



# I WANTED TO SAY SOMETHING ABOUT WAVES

*Four decades after pioneering Uluwatu, surf yogi GERRY LOPEZ returns to teach yoga, talk story and dance with his ghosts. So much has changed.*

By Nathan Myers

Photography by Tommy Schultz and Rip Zinger





“Waves are hard to ride. And in the process of learning this difficult and uncompromising activity we learn there are many interesting parallels about life. While the waves of life are more difficult to ride than the waves on the ocean, when we apply the lessons learned on the ocean we sometimes find that easier paddle out, like hooking into the rip current that slides us smoothly past the closed out sets of day-to-day life and maybe get to the outside lineup keeping our hair dry.”

**He arrives in the dead of night.** Wise surf yoda. Reunited with the scene of the crime. Mr. Pipeline in the land of the gods. Decades overdue.

In 1974, when Gerry Lopez first surfed Uluwatu, there were no crowds, no traffic, no massage parlor nightclub Starbucks Mini-Mart Circle K morning price hipster cappuccino yoga barn custom motorbike straight razor barber shop Bintang Radlers. There was coconuts. There was rice paddies. The waves were empty and the days were long. Nothing to buy. No one to hassle. Just surf all day and wait out the tides in the cool shade of The Cave. Uluwatu was a myth waiting to be told.

Forty years later, twilight is fading on the morning of the earth. Uluwatu is a teeming favela of pop-up warungs, t-shirt vendors, ding repair dudes and freelance photographers selling international drop-in artists their own stinkbug selfies. Paradise. It smells like poop. A rabid monkey. A penis-shaped bottle opener. And yet somehow it remains magical. Holy. Cathedral. A surf mecca like no other. Like every other. Perfect. Ruined. Amazing.

Gerry's hosts pick him up from the airport and whisk him through the midnight darkness – past traffic, pollution, luke-warm Bintangs and 24-hour construction sites – to arrive at the garden paradise of the Uluwatu Surf Villas. The big grass lawn overlooks the all-day sunset and the waves of outside Ulu, but somehow blocks out views of the crowd. A private staircase leads to the waves. Plunge pools and daily yoga. Massages and vegan cheesecake. Gentle gamelan soundtrack.

Cool offshore breezes. Relentless swell. The dream of Uluwatu remains, it just changed addresses.

About everything else, Gerry had been warned. Put on your airplane eye-mask and don't take it off 'til you're paddling out, they said. And that's almost how it happened. He awakens to a 10-foot swell marching across Uluwatu's epic array of take-offs. Stretches out on the lawn. Everyone else is bubbling over, "Are we out there?" Mr. Pipeline just smiles his coy Buddha smile. Not even a question.

Did I mention the private access staircase?

Gerry opts for the stand-up paddleboard. More power. View of the sets. At 66 years old, he's always done things his own way. Shaped his own boards. Surfed his own waves. Left Pipeline for windsurfing. Left windsurfing for snowboarding. And so on. While he's as still fit as anyone, Lopez hasn't trained hard enough for this trip. Not like he used to. The SUP will be safer.

The inshore pummels him, but he makes it out. A set catches him inside, but again he holds position. He is Gerry Lopez. Everyone else in the lineup can't wait to get back to their Instagram accounts and post this shit. Sharing the lineup with Gerry-freaking-Lopez. He catches a series of bombs and their hoots and hollers echo along the cliffs. He's back. And he's paddling out for more.

That's when the set comes, of course. It catches everyone off guard, but no one more than the old guy on the stand up paddle. Total yard sale. Gerry's swimming. The current sweeps him past the cave in the no man's

land of unscalable cliffs, and what was meant to be an emotional reunion is now a fight for survival. Welcome back, Mr. Lopez.

Just past the eddy of the cave, Gerry spots his board. He swims hard and grabs it just before it hits the rocks. Then, remembering an old trick, he paddles back along the cliff face, around the corner and into the high-tide cave.

Echoes in the chamber. A tidal surge of memories. Familiar and unfamiliar. Same same but different. Home and far far away. Exhausted, he mounts the steps into Downtown Uluwatu. Zooluwatu. Uluwatu City.

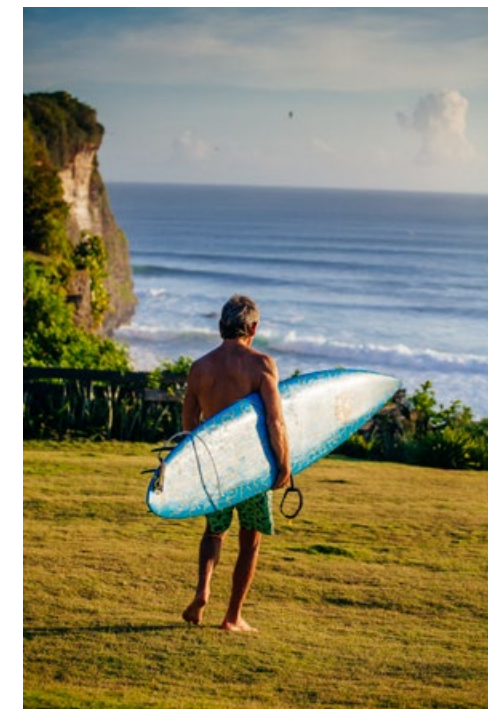
"I was ready for a shock," he says, "but by the time I got there I was already in shock. I don't know..." He leaves the thought unfinished. Shocked.

The old women of Uluwatu remember him right away. "Mr. Gerry," they call. "You come back. Still look young. So handsome. You like buy t-shirt? Massage?"

Thirty years later, they're still right here. They never left. They never grew up. They never forget. This is Uluwatu. And Uluwatu remembers.

Gerry hauls his big SUP up through the unfamiliar concrete corridors, choked by stickers, resin, novelty memorabilia and the scent of human shit. Monkeys crawl past in bored demure. A monitor lizard scurries into the cave wall. Tourists stare as the small grey yogi navigates his retreat through the wreckage of paradise. He's somehow familiar to them, but they can't quite figure it out how or why.

He's the reason they're all here.







**Now he faces the crowd.** Guru storyteller. Tribal elder. Teacher. Father. Shaper. Pioneer. There was never a crowd before. But everything changes all the time. They want to know. What was it like before? Before all these goddamn people found out.

“Me and my big mouth,” says Gerry under his breath and into the microphone. He smiles. Gentle Buddha. Loves a well-played joke. He’s been telling stories all his life.

These days, Gerry’s famous “talk story” nights are a slow boat to another dimension. Wireless and disconnected. Timeless campfire enchantment. “They say a photo tells a thousand words,” says Gerry, “but people still wanna hear stories. It’s the Hawaiian way. The mo’olelo — the story behind everything.”

He’s been here a week now. Teaching yoga to a small group of acolytes. Surfing meditative five and six hour sessions with his pro snowboarder son, Alex. And telling stories to anyone who will listen. They flow from him as naturally as breath. Stories on set of *Conan the Barbarian* with Arnold Schwarzenegger. Stories of blowing up Malibu hillsides with Stephen Spielberg. Stories of pioneering Pipeline and discovering snowboarding. Stories of *Big Wednesday*. Miki Dora. Brewer. G-Land. He tells stories. And he does yoga.

For Gerry, surfing and yoga are parallel paths. Interwoven religions that define his existence. “I believe my life and my purpose here,” he says, “which was all laid out before me long before it even started, is meant to discover the connections between surfing and yoga.” It’s the topic of his next book, and the direction of his every thought and action.

Yoga found Gerry in his early 20s, around the same time he started getting serious about surfing. The movement...the breathing...the meditation and discipline... the practical nothingness of both activities appealed deeply to him. In his very first class (which he took to meet girls), he recalls the revelation: “If you could apply all this to the waves, man....”

Over the next few decades, the yoga and surfing would evolve in parallel for Lopez, guiding his every step both to and away from waves. “In Hawaiian, the word for energy is Mana,” he explains. “And to the yogis, the word is Prana. It’s no coincidence that the words were so closely related.”

Gerry begins his Uluwatu Talk Story by leading 100 guests in an hour of deep, strenuous “Yin” yoga on the sunset lawn overlooking Ulu. As darkness falls, Rob Machado takes to the small stage to introduce “his hero.” They hug. Then Lopez takes the microphone and begins to explain how surfing is life’s ultimate metaphor.

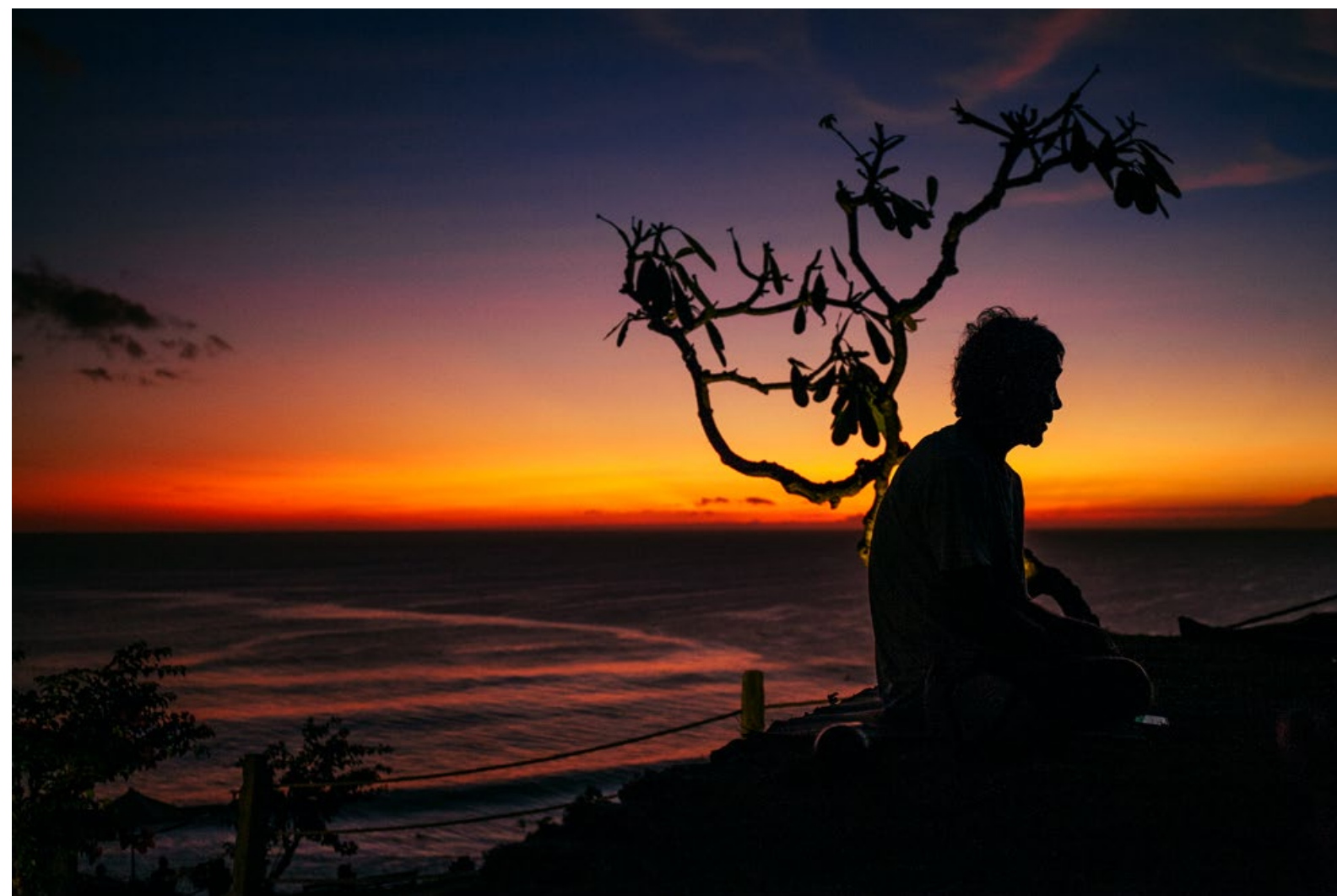
“A wave is the same as the ocean,” he says, “though it is not the whole ocean. Each wave of creation is a part of the eternal spirit. The ocean can exist without the waves, but the waves cannot exist without the ocean.”

Forget your surf-mag mysticism. This is Gerry’s truth. Surfing as a way of life. Surfing as everything. Gerry found it. Even when he left is all behind. Windsurfing. Snowboarding. Stretching. Breathing. Surfing, wherever you find it.

He tells the story of his first arrival in Bali in 1974.

“Maybe I should feel bad about how much things have changed here,” says Gerry. “But I don’t. Things change. You can’t feel bad about it. And the same things that brought me here in the first place are the same things that brought all of you. And they’re just as wonderful as they ever were. Maybe there are a few more people in the lineup, but the waves are exactly the same as they ever were. Still good surf.”

“They are difficult and dangerous to ride, but they’re our waves. No one can ride them for us. And on these waves we encounter outside sets of doubt, shallows reefs of guilt, and closeout sets of fear. With endless rips, currents and tide changes, we easily and often lose our way. Our board gets dinged, takes on water and buckles when we need it most. And if none of this lends itself to a peaceful and happy state of mind, we need one to stay on the waves. So where do we find the balance and direction to keep our feet on the board and stay ahead of the white water?”







“I’ve been studying yoga for a long time and I’ve found that the state of Samadhi (enlightened consciousness) can be attained through deeply focused meditation. I’ve been a surfer for a long time, too. And I truly believe the focus necessary to surf successfully is also a state of deep meditation. So it just may be that we were onto something much deeper than we knew when we first decided surfing was going to be our life.”



**The more things change, the more they stay the same.**

Uluwatu is a mess, but it was never perfect. Way back when, it was difficult to reach and difficult to stay close to. Now there’s traffic the whole way and it’s hard to find parking. That’s kinda the reason for this whole event in the first place: a fundraiser for Project Clean Uluwatu (PCU). To recognize and evolve with the changing times.

On stage with Gerry sits Maryland surfer, Tim Russo, a longtime Bali resident and co-founder of PCU. “The problem was simply that things grew too rapidly without much of a plan,” explains Russo. “It’s a common problem all over Bali, but because Uluwatu being a world famous surf break it was especially bad here. If it’s going to continue to evolve, we need to put some better support systems into place.”

An estimated 500,000 people visit Uluwatu every year. Over the past three decades, a few local coconut stands have grown into an entire economy. Dozens of restaurants, hotels and nightclubs now populate the otherwise infertile Bukit Peninsula. Meanwhile, banana leaves and coconut husks became plastic bags and glass bottles. Thatch roofs and bamboo walls became cement and rebar. There are no building permits. No regulations. The trash stacks up. The gutters overflow. The toilets flush into the riverbed. And every year when the first big rains hit, beautiful Uluwatu purges itself into a blackwater cesspool of human indignity.

That’s usually when a nice swell hits, too.

No one’s problem and everyone’s problem.

Surfing did this. Created a human eco-system on otherwise infertile soil. An economy of waves. A holy pilgrimage to the edge of nowhere. Beautiful. Devastating.

But what if the problem could also become the solution? What if “localism” referred to caretaking sacred ground rather than shouting down kooks? Uluwatu has provided jobs, tourism, and economy to the Bukit Peninsula – not to mention epic waves for thousands of traveling surfers.

Even today, a trip through the cave is a cosmic, magical experience. Across the reef, the cliff front towers around you. Glorious church of the open sky. Surfing continues, three hundred sixty three days a year here, in all its human glory. Stinky water or not.

“I grew up in Hawaii,” Gerry tells the audience. “So I’ve seen how tourism effects the community there and makes things grow and change so quickly. I understand that’s part of having a place that’s so wonderful, like it is here in Bali. Word’s gonna get out. Have any of you ever gone home and not told everyone what a wonderful trip you just had. I don’t think so. And that’s exactly why we have to protect it.”

Following a tenacious series of concerts, auctions, movie nights and bake sales, the team of Project Clean Uluwatu designed and implemented an entire bio-septic waste treatment system along with wastewater gardens, transforming nasty human poop into fertile garden soil. Completing the cycle. With the success of Gerry’s Talk Story night, they are now preparing to plant the gardens and get the pumps running on the system.

“It’s really cool that a group of dedicated surfers are out here saving this place,” says Gerry, “because it’s surfers that screwed it up in the first place. And now they’re fixing it.”

Yoda is pleased. He shares a few more stories. Sunsets. Gland tigers. Later forays into the Mentawais. Local children waving goodbye. “Have you ever seen a Balinese child not smiling,” he asks.

Gerry smiles at the gentle crowd. He gives so much of himself. And now he’s tired. The stars all rub their eyes and twinkle in the sky. He’s not saving Uluwatu, just lending his voice. Reflecting on the change. And shining a bit of his inner light.

In the morning, Uluwatu is crowded again. And Gerry Lopez is gone.







**On the speedboat boat to G-Land, Gerry is silent.** No more stories. No more stretching. The cheerful yogi takes the roll of somber monk. Focused and intense.

Machado sits next to him, recreating one of his favorite memories of meeting his childhood hero on a long boat to G-Land and finally arriving to find it empty. On that trip, they talked the whole way. Rob got to ask every question he'd ever dreamed of. And in many ways, he's assumed his hero's roll. The Gerry Lopez of the Momentum Generation. But on this trip, maybe the engines are too loud. Maybe it's too early. Too crowded.

"G-Land is class 5 wave," he says. "And one of my rules is that you don't go there without proper conditioning. And I haven't been conditioning for this trip."

He's been surfing 5 hour sessions all week. Doing yoga twice a day. His head stands and arm-presses are a site to behold, leaving fellow travelers Rastovich and Machado in awe. But Gerry's concern is palpable. He takes G-Land seriously.

If the "G" in G-Land didn't stand for Gragagan, it would stand for Gerry. While legends of the breaks discovery contradict each other, no one disputes that Lopez was the first great master out there. When Uluwatu got too crowded, he stopped going there altogether. G-Land was it.

The G-Land missions were different from Ulu. There were no warungs or porters. No hotels to return to. No smiling Balinese ibus to serve you nasi after a long day in the waves.

The jungle here is an impenetrable tangle of bamboo bramble, such that they used a tarp to make shade on the beach rather than risk it countless horrors. They slept in the trees. "One night we complained about the ladder to the tree-house being so dang high," Gerry said in the slide show. "That night the tiger in the jungle started

meowing REALLY loud. The next day the ladder wasn't high enough."

Other pictures from the slide show depict surfers pumping iron and working out around the G-Land camp. These always felt somehow staged before, but now it makes sense. Training for the wave was part of the pilgrimage. Respecting its power. No small thing.

Arriving at G-Land with Gerry, Rasta and Machado, not to mention Rizal Tanjung, Marlon Gerber, and Craig Anderson, one might expect some level of fanfare and excitement. But the jungle doesn't care how many signature board shorts you sold last year. Sand maggots tear everyone's feet equally. Monkeys steal your food then threaten your life with horrific fangs. The reef is jagged, urchin-covered and stingy with its keyholes. This entire place just wants you to bleed, wants you to show weakness, then devour you alive.

Aside from that, Bobby's Surf Camp is quite accommodating. Cozy cabins. Tastes meals. Footy on TV. Free wifi and beer on tap. This was the original camp, just forty years later. Everything changed. There are people here now with no intention of surfing. Russian Surf Schoolers who will paddle longboards out at the Tiger Tracks beachbreak then return to the motherland with tales of surfing the famous G-Land. With Gerry Lopez and Rob Machado!

Peter McCabe is here too. One of the Gerry's oldest friends and a G-Land original. He's celebrating his 60th birthday, with 25 or so friends from Australia. Insta-crowd. But what's new. Despite a kilometer worth of potential take-off spots, G-Land is crowded. But regardless of its fame and legacy, the break has never quite fit the mold of competitions and film crews. They try. But they rarely return. G-Land is harsh and difficult. A challenge under any circumstances. And that's why people come here.



“Surfing and yoga teach us about living a life in harmony with nature. The most natural thing we do, the simple act of breathing really becomes the foundation of our surfing and yoga practices. For many of us, every time we paddle out or come to our mat this may be the only time we actually breath the right way. We were born knowing how to breath properly, but somewhere along the way life came along and we forgot.”

Peter and Gerry climb the tower and spend a long time examining the lineup. Memory lane. Old scars. Echoes from the jungle.

They return to their rooms without a word. Gerry waxes up slowly. Stretches for a long time. Not a word from his mouth.

Out in the lineup, there's no sentimentality. G-Land is all business. Our tightknit crew of pros is scattered across the mile-long reef, hunting peaks and barrels and moments. True to history, Gerry catches a handful of classic 6- and 8-footers, gliding down the line like a ghost of himself. Graceful and meditative. Stylish and indifferent. Climb and drop. Trim and flow. Some things never change.

Eventually though, the lip finds him and pushes him deep underwater. His leash breaks and Gerry washes across the reef. Unscathed. But finished.

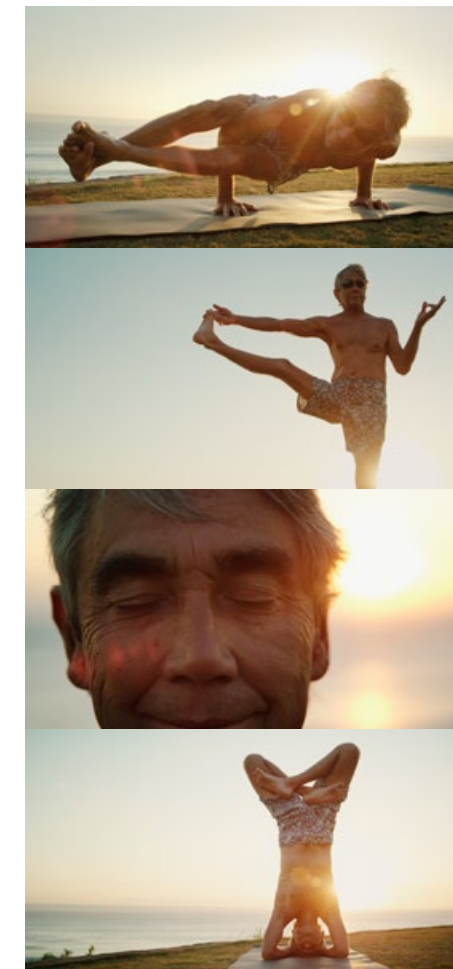
"She let me off easy," he says. "But you gotta remain respectful. It's a powerful wave and the price of a mistake can be very expensive."

Maybe he's speaking in metaphors. Maybe he's just talking waves. Maybe there's not difference between the two. It doesn't matter. This is not a place for speaking.

Back in the boat, he stares up the crowded lineup. Perhaps 80 surfers from all around the world. "I never imagined surfing would come this far," he says. "But you know, this is the world we live in, and you've gotta accept that. It is what is what it is, and that's what it is."

A set rolls through and the first one escapes unriden. Gerry mind-surfs the empty wave, arching and flaring through four decades of history and style. "But you know what," he says, kicking out on the inside. "The waves are exactly the same as they always were. Life is good."

The boat returns to Bali. Gerry returns to Oregon. The waves remain the same.







“His holiness the 14th Dalai Lama was once asked what surprised him most about man. And he answered ‘Man. Because he sacrifices his health to get more money. Then he sacrifices his money to regain his health. He’s so anxious about the future that he’s unable to live in the present. The result being that he’s not able to live in either the present or the future. He lives as if he’s never going to die. Then dies having never really lived.’

The message here is that life is for the living. So if you have the intention to live life to the fullest, even if you miss a few waves along the way, you’re still doing good.”

—*Gerry Lopez*

