my universal lessons is to always listen to people. You can't be too anxious to speak. You also must remember that knowing something is not the same as understanding it. All of these electronics keep people from being truly good friends. You have to get off Facebook and be vis-à-vis to read a person and understand them."

### ON GETTING OUTSIDE

"People need to spend more time outdoors and have real activities in their lives. I push myself to go out every day—even if it's just to walk a couple blocks."



## JOAN DYE GUSSOW, 83

LOCAL FOOD PIONEER

As a Columbia University professor, food and garden expert, author, and environmentalist, Joan is considered by many to be the matriarch of the eat-locally and think-globally food movement.

### ON REFLECTION

"I believe in taking breaks in life. Stop and find out what you're interested in. You have to ask questions and not just respond to things. I slow down and walk outside in my garden when I'm feeling overwhelmed."

### ON LAUGHING

"If you don't have a sense of humor, you might as well quit now. It'll require a good one to get through the next few decades."

### ON RELATIONSHIPS

"I've been married and have had deep affections for many people, but I think my deepest bond may be with nature."

### ON WHAT OTHER PEOPLE THINK

"In my twenties and thirties, I used to worry about what I said to people at parties—who I didn't talk to and who might have thought I was rude. Eventually, I just stopped caring. It would have been nice to know then it wasn't worth worrying about all of that."

### ON GETTING OLDER

"I recently read that feeling old doesn't have anything to do with age, it has to do with giving up your ideals. When you're my age, you're supposed to just travel and shop. I don't do any of those things that represent retirement. I still teach every fall."

### ON DISAPPOINTMENT

"I don't let myself get trapped in a slump or get depressed about setbacks. Instead, I just work harder and don't give up. If I buckle down, I figure I will cope."



**IRIS LANGDON, 80**

CORPORATE EXECUTIVE  
TURNED YOGA INSTRUCTOR  
(shown with grandson, Jack, 13)

After retiring from her job at Merrill Lynch, Iris decided to turn her love for yoga into a second career. She now teaches Iyengar three times a week at a YWCA.

ON WORKING

"I don't believe that your job creates things for you. Your philosophy on life takes you to where you are. Keep challenging yourself and always look at the glass as half full."

ON FAMILY

"As you get older, you realize that family is the most crucial. When my daughter calls me for something now, I don't ever say I might have to cancel another appointment to be there. I just say yes. Being needed by my kids and grandkids is more important to me than anything else on my schedule."

ON FEELINGS

"I used to be extremely emotional and would get really upset about things that happened with my children. At some point, I realized that I was draining myself and needed to learn how to look at things more objectively. Now I just try to focus on the positive and not dwell on the past."

ON CONSISTENCY

"If you want to do something well, you have to commit to doing it at least three days a week. That's how you build it into your psyche and achieve the most you can. I feel I've cheated myself if I don't do that."