

## Meditative Story Transcript – Diana Nyad

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**DIANA NYAD:** I rummage around my office for a Mary Oliver poem. I'm not much of a poetry type. Why hint around? Just come out and say it. But Mary Oliver is the one poet who does speak to me, and it's that one work of hers I just know is going to give me a spark. Here it is: "The Summer Day." And here is, specifically, that last brilliant line: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

I recite that line multiple times daily over the month I turn 60. I'm ready. I'm ready to catapult myself back to "Not a Fingernail Better." It's been decades since I've been a champion swimmer. But one epic venture still swims around in the back of my imagination. It's known as the Mount Everest of the earth's oceans – the crossing between Havana and Key West. I tried it once, way back at age 28, and failed.

**ROHAN GUNATILLAKE:** By the 1980s, Diana Nyad had left competitive swimming behind, embarking on a successful career as a sports broadcaster. But after a meeting with "Superman" actor Christopher Reeve – whose throw from a horse left him paralyzed from the shoulders down – she is reminded of a challenge that once fueled her early athletic ambitions. In today's Meditative Story, Diana, inspired by her encounter with Superman, re-commits to living every day just past the limit of what seems endurable.

In this series, we combine immersive first-person stories and breathtaking music with the science-backed benefits of mindfulness practice. From WaitWhat and Thrive Global, this is Meditative Story. I'm Rohan, and I'll be your guide.

The body relaxed. The body breathing. Your senses open. Your mind open. Meeting the world.

**NYAD:** I'm stunned. His breathing, through that respirator tube, isn't so much a sip as it is a gulp. Christopher Reeve is backstage at a fundraiser event for stem cell research. It wasn't so long ago that he was larger-than-life. Superman. The epitome of strength and virility. It was a cruel moment, his fall from his horse. In a heartbeat, Christopher Reeve became a quadriplegic.

His gulps from that tube gave him a stream of air to get out maybe five or six labored words. Chris loves athletes and their stories. He recognizes that I've been retired from world-class sports for decades at this point, but he still asks me: "What was the essence of your success as a swimmer?"

A make-up artist comes over to powder Chris's face. How can I pretend not to be shaken, to witness the life he now lives, strapped into this large contraption, his only movement possible by his eyes, his mouth?

Come on. Snap out of it. He's curious. He's asked you something. Get it together.

"Well, Chris, as a teenager I came to my last pool race, after getting up at 4:30 every morning for eight years. I didn't yet know my athletic talent lay out in the ocean. This race was to qualify for the Olympic Trials. And I remember it as if it were yesterday. I was walking down the pool deck in a daze.

"Chris, I can share with you, my chances that night were close to zero, even after eight years of working hard and believing. My buddy Suzanne shook me. She said, 'What in the world are you thinking about? You're in a fog!'

"Suzanne grabbed my shoulders, put her face within inches of mine, and barked at me. 'Get up to those starting blocks. Blast off with every ounce of what drives you. And when you touch that wall, don't look around to see where you finished. Close your eyes, close your fists, and say it out loud: 'I couldn't have done it a fingernail faster.'

"I'm telling you, Chris, I remember Suzanne's every word, even all these decades later. She told me, 'I guarantee you, you do it that way, you say it, you mean it, you will walk out of here with no regrets, no matter what happens.'

"So, Chris, that's the way I swam that race, the last race of my youth. And you know what? I didn't make it. But I walked off the pool deck that night with a philosophy for life. I literally stopped, looked up to the night sky and said to myself: 'Every day of your life, no matter what you do, do it so you can't do it a fingernail better. No regrets.'"

Chris stares at me pointedly. And he presses me: "So, you promised yourself a long time ago to live every day so you couldn't live it a fingernail better. Have you kept that promise?"

He stops me cold. I really don't have to think about it. I say one word to Chris. *Hardly.*

Chris's handlers come and he's off for his appearance. As he's wheeled away, I can't help but stare after him – in part because it hits me that in a nano-second any one of us could lose something that we so easily take for granted. The other thing is this. Here I am face-to-face with someone I've never met before, for only a scant few minutes, yet he unabashedly calls into question how I'm going about my life.

A year later. It's 2000, and the Olympics are in Sydney. It's the day of the center stage event, the men's 100-meter dash. I'm with Fox Sports, and we don't have the broadcast rights so we're piled up with maybe a pool of 100 crews way down at the end of the track. It's my twentieth year as a sports announcer, but I'm nowhere close to being jaded about the majesty of the Olympic Games. I still buy into the Swifter, Higher, Stronger ethos of the ancient Greeks.

The gun sounds. BAM! After the race a Dudley Do-Right-looking young announcer in the pool with us – carved jaw, no hair out of place – beams as he says to me, “Well, it just doesn’t get any better than this, does it?”

Something suddenly washes over me. It’s as if I’ve gone instantly deaf. The loud crowd, the pageantry, the track announcer. It all goes stone silent. I don’t answer Dudley Do-Right. I don’t even say good-bye to my crew. I pick up my backpack, and I start walking. Not to the media bus but through the outskirts of Sydney into town. It must be 6 or 7 miles that I’m walking, not really taking in the sights, but more as if in a trance. I’ve got the wrong shoes for a long walk. Blisters are bubbling up on each heel. But I silently press on all the way to the Sydney Opera House Bridge.

I never complain about my career of following the best in the world pursue their excellence. But today, for the first time, gazing out across Sydney Harbor, I am overwhelmed with an angst. It hits me hard: I am merely a spectator. That’s who I’ve become. A full-time spectator. I no longer chase my own dreams. I traipse around after others chasing their dreams.

**GUNATILLAKE:** It can be like this sometimes, when we see in others the life we could be leading but for some reason are not.

Let’s walk alongside Diana on her long walk back to her hotel. Just be there for her.

**NYAD:** I rummage around my office for a Mary Oliver poem. I’m not much of a poetry type. Why hint around? Just come out and say it. But Mary Oliver is the one poet who does speak to me, and it’s that one work of hers I just know is going to give me a spark. Here it is: “The Summer Day.” And here is, specifically, that last brilliant line: “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

I recite that line multiple times daily over the month I turn 60. I’m ready. I’m ready to catapult myself back to “Not a Fingernail Better.”

It’s been decades since I’ve been a champion swimmer. But one epic venture still swims around in the back of my imagination. It’s known as the Mount Everest of the earth’s oceans – the crossing between Havana and Key West. I tried it once, way back at age 28, and failed. The list of obstacles is long and overwhelming. The dangerous sharks of the tropics, the summer storms that come in with no warning at 60 miles per hour, the deadly box jellyfish, the powerful Gulf Stream tugging you hard east when you need to swim north.

The obstacles out in that vast ocean haven’t changed but, 30 years later, my mindset, the core of my being, *has* changed. At age 60, this isn’t an endurance event to me any longer. This is the wake-up call to remind me how to live a life. Reaching the other shore is almost beside the point. It’s more so a journey of lifelong friendships, of trust in team,

of unrelenting resolve, of grandísimo adventure. Chris Reeve has passed away at this point. But I so wish I could tell him: I'm back, back to living every day so I just can't live it a fingernail better.

The expedition is world-class. But with each attempt, Mother Nature crushes us. 51 hours this time, unpredicted heavy seas take us far off course. 48 hours this time, the box jellyfish nearly take my life. We try and we fail four times, and the whole world now seems to declare the crossing absolutely impossible. Yet we, my team, we're still believers.

We're in St. Maarten in the Caribbean, on our last training swim, a continuous 24 hours, before we move the entire expedition to Key West. That's where we wait for our weather window to get over to Havana for a final attempt. Bonnie, my head handler, is blowing her police whistle all night long, signaling me over the huge winds to come back closer to the boat.

It's just past 2 a.m., and we won't finish till 9 a.m. There is no moon. The sea is black, the sky is black. I'm shivering and confused. I'm lost.

I am counting in all my languages to get through another hour. Neun und siebzig. Noventa y ocho. Quatre-vingt-dix-neuf. I'm singing my songs. No headphones allowed in this sport. I sing to myself. "Busted flat in Baton Rouge, waiting for a train, feeling 'bout as faded as my jeans."

I'm hanging on by a thread. I'm floundering, nauseous, cold. Bonnie coaxes me very close to the boat and demands my undivided attention. "Diana, listen up, we don't need to make it to 24 hours. It's been a hellish night, and you've done great. Listen to me! I need to know if you have FIVE more strokes left in you! If you don't, if you can't take FIVE strokes, we're going to pack it up and we can live with that. Do you hear me??"

I nod weakly. "I'm asking you, Diana, do you have five strokes to give?" I'm childlike at this point. "I think so."

After all these unfathomable, long, lonely hours in the sea, hundreds of thousands of strokes, at this moment, five seems a Herculean effort. My goggles are completely fogged over. My teeth are chattering. The lights on the boat seem a mirage, and I can't figure out what they are. Bonnie prompts me gently again. "Just five strokes. Come on. Show me how tough you are."

I put my head down and gingerly pull the left arm out. It's painstaking. Now the right arm. One, two, three, four, five. They're feeble strokes, but I get five. I stop and look toward the silhouette that is Bonnie. She has a flashlight pointed to her hand in the pitch black and then I hear her shout: "That's it! You did it! I'm so damn proud of you, Diana! OK, show me five more. Come on, just five more! Can you do it?"

**GUNATILLAKE:** Just five more. Diana has been pushed to the edge of what she feels capable of. Stroke by stroke, her doubt disappears. Let's be part of Diana's support team too, and take five breaths, fully conscious, to help her time her strokes.

**NYAD:** Bonnie knows well that the first rays of the sun will give me hope. She pushes me to get five more strokes, over and over again, for hours. Then, sure enough, dawn breaks at the horizon.

Now I am gliding again. The wind drops, the surface is glassy. My mind is happy again, my body is revived. I feel strong.

For some mysterious reason, this morning, songs never before on my playlist start bubbling up in my mind, in my ears. Iz's magical ukulele and his angelic voice singing "Over the Rainbow" and "It's a Wonderful World" waft across my brain. "Somewhere over the rainbow... hmm hmm hmm." I have a sensation of being transcended to a higher place. I sense a lifting up. I am swept away, swept across the sea.

9 a.m., Bonnie blows the whistle. She and the crew signal me to the boat. They're beat themselves. They erupt into applause when I pick up my head and rip my cap off. Bonnie is in tears. And I say to her, "Bonnie, you know why I'm going to make it finally this time? I've somehow this morning transcended from an athlete to a citizen of planet earth. How many hours have I spent in the beautiful oceans of the world? But this morning is the first time I've fallen head-over-heels in love with this blue jewel of a planet of ours. I was just swimming these last few hours in utter awe. This Cuba Swim is bigger than you and me, Bonnie. Bigger than sports. It's our tribute to living this one wild and precious life."

September 2, 2013, I stumble up onto Smathers Beach in Key West. 110.86 miles. 52 hours, 54 minutes.

That was an extreme, black-and-white world, chasing that big dream. Now my professional athlete career is behind me. Now I'm living a life of greys, a less dramatic life. Now it's up to me to find the rapture I felt out in the ocean in *everyday* life.

I refuse to let the landing on that Key West beach stand as my life's high point. Didn't I claim the whole expedition was about the journey, the life lessons, not the triumphant ending?

I hit the pillow these days, and I say to myself: "Wow, I couldn't *possibly* have put an ounce more of my energy, my brain, my heart, into that day!" I am brimming with gratitude to take every last step of my old hound dog's life right along with him. As we stroll along the California shore, I am reminded of the awe I felt out in the azure waters of the Caribbean. I get lost in laughing with my friends until we're giddy, the same way my

teammates immersed ourselves in gazing together up at the two billion stars on a summer night.

I'm the same person, I walk tall with that same character, as the day I walked up onto that beach. Now it's my time to step up as an activist for the polluted oceans I fell in love with. It's my time for me to tend to my treasured friendships as if they are Pulitzer Prizes.

I'm flashing back to Christopher Reeve these days. Strapped down in that respirator machine, Chris was palpably confident. Even though his only movements were a blink of his eyes and the motion of his lips, he was a large presence. Actually, he was downright regal. At first, I thought what commanded my attention that night backstage with him was the shock that he was no longer physically capable. But the truth is, he captivated me because he was *still* Superman.

Chris lived for nine years as a quadriplegic. Yet there he was at those fundraisers, his ultimate grace on display, giving hope to the world for the day we can repair a severed spinal cord, nudging even a stranger like me not to leave herself any regrets.

I'm 71 now, and it just so happens I've been pretty much the strongest, fittest, healthiest person I've known all my life. If I may say so, I have felt maybe a bit of a Superwoman myself.

But, shock to the system, I wake up these days with extreme pain in the shoulders, the hips, and the neck. It turns out, I have a recently diagnosed condition called polymyalgia rheumatica. It's not quadriplegia. I'm going to be past this setback in some one to three years, but suddenly I've crashed into this new territory, into physical limitations I don't like, I don't want to accept.

I need to dig down to my true grit now. And to my grace. This is my life test, far more demanding than my athletic test. I need to grasp onto the positives. Millions suffer worse. I am turning to the resilience I see in so many who exhibit courage when up against loss and pain. I am meeting the call again of that "one wild and precious life" mantra, determined to rise above this temporary medical duress.

After Chris died, I recall wishing I could have told him, when in the rigors of training like a maniac, that I was back to living on full octane. Well, now, greeting the dawn without a world-class athletic enterprise on my horizon, again I wish I could call Chris.

Every waking hour of every day, Chris. New challenges. New joys. Not a Fingernail Better.

**GUNATILLAKE:** Thank you, Diana. In just a moment, I'll guide you through a closing meditation.

Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life? That line from Mary Oliver's poem that Diana references is much loved, and for good reason. As Diana mentions, it's from "The Summer Day" and is just a wonderful example of how Oliver relates to nature and expresses the wonder that she finds there.

That poem, and that line, is also dearly loved by many teachers in the mindfulness tradition. So let's use it as the inspiration for our closing meditation practice together.

Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

Wild.

Sit, stand, lie down, however your body is, whether moving or still – let it be. And sense into its wildness. For me, I can feel a pulsing energy in my hands, and a chattering energy in the mind. What does wildness feel like in you? In the body? In the mind? In the bodymind?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

Precious.

Can you now sense into the preciousness of this? There is a properly old-school saying from the Buddhist tradition that the chances of being born into a human life is the same as a blind turtle who only comes up to the surface to breathe every hundred years. And when coming up for that breath, it's head happens to poke through a small hoop that has been floating around the oceans.

You don't have to believe in rebirth or anything like that to appreciate the sentiment here. The invitation to appreciate the opportunity of the precious life that we have.

Can you sense that preciousness? The fragility of the breath? The steady energy of your body, the connection between the earth and the heavens. This extraordinary thing that is awareness, the one which knows experience.

Putting any self-judgment or doubt aside just for now, let's tune into what can be known right now. There is preciousness here. Let it in. Allow it. Tell me: What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life? What is it you plan to do?

It's the New Year, so if you're not over setting resolutions (which is totally fair by the way), why not set a meditative one now? What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

And not answering it with words (that's so 2020), instead let's answer it with our bodies. Set your intention with your body. Take the posture you want to express in the world.

And feel it, absorb it, really inhabit it.

This is your intention. This is your plan.

I love it.

Thank you, Diana. Thank you, Mary. And of course, thank you. All of you who have listened to this episode, in different times and places. But connected all the same.

See you soon.