MONEY AND LIFE LESSONS FOR YOUNG ADULTS

# NO ONE EVER TOLD US THAT

JOHN D. SPOONER

Author of the #1 Boston Globe Bestseller,
*No One Ever Told Us That: Letters to My Grandchildren*

WILEY

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Cover design: Wiley



Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey.
Published simultaneously in Canada.



***Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:***

Spooner, John D.
No one ever told us that : money and life lessons for young adults / John D. Spooner.
pages cm
Includes index.
ISBN 978-1-118-99223-4 (cloth); ISBN 978-1-118-99226-5 (ePDF);
ISBN 978-1-118-99224-1 (ePub)
1. Investments–Miscellanea. 2. Finance, Personal–Miscellanea. 3. Conduct of life–Miscellanea. I. Title.
HG4521.S7184 2015
332.024–dc23 2015007712

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# DISCLAIMER

I am a writer. But I also happen to run a wealth management business under the umbrella of a major investment banking firm. These dual careers are distinctly separate from one another. This right brain, left brain life seems to work fine for me.

But my opinions expressed within these chapters are strictly from my own experiences, and are my own observations.

John D. Spooner

*For my clients and special friends who have taught me all the lessons.*
*And for my sister Susie, for so many reasons.*

# CONTENTS

## PART II BECOMING FINANCIALLY SECURE



## PART III BECOMING YOUR OWN PERSON

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In no special order, my thanks to the following people for their help in bringing this advice to their young adults who need gentle shoves in the right directions.

Even if my helpers didn't realize at the time how much they added to my writing of the book, they made it possible: Weld Henshaw, Bob and Debbie First, Robert Sprung, Yvonne Russell, Alan Miller, Mike Sandler, Fred Greenman, Bill and Judy Cowin, Dr. Stuart Mushlin, Jeff Levine, Andy Hunter, Bill Eisen, Joe Rooney, Suzanne DelVecchio, and Nat Bickford.

And all the caring people at John Wiley & Sons.

Above all, agent and friend, John Taylor "Ike" Williams, and his associate, Katherine Flynn.

# INTRODUCTION

This is a book for all of you *new* grown-ups, out in the world for long enough to have experienced some early bumps in the road, and long enough to know how challenging this new century is for you, in all areas of your still-young lives.

I speak to you as if you are my children, all of them relatively new grown-ups, and needing practical advice for all these new crossroads you face.

I have advised, and still advise, thousands of people, in hundreds of professions and careers. And I've done this for more than 50 years. No rookie, no virgin either, in finding solutions to so many of life's problems.

And as you all are at various new crossroads, I'm at another major one myself.

After my last book, *No One Ever Told Us That,* had been out for several months, a young man knocked on my office door. He seemed to be in his late twenties or early thirties, in a suit and tie, with highly polished English shoes. I seldom see young people so turned out. He was holding a small package wrapped in bright paper, like a birthday present.

"Do you have a minute?" he asked.

"Not really, I said, "but come on in."

He held up the package. "This is for you," he said. "You changed my life."

"How did I do that?" I said. "Although I'm flattered."

"I read your book," he said. "In a chapter about the problems in almost all families there was a line. I've had issues with my family for years and it was eating me up, having to stifle my feelings. Your line was, 'Love your family, but don't let them suck the oxygen out of the room.' I kept thinking about that line. And it gave me the courage to finally speak out. When I did, years hiding these things just fell off my back. Thank you for changing my life."

I opened the present.

"It's pictures done by my favorite artist," he said. "He does graffiti."

I thanked him and asked him to tell me about himself, which he did. And then he said, "You know, you should write a book for us, for me and my friends. We're out of school for 10 years or more, married or not, kids or not, parents who you can tell are going to be needy, and jobs, careers we're not sure about. So many things we're not sure about. We need a lot of help."

This was a young man, suddenly honest about so many things, and not finding many answers, particularly in practical ways. After he left I had a flash about my first years in business, trying to scratch a living as a young stockbroker. My ambition then, in the early 1960s, was to make a six-dollar commission before lunch. My share would be one-third, or two dollars. I figured that two bucks would pay for lunch, and whatever I made in the afternoon would be gravy. Before I had launched in this career, I mentioned to my father that I was considering business school.

"You've been in school long enough," he said. "Time to go to work."

Like the young man knocking on my door, I knew little or nothing about so much. And now I was out in life, a stranger in a strange world, wondering and worrying about almost everything, including: Would anyone ever love me? Would I ever get married?

Now I feel like I'm almost back at those beginnings long ago.

My wife of 45 years, Susan, died of lung cancer in June of 2011. We were all alone in our house, looking out of our bedroom at sailboats, white against blue, rushing into harbor. "It's late, isn't it?" she asked,

coming in and out of morphine-assisted sleep. Those were her last words to me.

For years in my marriage, I counseled Susan about things to watch for after I got hit by the big bus in the sky. Things such as "Anything anyone wants to do for you, who can't explain themselves in a few simple paragraphs, should not be hired to help you," "Anything that seems like BS to you probably is," and, "You have to reach out to friends, not automatically assume that everyone is always going to call you." Of course, everything you plan for almost never happens the way you plan. It may be better than you anticipated. But it won't be as you thought or feared.

The first New Year's Eve I spent without her in 45 years was in 2011. That night, I was invited to dinner at an old friend's apartment in Boston, only about a mile from where I live, a walkable distance on the chilly, clear night. There is a grand fireworks display every New Year's Eve on Boston Common, where cows grazed during Revolutionary War times. It has been estimated that as many as 1 million people pour into the city to watch the show and stay for First Night festivities: mostly free performances for all the family, all over the city. I walked from my house, two blocks to Charles Street, a long thoroughfare bisecting the Common from the Public Garden, hundreds of thousands streaming toward the fireworks site. I said to myself, "How typical of my life, everyone moving toward the brilliant explosions. And me, moving in the opposite direction," even thinking, "I care much more about watching people's faces than seeing the sky lit up by fire." All of this, in my view, is part of the grief process. We were married for 45 years. But if anything is ever good in life, it's never long enough.

One of the themes in our marriage was always after various pronouncements on my part, Susan would respond with. . . "Grow up." Let's face it; women are the adults. Men are programmed to go out, kill the Brontosaurus, and bring home the steaks. And men habitually believe they're frozen in time at 18, despite all the signs to the contrary.

I never even looked back at the fireworks, happy to go against the grain. But I rejected all the clichés, such as "She's in a better place." I don't think so. Or "Life goes on." I say, "Define *life*." Of course, I was feeling sorry for myself, and not proud of it. The crowd pushed against me, families oohing and aahing with every explosion

of sparkling lights, excited by the show, warmed in the freezing night, staying close to strangers.

Later that winter, I went to a birthday party for a high school classmate. One of the guests was a man, a doctor with the reputation of being the best internist in Boston: smart and caring. I knew that he had lost his wife some years before and had remarried. After dinner, he came up to me and said, "I'm so sorry about Susan. Of course we had heard. If you don't mind I'd like to tell you a little story."

"Sure," I answered.

"After my first wife died," the doctor said, "it was obviously very hard. And then I threw myself into work, buried myself in it. One day a patient came in to see me, an older Italian woman who still spoke with an accent after years in this country and always wore a black dress. She gave me her condolences, went through her examination, then left. About 10 minutes later she appeared in the office again.

"'Just a minute more of your time, please,' she said. 'Something I forgot.'

"She came in and asked me to sit down and I did. She stared at me for some time and then said, 'I thought you should hear this. She's not coming back.' Then she got up, pressed my hands briefly in hers. And left."

My initial reaction to what the Italian woman had said was that I wished the doctor had not told me that story. I didn't want to hear anyone say, "She's not coming back." Of course, the message he gave me was one of understanding life. But you have to be ready for messages, and often have to step back to appreciate the words in full.

I was almost 29 when we got married, and so much of what I know about life was drummed into me by my parents: history, standards, things to ponder and watch out for, and classics, such as "Debt can be a killer" and my mother's advice to my sister, "Never marry anyone prettier than you."

Most of you readers have never had to deal with a real personal loss, almost certainly not the loss of a spouse. But I will give you a life lesson that I have been preaching to people, clients, and friends, for many years. In a grieving situation, such as the death of a spouse, or more to your age situation, a divorce, it takes two years in your new incarnation to get used to the rhythm of that new life. No matter how prepared you are, how rich, how smart, how tough. It will