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With the Tide

SURFING LEGEND AND SANTA BARBARA LOCAL SHAUN TOMSON ON RECONNECTING WITH OUR ROOTS

BY Nicole Johnson | PHOTOGRAPHY Tynan Daniels

A light audible buzz and wandering gazes follow me as I stand in line for a routine midday chai latte at Pierre Lafond. It’s my company that’s garnering the attention, though: I peer up at the drink menu in tandem with Santa Barbara resident and world-renowned surfer Shaun Tomson, all but casually.

A local reverence accompanies Tomson’s every move: just moments prior, he had been musing about Miramar swells with a pair of wide-eyed fans as I waited back, anticipating making my introduction. His 1977 World Surfing Champion title and regard among the top 10 professional surfers of all time are unnerving, but the barrel rider’s warm grin and soft spokenness, marked by a distinct South African accent, immediately soothe my nerves. I cheekily comment on his popularity, and he chuckles, casually dubbing those who venerate him as “friends.”

“In transitioning out of professional surfing, your followers grow with you—your role shifts, but it doesn’t fundamentally change,” Tomson explains. “As an athlete, people connect with you not just because you win, but because you inspire them in some way,

and as your age, career and work evolve, that essential connectivity remains.”

Humility marks his every word. Throughout his two-decade career, Tomson’s unparalleled grace and depth in tube-riding carved out an utterly *monumental* legacy both inside the pipeline and beyond. From naïvely surfing the lengthy point breaks up his native Durban coast in boyhood to touring the globe in professional campaigns of the ‘70s and ‘80s, Tomson was among a horde of brazen South African and Australian waveriders who revolutionized the global landscape of the sport. In what he calls a “dramatic and violent birth,” Tomson and company elevated surfing to the professional realm.

His salt-soaked, shaggy brown locks have since retreated to a clean trim, but the same vivacious enthusiasm illuminates his hazel eyes, imbuing his disposition with an easygoing wisdom. Tomson learns by doing, and surfing is his pedagogy: the material and spiritual meet in the swells, and his decades at this intersection have instilled life on land with insight. “The best moments in surfing happen when you’re riding inside the tube, which you drop into entirely on instinct,”



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Tomson grins, hollowing out his hand to engulf an airborne rider in a miniature barrel. “At times I honestly thought I could bend time and space, curving the water while being in this state of flux.” Progressively, these juvenile moments of marvel became metaphorical.

As he absorbed the natural world through visceral intuition and visualization, a series of incontrovertible truths slowly washed over all else. Twelve purposeful statements—his “code,” as he’d come to call it—soon materialized as he put them on paper, translating the ethos of surfing into an energizing scripture for everyday life. As he begins to enumerate these from memory to me, he pauses, as if some vital ingredient is missing. A palm-sized black leather wallet emerges from his jacket pocket, revealing the original ‘code’ enclosed behind a thin lamination. I begin to laugh, partially in astonishment at its unworn condition but mostly in sheer admiration of Tomson’s commitment to—literally—wearing his heart on his sleeve. It’s almost overwhelmingly straightforward, and in such, is incredibly potent.

Over 20 years of memories, revelations, and promises inundate his expression as he presses his fingers to it, a wistful grin filling his cheeks and a slight wateriness lining his eyes. Tomson sealed this code before his life “came to an abrupt stop” at the sudden death of his 15-year-old son, Mathew, in 2006. His overwhelming grief turned galvanizing: he began to pour his energy into “enriching projects that were good both for others and [himself] in this period of seeking purpose,” he recalls. As with the natural evolution of the tides, much has changed since then, but the tenets encased by these four leather corners ring truer every day. “I will never turn my back on the ocean—first line,” he recites softly. “I will always paddle back out—second line.”

Tomson’s inner healing manifests outwardly: his efforts to share his transformational principles with broad audiences take many forms, among which are several novels.

His first, *The Surfer’s Code: 12 Simple Lessons for Riding Through Life*, guides readers through their own code-writing process, seeking to lay foundations for spiritual rejuvenation. “I like to think that the code that surfing gave me is inextricably intertwined with the life of my son, whose name means ‘gift from God,’” he expresses. “The code is my gift to humanity.”

To call Tomson giving is an understatement. To date, he has guided innumerable audiences—among them elementary-aged children to graduate students, incarcerated populations, doctors, and Navy SEALs—in codifying their own 12 lines, leaving them newly attuned to their innate, subjective purpose. The surfing sage is by no means dogmatic: Tomson simply redirects audience focus back to our most rudimentary human instincts,





asking us, *What do we value? Who are we presently? How can we embrace and embody our truest selves?* Fundamentally, the code “is about activating purpose and maintaining a passion and enthusiasm for life,” he shares; “while it teaches perseverance and resilience, underlying it all is hope.” He’s a realist, yet is infectiously optimistic.

The code was originally crafted to be shared with growing children, and is profound in its plain nature. Fittingly, it gained its initial gravity in the words of a 13-year old student at Anacapa School: Tomson recalls reading “the first line of code written by a child” during a speaking engagement promoting his novel there, just months after losing his son. “This young girl had been a victim of bullying and social isolation,” he reflects. Low and behold, “Her first line was *‘I will always be myself.’*” It brought me to tears.”

Why is there something so evocative in the most understated expressions? Perhaps, as our experiences ebb and flow over time, the over-occupied adult mind loses sight of its serenely simple roots. To Tomson, it’s not exactly innocence that we lose; it’s our footings in our foundations.

Once all 12 lines are written down, they’re tangible and concrete, raw and real—and now we’re accountable for aligning our behaviors with these committed values. Intimidating, no? Tomson agrees, but finds empowerment in the vulnerability it takes to forge a promise with our peers, and most pertinently, ourselves. “I’m fascinated by great leaders like Mandela, Gandhi, and their guiding

principles. These words inspire us, without a doubt. But our *own* words are the ones that *transform* us. You want transformation?” he smiles. “Write it down.”

And what if our code necessitates revision? Read *between the lines*, Tomson advises, reminding us that we can be as dynamic as the often tumultuous change around us. Pivoting to find new definitions in our guiding tenets may prove just as useful as cementing them in the first place. What we may discover in those free-flowing waves of new meaning—forgiveness, growth—may breathe new life into our code, and by extension, ourselves.

This is quite the emotionally weighted conversation to be having while sitting in a quaint coffee shop courtyard. But Tomson’s grounded effervescence is transfixing—I’m shocked to notice we’ve spoken for upwards of an hour, and the uplifted energy flowing through me could sustain our conversation through several more. I’m getting a personalized education on the holistic power of learning through lived experience—yet I’m still curious about how often the surfing luminary gets out in the Santa Barbara swells.

“I paddle out when the conditions are good; I no longer have that competitive spirit, but still have a deep and abiding love for the ocean,” Tomson nods. He pauses, ushering in a nearly mischievous smile. “And when there’s no surf, I repeat a line of my code: ‘I will catch a wave every day—even in my *mind*,’” he chuckles, heartily.

I seldom surf, but you know what? Now, so will I.*