

Bill Jones: The Tao of surfing

Bill Jones Dropping In Monterey County Herald

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In October, I am headed to Portugal to make a presentation at the conference of the European Association of Surfing Doctors.

One of my topics is on "The Declining Competency in the Aging Surfer." In doing my research and compiling data, I came across one of my favorite surfing books, "The Tao of Surfing, Finding Depth at Low Tide," by Michael A. Allen.

Having had a Catholic and Quaker education in my undergraduate and graduate school days, I have opted to lean toward a Surfing Zen Quaker philosophy of life and attend the Church of the Early Morning Surf on a daily basis.

When I found Michael Allen's book in 1997, it fit right into my beliefs and lifestyle.

The book was written by Allen after his brother died of AIDS. It has four chapters that have a great deal of depth and understanding of the Tao and the East/West comparative philosophies. It also investigates the meaning of life with a surfing identity and the journey one is on in the "ebb and flow" of the life cycle.

So what the heck does this have to do with writing a column in the sports section of the Monterey County Herald? Surfing can be competitive, it can be an artistic challenge, it is an outdoor, all-encompassing sports experience or it can be a very self-spiritual endeavor.

I have read Michael Allen's book many times and it is dog-eared and underlined throughout. I found many ideas, thoughts and words that make my presentation topic on "The Aging Surfer" have a bit more meaning and understanding for younger surfers.

One of the ideas that comes across clearly is the sensory aspect of being in the water. Divers, surfers and swimmers know the multisensory feeling in the water.

The temperature of the water, the clarity, the saltiness and the flow of the swell movement are sensory. To be able to identify closely with the senses and separate them, give more meaning to that plunge into the ocean.

There is also a lot about adjusting to the changes the ocean brings with it and the attitude one has with these changes. Surfing is an adventure of learning and evolving skills that adjust to locations, surf conditions and aging. With aging and a slow decline of timing and skills, the surfer must adjust to this by compensating with a change in style, equipment and attitude.

Surfing is hard to give up, but if one starts to think about ways to change your approach to a passion or hobby, when it becomes difficult, that is the beginning of the adjustment to aging. I hate to say this, but I would have given up surfing several years ago (I can hear and see local surfers applauding), because it was no fun anymore. Stand up paddling is a gift, because it maintains the thrill of surfing in a new way and keeps you in the water.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, in her articles and books, details the stages one goes through in dealing with death. As surfers and water people, we go through the same stages of anger, denial, bargaining and finally accepting where we are at. Many of us have former surfing buddies who just quit and go cold turkey in regard to surfing.

In prepping for my presentation, it was really a superb moment, when I was able to turn to Michael Allen's book and find an old friend to help me find the needed words and insight to add meaning to my research. Declining ability to do some of your life's passions is not fun. But if a bit of reflection and adjustment can be directed to the activity, a workable solution can be reached.

As Al Jardine sings, "Don't fight the sea, don't fight the sea. Just let it be."

Or as Saburo, my Hawaiian surging mentor says, "You go till you no mo can go."

Thanks for letting me go on a short philosophical side trip. See you in the water.

Bill Jones is a surfer, diver, kayaker and stand-up paddle instructor who lives in Pacific Grove. He can be reached at bjones_surf@yahoo.com.