

Surfing For Something

August 2005

It was the perfect day at Beacon's, a pristine beach below a high bluff in Leucadia, north of San Diego. Serene, enticing, and intoxicating — ultimately it was life-changing. The venture capitalists (VCs) had been stringing me along all summer on funding my second tech start-up, Imagine Communications. “We’ll do the deal next week” was their mantra. “Right, next week” I thought to myself.

The summer was fading fast. I figured I’d give the VCs one more week. But I’d been saying that all summer. Even with a wife and three kids, I was reluctant to commit to any other opportunities because this new venture had such great potential. At least I was at the beach, catching some rays and body surfing for the first time in years.

Start-up or no start-up, I needed something new to do. There was something missing in my life, a void at once perceptible and elusive. Golf? Too slow and time-consuming. Re-learn the piano of my youth? Maybe some day. Something spiritual? Hmmm. What if that involved some core set of beliefs and values focused on living and acting in harmony with nature, in peaceful coexistence with people and other living things? I could buy into that.

The waves at Beacon's continued rolling into shore: undulating, impeccably shaped, awe-inspiring creations of wind and water. Where had all the time gone? I was suddenly in my late 40s. I thought I’d missed the surfing boat eighteen years earlier when I first moved to San Diego. As long as I achieved my quota of ski days each winter, my need for thrills was satisfied. Jogging and tennis kept me in decent shape. I didn’t need to surf.

Then I saw the surfers. They made it look so easy, gliding smoothly and gracefully, their boards serving as seamless vessels sandwiched between body and water. It looked so fun, the way they charged forward, popped up, dropped in, and carved through the flawless waves, lean figurines silhouetted against the sea and sky.

I could do that!

The VCs had said “next week” one too many times. I was sick of waiting around. I just wanted to ride some mellow waves once in a while. No big deal. I’d take some lessons with my older daughter, Madeleine (thirteen), who had recently started surfing at Solana Beach Junior Lifeguards summer day camp.

A few days later, the two of us were at Eli Howard Surf School in Cardiff. Soon enough I was riding my first wave. There's a finite number of truly memorable firsts in one's life, and this was right up there. I was hooked. But it was hard. Really hard. Not having the muscle memory or skills from learning to surf as a kid, there were way too many things to focus on at once: wave selection, paddling at the right time in the right place, steering clear of other surfers, going from horizontal to vertical on the moving water, riding the wave, staying up as the speed accelerated, and not getting hit by my board. Then paddling back out against the crashing waves.

After a lifetime of skiing, I'll ski just about anything anywhere; I've been on the edge more times than I care to remember. My goals for surfing were far more modest. I had no intention of surfing the North Shore of Oahu. I just wanted to have fun and maybe get a little better so I could have even more fun.

It fascinates me to think about the parallels between skiing and surfing. The thrill, the rush, and the exhilaration common to both. The two distinct H₂O playgrounds: soft and powdery in the first instance; energy moving through liquid in the latter. The spiritual aspects: contemplating one's inconsequential place in the universe, with nothing but snow-capped mountains as far as the eye can see; a dot in the vast blue ocean morphing into a bluer sky. Launching off a cornice versus dropping in on a wave. Fresh, fluffy powder versus glassy, rolling waves. Being stuck on top of a cliff with nowhere to go; paddling into a big wave looking straight down the precipice. The ski scene versus the surf culture. Warren Miller movies versus *Step Into Liquid*. Balance. Bent knees. Speed. Ecstatic yelps. The analogies are endless.

Fast Forward to September 16, 2014

One of the best decisions I ever made was learning how to surf. We've had a crazy heat wave here in San Diego for the last two weeks, and I really need to take a break from trying to finish writing this book, *Televisionaries*.

When I was out surfing last week at Cardiff, this surfer dude told me it was going to get big next week. A double whammy was on its way: tropical Hurricane Odile combined with a big New Zealand ground swell.

Well, "next week" has arrived, and it's way too hot to work on my book today. So, I'm going out surfing. I drive up to Beacon's, the same break in North County San Diego where I was first inspired.

The waves looked big, at least head high, as I strolled down the switchback trail with my board. It's been feeling almost like Hawaii here: hot breezes and water temperatures pushing 80 degrees. It was really hard to paddle out. A relentless set of waves — over twenty in total — kept slamming me, and my board was too long to duck dive. Finally, I

got past the break zone, paddled south parallel to shore about 300 yards due to the strong rip tides, and arrived at the line-up of surfers.

I caught an amazing right, and then got stuck inside again trying to get back out past the breaking waves. I almost gave up and called it a day, but the set ended and I paddled back out. A guy with a GoPro was swimming around, trying to get a video of his girlfriend catching a big one. A huge swell headed toward us, and he called her off from a monster, incoming, overhead wave. I barely made it over the top to the other side myself, joining his girlfriend where it was calm and safe. When the GoPro guy finally made it back out to where we were, he said he'd been taken out by that big wave, thrown for a twenty-yard loss like playing tackle football with nature.

I knew I had to be patient. Finally, my wave came. I dropped straight down the steep face, carved left, and rode it all the way in. OMG, I'll be thinking about that wave for the next two days. Life is good. Time to get back to writing this book.

December 10, 2014

Another break in the action; my book design is being proofread by a professional proofreader. I find myself in Pavones, Costa Rica, following three therapeutic days off the grid at O2 For Life, my friend Steve's rainforest foundation in the Golfo Dulce (sweet gulf) of the Osa Peninsula, near Panama. Pavones is a remote surfing mecca, where the Golfo Dulce meets the Pacific. Its wave is legendary for being the longest left in the world, ideal for me because I'm goofy foot. The town has an interesting and friendly combination of ticos (Costa Rican natives) and gringos who arrived years ago and never left.

It's near the end of the rainy season and the weather is gorgeous: sunny and 75 degrees with a gentle tropical breeze. The waves are reportedly 1–2 feet. Steve, Ken, and I have a delicious breakfast at a beach shack and then I head out to the famous break. As I paddle out, I soon realize they measure the size by the backs of the waves, Hawaiian style, so the faces are actually waist high to slightly overhead. So much fun! As we return to San Diego, I can't get those waves out of my head. Pura vida! Time to finalize this book.