

Address by Middlebury College Commencement Speaker Diana Nyad
May 25, 2014

You know, to follow Jenny [student speaker], I think I'm going to dispense with the de rigor opening formalities, and I want a selfie too. But I want you all to be up and raucous! Get up! [Applause]

So many people have said it in different ways, when you achieve your dreams, it's not so much what you get. And since that walk up onto the beach in Florida from Cuba last Labor Day, I've been getting a lot. I've sat in the Oval Office with President Obama, whom I admire terribly. I've sat down with Oprah for a long, long soulful interview. I've been honored with a book contract with the esteemed publisher of *America Today*, Knopf, who believes that I have a memoir of inspiration within me. And to stand with you today on your special day at this treasured American school, I can tell you means the world to me. And by the way, come on, I've been on *Dancing With the Stars* now, it doesn't get any bigger than that.

But the end of that phrase goes, when you achieve your dreams, it's not so much what you get, it's who you become. And I can tell you that that stumbling walk up on that beach, me and my team, we made history, it wasn't me alone. I was filled with those phrases that came out of that unconscious, dazed brain that day—never, ever give up. And I was filled with questioning myself and fulfilling that question as to what is my life philosophy? What makes me proud of myself? And perhaps, oddly enough, my life philosophy came from a teenager—not a great president, a grand philosopher, and I was a teenager myself. I'll never forget her words, and I've tried every day of my life sincerely to live by them.

So I was a kid who had Olympic dreams, and it came to be the Olympic trials for Mexico City, 1968. I believed I had a chance to bow my head and receive a medal for the United States of America, and my speed had fallen off somewhat, and now I was facing the 100 meter back stroke after 10 years of 4:30 in the morning every day, 365 days a year, 1,000 situps every day, never 999. And that last 100-meter back stroke was in front of me, and it was either going to be this one or the next one when the three go on to Mexico City.

And I was walking down that pool deck, I remember it like it was yesterday, like I was in just a fog, I had no focus at all. The pressure, the perspective of all those years, all that sacrifice. I didn't even smoke pot in the parking lot in high school. I mean, the sacrifices were tremendous. My parents had given up so much, my brother and sister, their dreams were so small compared to mine. And a girl, a 17-year-old name Suzanne, with her own chances for Mexico City, she saw that I was in a fog. And she came over and she shook me, and she said, "What is going on? This is the most important race of your life! Why aren't you in a laser focus?" And I said, "The coach and the parents and the sacrifice and my brother and sister..."

She said, "Stop it, stop it!" She said, "You know you're the one. You're the one who's always telling us that you reach for the stars, and you have a vision of that dream. And

even if you never make it, you're working so hard to get there you're up playing around in the heavens. But you have that dream and then you get to work—you work hour by hour, and month by month, and year by year, and then maybe you get there, or you get pretty darn close." And she said, "Remember, we just saw the documentary on Billie Jean King, the great tennis player." She said, "Remember how she says when she goes to Wimbledon, she doesn't go over and look at the draw and see, oh yeah, I might play her in the quarter finals, and I heard her second serve has improved a lot. No, she goes on to the Wimbledon grass, she says, like a cheetah on the hunt. She has no idea who her opponent is, she doesn't know who the chair umpire is, she doesn't know what the impending weather is. She is playing as the first Zen athlete—not the ball—she is playing the fuzz on the ball. And as the ball comes over, all those years of practice, all that genetic talent comes oozing out, and she hits the most perfect backhand that's ever been hit. If the ball happens to come out, cheetah, she's at the net, she's hitting the overhead, and Billie Jean holds the Wimbledon trophy above her head 20 times."

So my friend's saying to me, "You know what I'm talking about. You've got to be in this moment!" And she says, "Okay, look, it's not as poetic as the fuzz on the tennis ball, but I want you to take a look at this little half moon sliver of your pinkie fingernail." I needed this girl at this moment. And she and I are standing on the pool deck like this. I said, "Yeah, I see it." She said, "All right, why don't you tell me how long it's going to take you in the 100-meter backstroke to swim that little half moon." And I said, "Well, that's probably going to take about a thousandth of a second." She said, "No it isn't, come on, let's do the math. It's going to take a lot less than that. What's it going to take?" And I said, "Okay, okay, you're right, let's say it's going to take a thousandth of a thousandth of a second." She said, "That's it, that's what it's going to take. Why don't you get up there on those blocks and blast off with the powerful shoulders that *you* built, and the unique heart of yours, and dig in and swim the most perfect potential race you've got, touch the wall, don't look up at the electronic scoreboard, don't look around the pool. You're either moving on to the trials or you're not." You're moving on to the rest of your life, and I guarantee you, if you can say it and mean it, "I couldn't have done it a fingernail faster," it'll all be all right no matter what you do.

And I get up there, now I've got the laser focus. The perspective, the big dream is somewhere down in the soul. Now I've got 100 meters of perfection in front of me, and I blast off with those shoulders, and with that heart, and when I touch that wall, I have no idea if I was first or third or eighth, and I closed my eyes and I closed my fists, I said it and I meant it, I couldn't have done it a fingernail faster! I didn't leave a fingernail in that pool. And I looked up at the electronic scoreboard and I was sixth. And this kid didn't go to Mexico City, and that girl's wisdom swam through my body. I went and shook the hands of the three girls who were moving on, wished them luck. I went in the locker room, I thought maybe a flood of tears would come after all the effort, all the belief, 10 years. But the tears never came. And you know why? It's because it wasn't just that 100 meters, it was the whole 10 years. It was every day of the situps, it was every day without the alarm clock. And I said to myself, I'm just a kid, I'm a teenager, I was almost your age, and I'm going to go on and live all the rest of my life no matter what I do like that.

And so life happened. College, and frankly, the only thing I can share with you about my college experience that would be informative was that I parachuted out of the four-story window of my dorm, you know, without a lot of erudite research on the aerodynamics of that. And just to tell you, you need to go a lot higher than the fourth floor for the chute to open. But there was graduate school, and then I was introduced to marathon swimming, and you know, I got to be 60. You're not going to believe me, but you're going to blink and you're going to be my age. And, you know, as the president was just using that phrase, I really was, I was kind of staring myself in the virtual mirror with true existential anxiety. What had I done with my life? Who am I? Am I living this way, have I been all these years, these 40 years, not a fingernail better? And to me, the rhetorical question that asks it all is the Mary Oliver poem. And she says—"So"—and I was saying this to myself that summer of turning 60—"what is it you're doing with this one wild and precious life of yours?"

Cuba had entered my imagination years before I tried it. 35 years before, 42 hours, jellyfish, sharks, Gulf Stream eddies—it's the Mt. Everest of the oceans. It's epic. People have been trying since 1950—strong men and women—and no one's ever done it. And at 60, did I have it? Did I have the will, the shoulders? I started to put it together. I started living with that unwavering commitment again. I was high. I was high on the passion and bringing my best self and everybody around me, the team. Then it turned out the world started getting involved, and I failed, and I failed again, and I failed again. And after the fourth time, each time, literally, life and death in the balance, my team started to say to me, "You know, Guam is awfully nice this time of year. Have you seen the Maldives? Just beautiful." You know, island to island over there.

But it was always Cuba, and Cuba was never about athleticism and endurance records for me. Cuba was about life, and questioning myself if I'm living the right life. It was that metaphor. And I can tell you today that Labor Day 2013, to see that crowd on that beach, I cried with my 44 teammates who had given so much, and they deserved this victory too. And I walked up on that beach, I asked myself the fingernail question, and I answered it sincerely, I'm back. I'm back to living every day, so I can't live it a fingernail better. And I'm not a religious person, but the day that's my last day to close my eyes on this Earth, I'm going to close my fist too and I'm going to say, "You know what? I couldn't do it all, I didn't succeed at it all, I wish I could have helped more people, gone more places, but it does go by awfully quickly, and at least everything I did, I did it so that I couldn't do it a fingernail better."

And you, the Middlebury Class of 2014, I pose the question to you today. Jenny said it well, do we know what we're going to do? Probably not. But I'm asking you, what are you going to do with this one wild and precious life of yours? And you know, in the end, you'll do many things. You'll achieve much, you'll give much, and on your last day, what a goal it would be to say that you did all of it—this college experience and all the rest of your lives—so that you just can't do it even a fingernail better. I'm proud to be with you. I congratulate you. Celebrate and move on and ask yourself that question, because it's your life, and it's wild and it's precious. Thank you so much for having me.