

Just Keep Swimming

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Photo: Corbis Images

By

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I first met Diana Nyad in 1982 on the eve of the first 3,000-mile nonstop transcontinental bicycle Race Across America (RAAM). She was covering the race for ABC's Wide World of Sports; I was riding in it. I knew of her 28-mile swim around Manhattan, her 102-mile open-ocean swim from North Bimini in the Bahamas to Juno Beach, Fla., and her first unsuccessful attempt to swim from Cuba to Florida. So at a pre-race dinner in Los Angeles, with my nerves in my throat about undertaking my first transcontinental crossing, I asked her what kept her going through success and failure.

I don't remember her exact words. But the single-minded intensity and strength of will that came through in her presence inspired me over the next 10 days to make it to New York.

Diana Nyad is a force of personality that anyone who meets her never forgets. This drive and dynamism is well captured in the title of her moving memoir “Find a Way.” She has—and her book shows us how we all can.

Find a Way

By Diana Nyad

Knopf, 308 pages, \$26.95

The sport of long-distance open-ocean swimming is like no other. RAAM riders take periodic motor home stops for hot showers and meals. Tour de France riders get massaged in hotels between stages. Even Mount Everest climbers stop and rest in tents, sometimes for days. Ms. Nyad’s sport allows none of this. In her four attempts to make the crossing from Cuba to Florida between 2011 and 2013—the narrative thread of her book—she was not permitted to even hang on to the side of the kayaks that trailed her, much less climb aboard the lead catamaran for a break. She had to tread water while eating, drinking, adjusting fogged-over goggles, or donning anti-jellyfish gear to ward off the deadly box jellies whose stings almost killed her and ended her 2011 and 2012 attempts.

While swimming, Ms. Nyad’s head came out of the water to breathe 52 times per minute in between the approximately 200,000 strokes of the 110.86-mile trip. But unlike ultramarathon athletes and alpinists, she took in no magnificent scenery. She spent most of her time staring into the inky-black abyss, broken only by an underwater streamer dangling from a pole deployed from her support boat, which at night was lit by LED lights to guide her in a straight line as waves and currents constantly directed her away from her goal of the Florida Keys. Ms. Nyad narrates a typical evening stretch: “The waves are slapping all night long. . . . Because I can’t judge the feel of the waves on my face, I am thwacked by walls of seawater. I gag. I vomit right into the mask. It’s very difficult, now that my fingers have lost both dexterity and feel—a normal occurrence after many hours swimming in the ocean but magnified by the latex gloves—to pinch the underside of the mask material, pry my teeth from the retainers, and lift it above my nose to clear the vomit. I swim through the entire night, violently seasick. I’m not even capable of looking for daylight.”

As most of the world knows (media coverage was extensive), in 2013 Ms. Nyad finally made it to Florida on her fifth try in 52 hours, 54 minutes and 18 seconds. It is the longest unaided open ocean swim in history, and she did it at age 64. “Find a Way,” however, is not just a recounting of that successful crossing, but it also covers the four previous failures, with many thoughtful reflections on relationships and the human condition.

In addition to being the greatest long-distance swimmer in the history of the sport, Ms. Nyad is also gay and an atheist—and she handles both subjects with candor and grace. We learn that she was in a decade-long relationship with a woman she calls the love of her life, but since that ended in 1994 she hasn’t found a romantic partner. Best friends, such as Bonnie Stoll, who is also her coach, have stood as reliable proxies for intimacy.

It’s hard not to see Ms. Nyad’s almost inhuman ability to withstand athletic pain as connected to the sexual abuse she suffered from the time she was 5 at the hands of her father, a con man who finally skipped town ahead of his creditors when Ms. Nyad was 14. She tries to find some good in “that conscienceless bastard for his outlandish and engaging spirit” and convince herself that “weeding out the good from the bad” is

"part of our growth, isn't it?" Maybe, but there is no good could to be found in Ms. Nyad's high school swim coach, who molested her at his home, in his office, in the bathroom . . . anywhere he thought he could get away with it. The rage she felt at the violation was eventually channeled into a steely-eyed determination to be as close to invincible as humanly possible.

In a chapter entitled "Atheist in Awe" she recalls a trip to the Amazon in which her hosts' puppy went missing for five days. Ms. Nyad was especially sympathetic because she had a dog at home who died during this trip, leaving her distraught. Late one night Ms. Nyad couldn't sleep, so she went out into a field to write in her journal about her beloved canine, Moses. All of a sudden, her hosts' missing puppy appeared out of dark and crawled into her lap. "I'm quite sure the interpretation could easily be made that this little puppy was some kind of sign from the universe, Moses's spirit reincarnated for me to hold close," she reflects on the human propensity to believe that everything happens for a reason. "To me, it was a sad passing followed by a happy coincidence, a cue to embrace the chaos, in itself a paradox of joy and sorrow, life and death existing in the same moment, neither canceling the other out."

The story and her elegant deconstruction of it reminds me of Oprah Winfrey's response upon discovering Ms. Nyad's atheism in an interview. "But you're in the awe," Oprah said, as if one can't be an atheist in awe. "I don't understand why anybody would find a contradiction in that," Ms. Nyad responded. "I can stand at the beach's edge with the most devout Christian, Jew, Buddhist—go on down the line—and weep with the beauty of this universe and be moved by all of humanity. All the billions of people who have lived before us, who have loved and hurt and suffered. So to me, my definition of God is humanity and is the love of humanity."

Ms. Nyad's book is an inspiration. And though the author is a multifaceted person, the Cuba swim, she writes, "has come to emblemize all I believe in, my worldview. Reaching stroke after stroke toward this particular horizon is my version of Browning's reaching for heaven. The vision of it, the planning, the training, the unwavering belief in the face of overwhelming odds—this swim demands and defines the person I want to be. The person I can admire." Would that all of us would reach so far.

—Mr. Shermer is the publisher of Skeptic magazine. His latest book is "The Moral Arc."