

BY JESSICA RIDENOUR

# Soul Surfing

The unexpected connection between God and catching a killer wave

A few years ago, *Surfer* magazine reported that they could fill their editorial pages for years to come solely with letters from surfers detailing spiritual experiences in the big drink. The realization prompted the magazine to ponder: is surfing a religion? Groups like Christian Surfers, an evangelical organization that “exists to see every surfer in America impacted by the Gospel,” have blurred the lines between soul saving and sport, using

the ocean as a pulpit to show surfers that God can be pretty gnarly too. But for most of those who’ve had a

mystical experience on a double overhead barrel, surfing is more of a spiritual than a religious thing. Were the Beach Boys modern day prophets? Was Gidget a guru in an itsy bitsy bikini? Could those salty golden-skinned surfer dudes and dudettes know something about the mysteries of the universe that we don’t?

Journalist Steven Kotler wondered the same thing. The self-described “science geek” lost faith in the miracle of modern medicine after a debilitating and incurable battle with Lyme disease. While many may turn to God, religion, magic mushrooms or medicine men during a time of such existential and physical

crisis, Kotler found the only thing that brought him solace and healing was surfing — it was the one belief he had left. In his book *West of Jesus*, he details his three-year quest to explore the spiritual side of surfing and the science of mystical experiences.

“We don’t know what goes on in the brain of a surfer when he’s riding the wave,” says the LA-based Kotler, who calls on professors, researchers, neuroscientists and a surfing rabbi in his search for the connection between science, sports and spirituality. “But we do know that one of the most common mystical experiences a surfer has is a feeling of oneness with the ocean. And while we don’t know what goes on in the brain of a surfer while he’s riding the wave, we do know what goes on in the brain of people who are meditating.”

Because no two waves are the same, Kotler explains, surfing has more high-risk variables than other sports. Breaks change, swell directions alter the shape of the wave, the size of the swell varies and wind direction affects everything. “Surfing has more moving parts than any other sport,” he says, “and because of that, it requires the same laser pinpoint focused concentration to ride a wave as it does to meditate.”

In his book Kotler cites research by neuroscientist Andrew Newberg and the late anthropologist and psychiatrist Eugene D’Aquili from the University of Pennsylvania, who studied







brain scans of Franciscan nuns in prayer and Buddhist monks during meditation. The two scientists pinpointed the exact parts of the brain that were most active and inactive during a religious experience. They found that the right parietal lobe — the part of the brain that allows us to orientate ourselves in space — stops accepting information in and stops putting information out during moments of intense concentration. “Because it’s the part of the brain that helps us separate self from other, when this portion of the brain is shut down, if you demand an answer from it and say ‘Where am I right now?’ it has no other option but to tell you that at this particular moment, *you’re one with everything*. Everyone is hardwired for this experience, so it’s not just surfer hippie nonsense,” says Kotler. “It’s standard biology. It’s how we’re just built.”

“When the flow of unitive consciousness comes, that’s God,” says surfer and renowned yoga teacher Shiva Rea, who will soon add *Surf Yoga Soul* to her impressive catalog of DVD offerings. “For me, sitting out on the water is being able to connect with that primordial rhythm in a wild and ever-changing, extraordinary dance. We’re dancing with something that’s very alive, that’s in this moment, [and] that as human beings we can’t control.” Not only does surfing “vibrate us to a higher frequency,” according to Rea, but it’s also a character builder, teaching us about fear, commitment, impermanence, finding harmony with others and falling down and getting back up again. “It takes balls,” she laughs, “to celebrate life. When you’re up on the wave, it’s just beautiful. It’s what birds must feel when they fly.”

For San Francisco writer and wave-rider Jaimal Yogis, surfing and spirituality have an easy affinity for one another. “Whether you have a spiritual tradition or not,” says Yogis, “there’s something about being in the ocean and feel-

ing this vastness that connects you to something greater. I think every surfer feels that, whether they describe the feeling as spiritual or not.”

Yogis, who lived in a Buddhist monastery for a year after high school, explains that Buddhists talk about the illusoriness of everything — what seems solid may not really be solid. Things are always in flux. “That’s sort of the way a wave is. It looks like a solid entity but it’s really a spiraling transmission of wind power moving through the water. So the wave is both real and an illusion.”

He also notes that surfing a popular break is not always an enlightening experience. In certain locations, such as Santa Cruz, Hawaii, and well, anywhere in Southern California, the surf scene can get downright nasty. “Surfing now is so crowded that it’s kind of a war zone in some places — people dropping in on you and getting into fights,” says Yogis, who’s writing a book touching on themes of Zen and surfing. “It’s true that a lot of times you go out and you want that feeling of solitude and peace and happiness, and you end up getting pissed off. But that can be a spiritual experience too,

because it’s more like life in general. That element can be a really good spiritual practice.”

Whether it’s a mystical experience or simply a serious adrenaline rush, there’s something about paddling out into a monstrous wall of water, popping up to one’s feet and then gliding down the front of a wave. At first the wave controls you, but once you’re on it, it’s more like you’re working together. Think of it as an intimate partnership with nature that can be thrilling, relaxing and healing. As Yogis puts it: “You always feel better once you’ve gotten in the water and gone surfing.” ●

*Until she achieves oneness with the roiling ocean, writer Jessica Ridenour still regularly prays to God for protection while surfing near her Southern California home.*

Oneness with an unruly 8-foot piece of fiberglass can be tricky for beginners. Before worshipping at the Church of Surf, learn the basics at one of these surf schools.

**Aqua Surf School**  
Santa Monica  
310.902.7737  
[aquasurfschool.com](http://aquasurfschool.com)

**M&M Surfing School**  
Seal Beach  
714.846.7873  
[mmsurfschool.com](http://mmsurfschool.com)

**Corky Carroll’s Surf School**  
Huntington Beach  
714.969.3959  
[surfschool.net](http://surfschool.net)

**Learn to Surf LA**  
310.663.2479  
[learntosurfla.com](http://learntosurfla.com)