Never, ever Give up

It's the fifth time I stand on this shore, the Cuban shore, looking out at that distant horizon, believing, again, that I'm going to make it all the way across that vast, dangerous wilderness of an ocean. Not only have I tried four times, but the greatest swimmers in the world have been trying since 1950, and it's still never been done.

The team is proud of our four attempts. It's an expedition of some 30 people. Bonnie is my best friend and head handler, who somehow summons will, that last drop of will within me, when I think it's gone, after many, many hours and days out there. The shark experts are the best in the world -- large predators below. The box jellyfish, the deadliest venom in all of the ocean, is in these waters, and I have come close to dying from them on a previous attempt. The conditions themselves, besides the sheer distance of over 100 miles in the open ocean -- the currents and whirling eddies and the Gulf Stream itself, the most unpredictable of all of the planet Earth.

And by the way, it's amusing to me that journalists and people before these attempts often ask me, "Well, are you going to go with any boats or any people or anything?" And I'm thinking, what are they imagining? That I'll just sort of do some celestial navigation, and carry a bowie knife in my mouth, and I'll hunt fish and skin them alive and eat them, and maybe drag a desalinization plant behind me for fresh water. Yes, I have a team.

And the team is expert, and the team is courageous, and brimming with innovation and scientific discovery, as is true with any major expedition on the planet.

And we've been on a journey. And the debate has raged, hasn't it, since the Greeks, of isn't it what it's all about? Isn't life about the journey, not really the destination? And here we've been on this journey, and the truth is, it's been thrilling. We haven't reached that other shore, and still our sense of pride and commitment, unwavering commitment. When I turned 60, the dream was still alive from having tried this in my 20s, and dreamed it and imagined it. The most famous body of water on the Earth today, I imagine, Cuba to Florida. And it was deep. It was deep in my soul. And when I turned 60, it wasn't so much about the athletic accomplishment, it wasn't the ego of "I want to be the first." That's always there and it's undeniable. But it was deeper. It was, how much life is there left? Let's face it, we're all on a one-way street, aren't we, and what are we going to do? What are we going to do as we go forward to have no regrets looking back? And all this past year in training, I had that Teddy Roosevelt quote to paraphrase it, floating around in my brain, and it says, "You go ahead, you go ahead and sit back in your comfortable chair and you be the critic, you be the observer, while the brave one gets in the ring and engages and gets bloody and gets dirty and fails over and over and over again, but yet isn't afraid and isn't timid and lives life in a bold way."

And so of course I want to make it across. It is the goal, and I should be so shallow to say that this year, the destination was even sweeter than the journey. But the journey itself was worthwhile taking. And at this point, by this summer, everybody -- scientists, sports scientists, endurance experts, neurologists, my own team, Bonnie -- said it's impossible. It just simply can't be done, and Bonnie said to me, "But if you're going to take the journey, I'm going to see you through to the end of it, so I'll be there."

And now we're there. And as we're looking out, kind of a surreal moment before the first stroke, standing on the rocks at Marina Hemingway, the Cuban flag is flying above, all my team's out in their boats, hands up in the air, "We're here, we're here for you," Bonnie and I look at each other, and we say, this year, the mantra is -- and I've been using it in training -- find a way. You have a dream and you have obstacles in front of you, as we all do. None of us ever get through this life without heartache, without turmoil, and if you believe and you have faith and you can get knocked down and get back up again and you believe in perseverance as a great human quality, you find your way, and Bonnie grabbed my shoulders, and she said, "Let's find our way to Florida."

And we started, and for the next 53 hours, it was an intense, unforgettable life experience. The highs were high, the awe, I'm not a religious person, but I'll tell you, to be in the azure blue of the Gulf Stream as if, as you're breathing, you're looking down miles and miles and miles, to feel the majesty of this blue planet we live on, it's awe-inspiring. I have a playlist of about 85 songs, and especially in the middle of the night, and that night, because we use no lights -- lights attract jellyfish, lights attract sharks, lights attract baitfish that attract sharks, so we go in the pitch black of the night. You've never seen black this black. You can't see the front of your hand, and the people on the boat, Bonnie and my team on the boat, they just hear the slapping of the arms, and they know where I am, because there's no visual at all. And I'm out there kind of tripping out on my little playlist. I've got a tight rubber cap, so I don't hear a thing. I've got goggles and I'm turning my head 50 times a minute, and I'm singing, ♪ Imagine there's no heaven ♪ ♪ doo doo doo doo doo ♪ ♪ It's easy if you try ♪ ♪ doo doo doo doo doo ♪ And I can sing that song a thousand times in a row. (Laughter) Now there's a talent unto itself. (Laughter) (Applause) And each time I get done with ♪ Ooh, you may say I'm a dreamer but I'm not the only one ♪ 222. ♪ Imagine there's no heaven ♪ And when I get through the end of a thousand of John Lennon's "Imagine," I have swum nine hours and 45 minutes, exactly.

And then there are the crises. Of course there are. And the vomiting starts, the seawater, you're not well, you're wearing a jellyfish mask for the ultimate protection. It's difficult to swim in. It's causing abrasions on the inside of the mouth, but the tentacles can't get you. And the hypothermia sets in. The water's 85 degrees, and yet you're losing weight and using calories, and as you come over toward the side of the boat, not allowed to touch it, not allowed to get out, but Bonnie and her team hand me nutrition and asks me what I'm doing, am I all right, I am seeing the Taj Mahal over here. I'm in a very different state, and I'm thinking, wow, I never thought I'd be running into the Taj Mahal out here. It's gorgeous. I mean, how long did it take them to build that? It's just -- So, uh, wooo. (Laughter) And then we kind of have a cardinal rule that I'm never told, really, how far it is, because we don't know how far it is. What's going to happen to you between this point and that point? What's going to happen to the weather and the currents and, God forbid, you're stung when you don't think you could be stung in all this armor, and Bonnie made a decision coming into that third morning that I was suffering and I was hanging on by a thread and she said, "Come here," and I came close to the boat, and she said, "Look, look out there," and I saw light, because the day's easier than the night, and I thought we were coming into day, and I saw a stream of white light along the horizon, and I said, "It's going to be morning soon." And she said, "No, those are the lights of Key West." It was 15 more hours, which for most swimmers would be a long time. You have no idea how many 15-hour training swims I had done.

So here we go, and I somehow, without a decision, went into no counting of strokes and no singing and no quoting Stephen Hawking and the parameters of the universe, I just went into thinking about this dream, and why, and how. And as I said, when I turned 60, it wasn't about that concrete "Can you do it?" That's the everyday machinations. That's the discipline, and it's the preparation, and there's a pride in that. But I decided to think, as I went along, about, the phrase usually is reaching for the stars, and in my case, it's reaching for the horizon. And when you reach for the horizon, as I've proven, you may not get there, but what a tremendous build of character and spirit that you lay down. What a foundation you lay down in reaching for those horizons.

And now the shore is coming, and there's just a little part of me that's sad. The epic journey is going to be over.

So many people come up to me now and say, "What's next? We love that! That little tracker that was on the computer? When are you going to do the next one? We just can't wait to follow the next one." Well, they were just there for 53 hours, and I was there for years. And so there won't be another epic journey in the ocean.

But the point is, and the point was that every day of our lives is epic, and I'll tell you, when I walked up onto that beach, staggered up onto that beach, and I had so many times in a very puffed up ego way, rehearsed what I would say on the beach. When Bonnie thought that the back of my throat was swelling up, and she brought the medical team over to our boat to say that she's really beginning to have trouble breathing. Another 12, 24 hours in the saltwater, the whole thing -- and I just thought in my hallucinatory moment, that I heard the word tracheotomy. (Laughter) And Bonnie said to the doctor, "I'm not worried about her not breathing. If she can't talk when she gets to the shore, she's gonna be pissed off."

But the truth is, all those orations that I had practiced just to get myself through some training swims as motivation, it wasn't like that. It was a very real moment, with that crowd, with my team. We did it. I didn't do it. We did it. And we'll never forget it. It'll always be part of us.

And the three things that I did sort of blurt out when we got there, was first, "Never, ever give up." I live it. What's the phrase from today from Socrates? To be is to do. So I don't stand up and say, don't ever give up. I didn't give up, and there was action behind these words.

The second is, "You can chase your dreams at any age; you're never too old." Sixty-four, that no one at any age, any gender, could ever do, has done it, and there's no doubt in my mind that I am at the prime of my life today. (Applause) Yeah. Thank you.

And the third thing I said on that beach was, "It looks like the most solitary endeavor in the world, and in many ways, of course, it is, and in other ways, and the most important ways, it's a team, and if you think I'm a badass, you want to meet Bonnie."

Bonnie, where are you? Where are you? There's Bonnie Stoll. (Applause) My buddy.

The Henry David Thoreau quote goes, when you achieve your dreams, it's not so much what you get as who you have become in achieving them. And yeah, I stand before you now. In the three months since that swim ended, I've sat down with Oprah and I've been in President Obama's Oval Office. I've been invited to speak in front of esteemed groups such as yourselves. I've signed a wonderful major book contract. All of that's great, and I don't denigrate it. I'm proud of it all, but the truth is, I'm walking around tall because I am that bold, fearless person, and I will be, every day, until it's time for these days to be done.