

THE EQUALISER

BY AJIT JOHN

“I have come to believe that what ever happens, happens for the best. I also believe that your last shirt does not have a pocket,” says Thomas Lundgren in this exclusive chat with *City Tribune*.



PHOTO: MAJEED MOHAMMED

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HAT DO YOU MAKE OF A MAN who talks incessantly, admits he's a schizophrenic and, yes, runs \$85 million operation spread over the Middle East and Europe?

He would like to save the world, plans to build a school in India and feels that the world does not need another hypermarket.

Welcome to the fascinating world of Thomas Lundgren, self-styled master of the mix and antigravity manager and CEO of The One.

For a company that claims to provide a total home experience the development of the brand makes for a fascinating case study. Its communication has created controversy with its focus on questioning well-entrenched belief systems.

Urging everyone to save the world from conformity, colour and an identity crisis amongst other things the company has faced censure from the authorities in the UAE. But

THE ONE: I intend to close two of my outlets in the UAE and take them to India.

this has not fazed Thomas a bit. It has, in fact, made him more determined to move along trying to create a world that is more equal.

“For me, everyday is a new day, an opportunity to do something new, to touch lives to hopefully make this world a better place to live in,” he says — a typical Thomas sound byte said with out a hint of modesty.

For Thomas, the last 10 years have a steep learning curve. “I came to the Middle East 22 years ago. I landed up in Saudi Arabia on an assignment with Ikea. One day I was sitting in Sweden in knee deep snow in temperatures of minus thirty degrees and the next in the hot sweltering heat of the kingdom. It was a bit of a shock but a very interesting shock. I have come to the conclusion that everything that happens in life is because of a reason. There is something called fate.

Though I am also of the belief that it can be changed.”

Having decided to save the world from IKEA he decided to launch his company, which would reflect his persona and as he puts it bring a bit of rock and roll into home décor. “The initial years were tough everyday was a constant battle. When we launched The One in 1995 it was a struggle for the first seven years. It was really bad. I used to constantly think that success meant a reaching a certain level, but once you reach it, you realise that this is not success. It is the journey that is really interesting.

“It is more fun taking people along with you and helping them do things that make them happy. I constantly tell my people that it is important to have fun in life and in work. I want my people to feel secure

I prefer to keep the atmosphere in my office very cool and relaxed. For me, there is no greater vindication when people who left the company come back to the fold.”

As he puts it, “I’m constantly in a fight with myself. I’d like to see how far I can extend this idea, but then I’m also scared of turning this into a big corporation. Do we need another retail outfit?

We have a restaurant in our outlets but we do it for fun. I am scared, very scared in fact about becoming this huge cold corporate.

“I intend to close down two of my outlets in the UAE for 10 days and take them over to India to build a school. I know this guy there who has the expertise in building schools. I’m sure this experience will change a lot of lives. “We intend to do this in different countries every year. This is a great bonding experience but more importantly it keeps the company real and keeps it from loosing its conscience.

“I have not been involved in recruiting people recently and, I might add, regretfully, but I prefer to keep all kinds of people around me. So I don’t mind some one who is lazy but intelligent.

“We take them on and they find their level. My greatest challenge in the business is dealing with the constant movement of people. We sometimes find people leaving because someone else is giving them a small increase. I want people to develop roots, add to the culture of the company and enrich it.”

Away from work the father of three young daughters spends his time creating music. Like any parent he dotes on them.

“Well, let’s put it this way, they’re proud of me and, yes, at times they get very embarrassed. I keep doing these goofy things sometimes. Well that’s life.”

A fan of Spinal Tap, Thomas has produced a CD of some of his favorite music, which has sold approximately 10,000 copies.

As Thomas puts it life has been full of interesting surprises. “I have come to believe that what ever happens, happens for the best. I also believe that your last shirt does not have a pocket. This is what continuously pushes me to do what I am doing.”

Amen to that.

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DON'T WORRY, BE HAPPY: “For me, everyday is a new day, an opportunity to do something new, to touch lives to hopefully make this world a better place to live in,” says Thomas Lundgren, CEO of The One.

PHOTO: NOOR MOHAMED

MIND YOUR BUSINESS... IT MAKES SENSE