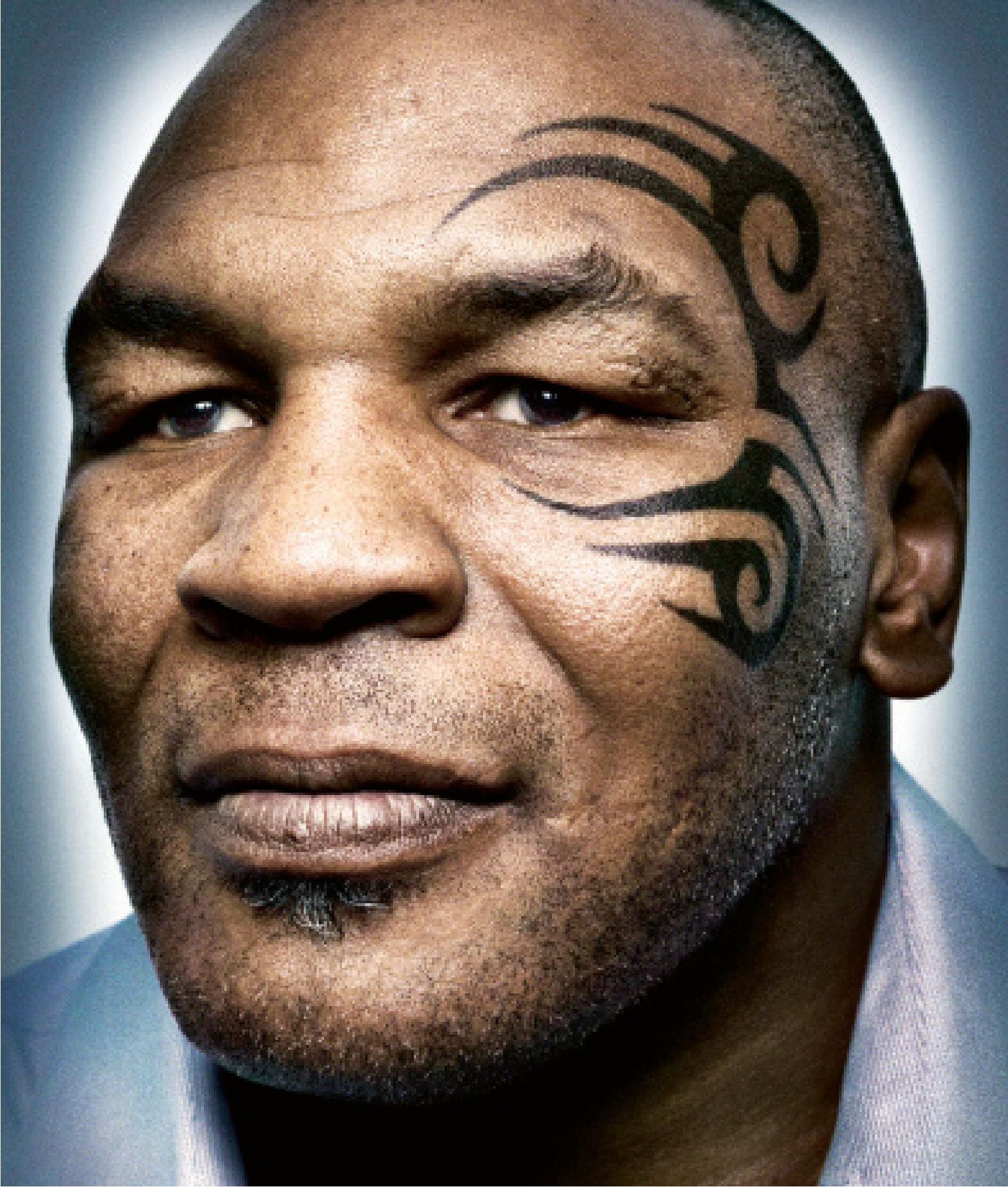


**‘I STILL HAVE
MY DEMONS
AND MY FLAWS.
BUT I WANT TO
DO THE RIGHT
THING’**

Once idolised, swiftly reviled, few have had their personal failings so publicly dissected as Mike Tyson. But, as Ariel Leve discovers among the pigeon coops of Brooklyn, a more mature and measured Tyson seems, finally, to be taking flight – and responsibility for his past

PORTRAIT Platon



Mike Tyson is a man of extremes. His nearly 45 years of life have been characterised by tremendous good fortune and acute despair. He's been surrounded by cameras and he's been the forgotten ex-champion, left alone in solitary confinement.

One of the greatest heavyweight boxers of all time, he has been knocked down – literally and figuratively – and got back up many times over. Mike Tyson has committed himself to greatness and to debauchery in equal measure. He's overcome adversity that was both dealt – a turbulent childhood – and self-inflicted: a tumultuous first marriage to Robin Givens, addiction to drugs, a prison sentence for a rape conviction. He has shown resilience and persevered after losing respect, money, his mother, his sister, his surrogate father, protector and mentor, Cus D'Amato, and, most recently, the death of his four-year-old daughter, Exodus.

Whatever you think of Mike Tyson, the one thing that can't be disputed is that he has endured. And the one thing that seems to have eluded him? Feeling known.

He stares at me. I stare back at him. A few seconds pass. Neither of us looks away. Just then it occurs to me, I'm getting The Stare. Locking eyes with Mike Tyson used to be something that only the most ferocious fighter could sustain. It was a cold, brutal stare. But he hasn't given that stare in a long time. His brown eyes no longer have the look of a gladiator. The stare I am getting now is from a man who is searching.

"Who am I? I'm nobody – I know nothing. What I know is nothing considered to the ancients of this world. Just because I knocked out a few people – people don't know nothing about me – just what they're led to believe. No one knows who I truly am."

No one? "No one but me. No one knows who you truly are."

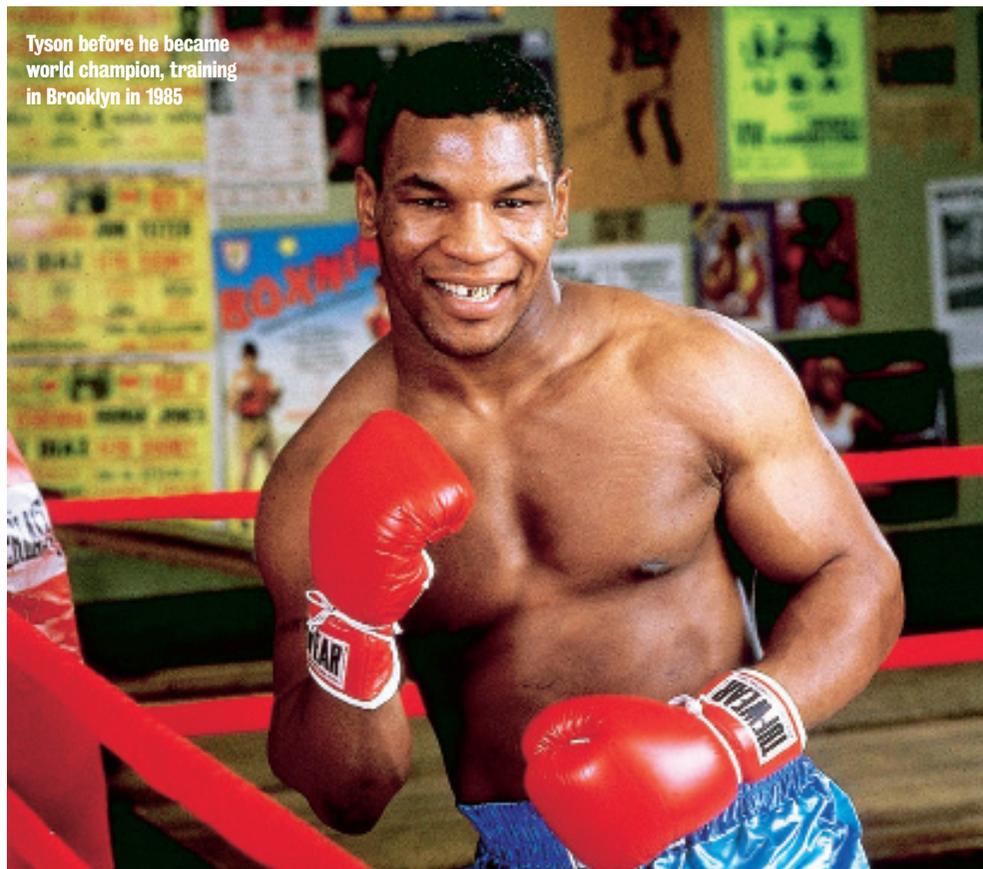
It must feel lonely never to be known. Again, there is a stare. He's thinking.

"Not everybody gets me. I don't try to push myself on people."

I'm standing on the tarred rooftop of a three-storey building in Bushwick, Brooklyn. Dave Malone has known Tyson since childhood. "When I was 10 and he was 12," he says, as he leads me towards the loft where there are upwards of 900 pigeons. He looks after the coop and tells me that, when they were kids, they would pickpocket to get money to buy the birds. Now they've both cleaned up and as Tyson embarks on a new chapter in his life – pigeon racing – Dave is a part of the team that makes up "Tyson's Corner".

The man himself is running late – he's on his way over, stuck in traffic on his way back

Tyson before he became world champion, training in Brooklyn in 1985



'People don't know nothing about me. No one knows who I truly am'

from a TV interview. While we wait, Malone shows me around. These are not the same dirty pigeons I grew up avoiding. These are thoroughbreds, they've all been inoculated, had booster shots, and they eat special food – corn, beans, rice. They have a pleasant life.

"Mike's got his favourites," Malone says, opening a door to reveal hundreds of homing pigeons in various sizes, shapes and colours, sitting in individual cubbyholes.

Since Malone is one of Tyson's oldest friends, I'm curious how he thinks Tyson has changed. The passing of Tyson's daughter was a turning point. In 2009, Tyson lost Exodus in an unusually awful fatal accident – she had been playing on a treadmill and got her neck tangled in the cord that dangles from the console. Her seven-year-old brother found her. Since then, Malone says, he's become calmer,

accepting, and there is more emphasis on family and helping others.

Ten days after the death, Tyson married Lakiha, his third wife, who was not Exodus's mother but who is the mother of his daughter Milan and infant son Morocco. He has five other children from different women.

Tyson suddenly appears on the roof. Wearing a chunky ivory cable-knit jumper and a hunter's cap with flaps over his ears, his enthusiasm explodes as he arrives with a crew of about half a dozen men – all burly, wearing black, and part of Team Tyson. He is charged and happy to be among the birds.

"Oh, man!" he calls out, looking up at the flock circling above. His arms are raised, reaching up for them. Everything about these birds is a comfort to him. In a life of inconsistency and instability, the pigeons have been the one stabilising constant providing loyalty and solace. Tyson was 11 years old when a local gang member ripped the head off one of his pigeons and threw it back at him. It was the first punch he ever threw. The pigeons have been there for him in the best of times and the worst of times. After being knocked out by Lennox Lewis in 2002, the coop is where he headed.

Now his love for these avian athletes anchors a TV reality series called *Taking on Tyson*. ➤

An exceptionally candid visual memoir, Tyson reveals a self-awareness that's as surprising as his emotional connection to the birds. The pigeons have come through for him once again.

"Let's do this," he says, shaking my hand, eager to get the interview over with so he can get back to the birds. "It won't take more than a few minutes, right?" I can't tell if he's joking. I suggest we talk in what's essentially a wooden box – a shanty – that adjoins the newly constructed coop. It was built to allow enough room for a single chair and a small stool. Tyson politely offers me the chair but I decline. There is no door and he sits, facing out, towards the sky. Between the pigeons and the various friends and handlers, it seems it's going to be a challenge to hold his attention.

In November 1986, a 20-year-old Mike Tyson won the WBC title and became the youngest world heavyweight champion in boxing history. Of that night, the noted author, Joyce Carol Oates, keenly observed in her book, *On Boxing*: "Mike Tyson, a boy warrior, had become legendary, in a sense, before there is a legend to define him."

She prophetically predicted that Tyson would never be as fully comfortable with his celebrity as Muhammad Ali or Sugar Ray Leonard are with theirs. We begin there and I ask if this is true. Tyson nods.

"Back then I was a simple guy. Selfish. I had nothing else to think of but me and my success. I was never comfortable and I was never prepared with how to be comfortable in the lifestyle."

As soon as he starts talking, Tyson's energy shifts. He is focused and relaxed, soft-spoken and refers often to the "Mike Tyson then" as he speaks about his past. His manner is gentle. Placid. His hands are folded in his lap and he is unusually thoughtful when he speaks. There is a penetrating, sometimes mournful gaze as he is processing each question. There is nothing practised about his responses.

"From where I'm coming from, people that conducted themselves the way they did – they were a sell-out white Uncle Tom – this is how my mind works back then. So I'm from a society where the more good you're doing, it's wrong. If you're the guy going to school and getting good grades, you get your family out of the decimated neighbourhood, you're the bad guy. But if you're out there pickpocketing – you're a cool dude. So I was caught up in that life and I was having that kind of dilemma. That's why I was never comfortable. I didn't understand the way the world functioned back then."

The "back then" he is referring to is a childhood where options didn't exist. Tyson's early life was filled with crime, poverty and violence. Born in 1966, abandoned by his father, he lived with his mother, brother and sister in Brownsville, a section of Brooklyn



'Bullying made me feel I had to be mean. It made the victim the victimizer'

that in the Seventies was a ghetto. Tyson's mother, Lorna, died when he was 16. She was clinically depressed, he says now, and when asked if she was on medication, he laughs slightly and waves his hand in a dismissive way that suggests that sort of psychiatric help would have been a ridiculous luxury.

A seminal feature in Tyson's life is that he was bullied as a child. It shaped his life although, he reflects now, not in a good way.

"It made me feel that I had to be the meanest, vicious, toughest guy. It made the victim the victimizer. Once you've been bullied, you never want to feel that way again. That feeling sticks with you for the rest of your life. It scars you more emotionally and psychologically than it ever could physically."

To fit in, he committed burglaries and robberies; by 12, he was an inmate at a juvenile detention centre in upstate New York. It was there he met Cus D'Amato, the man who trained him, broke him down and rebuilt him – the man who would change his life. "Cus put that s*** in perspective and made it a reality. I wasn't doing nothing with my life.

From left: Tyson with Robin Givens in 1988; with his third wife, Lakiha Spicer, 2010; with daughter Milan last year

He made me think like a man of action.

I was a dreamer and he made me think like a man. Instead of thinking of the man who had the best girlfriend and the best car – I could be that guy."

He became that guy, but it had a price. Even more confusing than the respect and financial success that came from being a champion were the emotional and psychological quagmires. D'Amato died before Tyson won the title, abandoning him to deal with it on his own.

Tyson describes a bird's-eye view of himself as all this was happening. That he never fully engaged in his celebrity, but was observing it from a distance. Trusting no one, not even himself. "At that time, I was centre stage and the world was watching me. I was watching myself in my own mind."

He had been programmed by D'Amato, who believed a fighter's character was as important as his talent and gave him the tools not only to believe he was invincible, but to make it happen. But to exist post-boxing – those were tools Tyson didn't have.

For so long he had to believe he was the most powerful. When he retired in 2005 – his last fight was against Kevin McBride – his heart wasn't in it and it was just for the money. I wonder if the belief in himself was shaken when his confidence and self-esteem were no longer rooted in the uncompromising sense of superiority that is necessary to win.

"Funny you say that because I think I'm a megalomaniac. Not now. Back then. Man-to-man combat – I was a megalomaniac, no doubt about it.

"I was 12 years old when this man told me, 'I can make you a champion but you have to dedicate your life and do everything I tell you.' I took him up on that because I hated my life in the ghetto."

He speaks about how everyone who is powerful has that "ingredient" – the idea

that you have to believe you are better than everyone else. “To be somebody.” But then what? That arrogance can be an Achilles’ heel.

“And then, as you get older, you have to use your status or your celebrity for a cause. More substantial. It all comes from thinking that you’re special and different to other people – it comes from that insecurity.”

Tyson is introspective. He sees how others see him, good and bad, and contains his instincts to fight perceptions. He wants to avoid drama more than anything now.

“My mentor was a socialist. He taught me to take care of everybody, that’s how it works – that’s the psychology. My psychology is you have to take care of everybody. I believe I still have that in me. I get a little overzealous sometimes. That’s the quickest means to ruin. My wife put that in perspective.”

And can he tell when people are taking advantage of him? “We all get used in life. You use people, people use you. I use people, people use me. What’s wrong with that is when people misuse one another.”

Raised as a Roman Catholic, he stopped practising early on and became a Muslim while in prison. In 1992 Tyson was found guilty of raping Desiree Washington in an Indianapolis hotel room and served three years. The case sparked debate about racial attitudes in the criminal justice system and was recognised as an example of a successful date-rape prosecution. While he owns up to a variety of extreme acts of bad behaviour, it is still the one thing he won’t admit to.

“I just try to do the right thing. I still have my demons and my flaws in life. But I want to do the right thing.”

And what is the right thing? This is something he has grappled with for a long time. He wasn’t raised with boundaries, never had them as a globally famous boxer, and has only had to come to terms with them in adulthood after suffering the consequences of his actions. So where does this sense of morality come from? Cus D’Amato died in 1985 when Tyson was 19 years old – is it still his voice that guides him?

He pauses. “Could be. For a long time, I never really believed what I said. On the occasion I happened to tell the truth about how I felt – it’s just hard to be a really honest person without a backlash or something. People say it’s a democratic world where people can say how they feel – but it’s not. There’s backlash from everything. I think whenever the truth is told, somebody’s offended. It never fails. Because then, it appears that somebody lost. And no one likes losing. But it just *appears* that way. It’s wrong to equate that with winning or losing.”

He says that he is capable of letting himself down easily, but that he is also capable of doing tremendous things. He tries not to be

too hard on himself when things don’t turn out the way he wants and all of this is remarkably self-evolved and at the total opposite end of the spectrum from the person he used to be.

Someone from Team Tyson leans in and thrusts a pigeon into Tyson’s hands. He cradles it, tenderly stroking her head.

“She’s had two babies again! Still making babies,” the friend shouts.

Tyson tells me she’s nine years old – and just as I’m about to ask how he can tell, the pigeon c**s on him. He says it means good luck. “Can I have a napkin, please?” No one hears him so I hand over a tissue from my bag.

In 2008, the documentary *Tyson* came out, and perception of him as a brutal beast was disarmed when he admitted to his mistakes, took responsibility and exposed his flaws by telling the truth. To hear him talk about being scared paradoxically made him seem brave.

He says now he is no longer afraid. “I just... I don’t know. Anything that could happen to me has already happened. I don’t fear anything.

“I allowed myself to take drugs and hang

‘Tough is not how hard you can hit somebody but what you can endure’

out and do things I’m not supposed to do and I could use excuses like, ‘Oh, my daughter died’ or somebody else betrayed me and use excuses to go off the deep end – but I chose not to.

“Sometimes someone dies or we don’t get the job we want or our girlfriend dumps us... You give up on life and be humiliated? No. No one dies from humiliation. We have to go forward with a positive outlook on life and fight life to the end. Learn to love and have a passion for life.

“I’m not in a position to say what’s fair and what’s not fair. That’s up to God to choose. My job here is just to worship God and live in this world and take care of my responsibilities.”

Mike Tyson does not spend a lot of time alone, but when he does he thinks of great people. Cleopatra. Alexander the Great. Abolitionist Frederick Douglass. He is interested in history and is reading a book, *A Natural History of Human Emotions*, which examines feelings and looks at how they have shaped cultural and social history.

“I’m getting to grips with the elements of emotions. Why do we act that way when we

know it’s wrong? But still we can’t prevent that feeling from occurring? Once that feeling occurs, how are we gonna respond?”

He meditates regularly – “Sometimes twice a day, sometimes twice a week” – and has been a vegan since 2009. He has done a cameo in the comedy film *The Hangover*, and hilariously satirises the Geoffrey Rush character instructing George Bush how to talk properly in a short film parody of *The King’s Speech* that appeared on a US chat show after this year’s Oscars.

“I think it’s funny that in my second life – or my tenth life – I can be a comic or something. As a fighter, I took myself too serious. If a comedian made a joke about me, I’d look for him and I would start trouble.”

The anger is still there but he’s working on coping with it differently. “I have had to change in order to survive. The old Mike Tyson – that couldn’t continue. Any kind of physical altercation is just not acceptable. I have to deal with it.”

There is a part of Tyson that strikes me as a kind of permanent child. Even when he bit off a piece of Evander Holyfield’s ear, it was a kind of childish tantrum, a juvenile reaction to losing – he was getting beaten, frustrated by an opponent’s defence.

But he has also matured. He is striving to be honest with himself, to get along, and be better. The pigeons, he says confidently, will be a part of his life until he dies, and when asked what he hopes people will take away from the show, he says an appreciation that they are more than “flying rats”.

There is no desire to return to boxing and he watches it now only for entertainment. “I’m not attached. I feel detached. But I enjoy it.”

When he speaks about gratitude, he sounds baffled, too, at having survived as long as he has and of having defeated so much adversity. “I’m very lucky. Just to... just to have someone who cares enough about me, to marry me and have children with me and build a life with me, when I had days where I was not deserving of a prostitute with full-blown Aids. I am very grateful and I am very lucky.”

And what’s surprised him most?

“I’m a lot tougher. I’m not talking about tough in terms of taking a punch or hitting someone else. I’m talking about endurance. Tough is not how hard you can hit somebody but what you can endure. I’ve endured a lot.”

I’ve had his attention now for one hour and his eyes look up out at the sky. The Maori warrior tattoo on his face folds into pleats as he squints from the sun and brims with the anticipation of getting back to his birds. ■

Taking on Tyson is broadcast on the Discovery Channel on Fridays at 9pm