

A woman is running on a paved path that runs along a sandy beach. The ocean waves are visible on the left side of the path. The entire image is overlaid with a teal color. The text 'YOU CAN DO HARD THINGS' is written in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters, centered vertically and horizontally over the image.

YOU
CAN
DO
HARD
THINGS

a collection of stories

by nicole antoinette

For Kate Grace, whose dedication to getting the best out of herself as a runner has caused me to silently chant, “What would Kate do?” over and over again during the hardest parts of my races. Thank you for being the person I frantically text about running, and for being brave enough to go after your dreams out loud.

For Jason Fitzgerald and Ryan Knapp, who coach me, push me, and believe in me when I don’t believe in myself. My improvements as a runner are a direct testament to your passion and expertise.

And for you (yes, *you!*), I hope this little book serves as a reminder that you are capable of so much more than you imagine.

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Introduction

On May 1, 2011, I quit drinking and started running.

I had never played sports or done anything even remotely athletic in my life, ever.

Growing up, whenever my classmates were forced to run the mile in gym class, I faked sick.

While my friends spent their free time playing volleyball, soccer, and football, I curled up on the couch to read novels and eat Twizzlers.

So when I laced up my running shoes that first day, I could barely run for two minutes before needing to stop.

As my mother described it, I was more likely to sprout wings and fly to the moon than to ever become a runner.

And yet, that's exactly what I set out to do.

For me, running was a way out of the drinking hole. It was a way to save myself, a way to finally start believing in myself. Because what I needed more than anything back then was a reason to believe in myself, to believe that I was capable of more than the life I was living.

I started with a two minute run, and I kept going. Running was the first thing I ever started, realized I was terrible at, and didn't quit. That made all the difference.

Six months later, I crossed the finish line of my first half marathon.

I had done something that I had been absolutely positive I would never be able to do, and it brought into question everything else in my life that I had always said was "impossible."

So I kept running.

A second half marathon, and then a third. A fourth, and then my first full marathon in November of 2012.

Nothing felt impossible after that.

In January 2013, I turned my attention toward racing; instead of simply trying to complete a certain distance, I wanted to get faster. I wanted to push myself. I wanted to run a sub-2 hour half marathon.

In the pages that follow, you'll find a record of my running pursuits from that point forward. More than anything, these are letters to myself. Reminders that I am strong and tough, and that I can do hard things.

But they are also letters to you. Notes of encouragement for when you're deep in the valley of your own goal, and it's dark and frustrating and you're asking yourself why the hell you're working so hard.

These words of grit and grace helped me to keep going when I didn't think I could. And whenever you are on the verge of quitting, I hope they do the same for you.

xoxo

Nicole

February 2013

Get Comfortable Being Uncomfortable

If you've never had the experience of explaining to your boyfriend's mother that you need to fill her bathtub with ice cubes and sit in it for 10 straight minutes in the dead of winter, then let me be the one to assure you that, yes, it's as supremely awkward as it sounds.

That's the thing about training for a big race: it makes you do things you never (ever) dreamed you'd have to do.

To me, this is the fundamental difference between running and training; when you're training, you have the willingness to do whatever it takes to get better, stronger, and faster. The willingness to run 11 miles in 12 degree snow at an altitude of 5,280 feet on Christmas weekend, and then sit naked in an ice bath in the basement of your boyfriend's mother's house because that's what you need to do to train and recover.

Right now, I'm training for my next half marathon, the DC Rock n' Roll half on March 16, and it is, without question, the hardest I've ever trained for a race. Because I started as such a new runner in May 2011, the majority of my training has been about just getting good enough - just being able to complete the distance of any given race without falling over dead on the side of the road.

(Real talk: when you're new to running, not falling over dead on the side of the road is often your dream goal, and that's fine.)

But I've never trained with a serious time goal in mind before. I've never trained to be as fast as possible at a distance I'm already comfortable with on its own.

Until now.

As the calendar pages turned from 2012 to 2013, I wrote my goal on a sticky note and stuck it on the wall: sub-2 hour half marathon.

Which brings us back to the fact that I'm training, and that this training cycle has been anything but easy. I've run in the pouring rain and freezing snow, and I've been pushing myself in longer and harder workouts, all for the same purpose: to get comfortable being uncomfortable.

Running a sub-2 hour half marathon is something I've never done before, and in order to achieve something new I have to be willing to try things I've never tried and push myself to places I've never been as a runner.

That means 8 mile weekday runs with the middle four miles at race pace. It means 32 mile weeks and targeted core work and two shorter tune-up races before March. And it means, more than anything, that I have to redefine my comfort level, because growth is born out of discomfort.

Let me give you an example.

A few weeks ago, my boyfriend and I spent a long weekend in Mexico to celebrate our three-year anniversary. On our last day we were scheduled to go ziplining, which meant I had to get up at 5am in order to have enough time to do my 14-mile run before the tour company picked us up from our resort.

Now, listen, I've never been committed to anything the way I'm committed to running, but getting up at 5 o'clock in the morning to eat cold oatmeal in the dark before running 14-miles along an unfamiliar Mexican beach path, alone, while you're on vacation will test even the strongest resolve. Not to mention that the ocean wind was so intense that at certain points I had to run diagonally into the wind to avoid getting blown off the path. **DIAGONALLY INTO THE WIND.**

I'll be honest with you here, there were many miles during that run where I was so unbelievably uncomfortable that I almost broke down crying and collapsed on the side of the road. I kept thinking of my boyfriend, all warm and cozy in our big hotel bed, and wondering why in the crazy hell I was running diagonally into wind that was so strong it felt like I was trying to push a brick wall up a sandy mountain.

But - and here's where things get interesting - right after I reached the 10 mile mark I had a flash of realization: I wasn't going to get any more uncomfortable.

The wind was howling and I was slowly working my way through it, pushing that brick wall up that sandy mountain, and it was fucking horrible, totally fucking horrible, but it wasn't going to get any worse. I realized that I had made it through 10 miles of this agonizing slog of a run, and that if I just accepted the fact that I was uncomfortable, that it wasn't going to get better, but that it also wasn't going to get worse, I could relax into the discomfort instead of fighting

against it so much. And that moment, the exact moment when you allow yourself to get comfortable being uncomfortable, that's when you begin to grow.

It's the same thing with ice baths and running in the rain. Once you're sitting in the ice, you're sitting in the ice. You aren't going to get colder. And once you've been running in the pouring rain for a few minutes, you're already soaking wet. Running another few minutes or another few miles isn't going to make you any wetter. You might think you can't run in the wind, or the rain, or the snow. You might think you can't possibly handle sitting in a tub of ice water for 10 minutes. But then you do it - you run in the wind and the rain and the snow, and you sit in the bathtub surrounded by chunks of ice, and you're better for it.

Something you used to think was impossible isn't impossible anymore.

Which is why, with just over six and a half weeks until race day, my biggest focus is on getting comfortable with being uncomfortable. If I want to run 13.1 miles in less than 2 hours, that means I need to hold a steady pace of about 9 minutes per mile. And guess what? Maintaining that pace over that distance is going to be wildly uncomfortable for me. Which means that some of the training runs I have to do between now and then are going to be wildly uncomfortable as well, but discomfort is as much a mental hurdle as anything else. Our minds shy away from trying new things and pushing too hard, because they want to keep us safe. Our minds do everything they can to keep us from going over the edge of our comfort zone, because who knows what we'll find on the other side?

When you cross the border between comfort and discomfort, you have no choice but to step up your game. When you want to change, when you want to be better, you have to push yourself into discomfort.

Nothing changes if nothing changes, right?

20 months ago I couldn't run for more than a few minutes without needing to stop for a break, and now I'm training to run 13.1 miles in under two hours. Things I didn't dream I'd ever be able to do are now well within my comfort zone, because that's the nature of change, of endurance.

As Kenny Moore says, "The secret of endurance isn't so much a lesson as an imperative. You obey the dictates of the marathon. You cut your losses and keep on. You go numb, bleed out and keep on. You fall, get up and keep on. You go

from rock to rock, from tree to tree, and keep on. You take strength in knowing others care about your effort and keep on.”

Said another way:

Growth comes from taking chances - from sticking with it when all you want to do is quit. From saying, “I have no idea how to do this, but I’m going to do it anyway.”

February 2014

Do You Know How To Suffer?

Earlier this week, on the phone with Ryan, my running coach, the topic turned to my upcoming race: the Surf City Half Marathon in Huntington Beach on February 2. With the race less than two weeks away, it was time to talk strategy. What was my game plan? What finishing time was I gunning for? How did this race play into my continued training for the Phoenix Marathon on March 1?

“Listen,” I told him. “I have what might be an insane idea, and I want to know what you think.”

By this point in our relationship, Ryan is used to me and my shenanigans.

“I’m listening,” he said.

“So, okay, it looks like the pace groups are broken up into 10-minute finishing time increments. There’s a 2-hour group, which is too slow, but then the next group is for a 1:50 finish, which is too fast. I mean, my PR from last September is 1:56:05, and the thought of knocking a full six minutes off my time sounds like the absolute craziness, but...”

I trailed off. He kept listening.

“I mean, what’s the worst that could happen? I hold that pace until I can’t hold it anymore? I get wild stomach cramps from over-exertion and either have to walk the rest of the way or drop out for some reason? Who cares. Phoenix is my goal race for the season, not this half - and plus, I’m kind of curious to see what would happen if I really pushed myself and just went for it.”

“Do it,” he said immediately.

“Yeah??”

“What do you have to lose? I think a tough, good race would do you some good. At the very least, it will help teach you how to suffer.”

And, with that, I had my race plan: Start out running alongside a group of people who are too fast for me and try to hang on for as long as possible.

But, on a bigger scale, what Ryan had actually just given me was a *life* plan: Don't shy away from a worthwhile struggle. The point of living isn't to be as comfortable as possible all the damn time.

Too often, we keep our goals under-wraps while we're working on them because we're too afraid of what people will think if we fail. But why is failure a bad thing? I'm inspired as hell when I see someone being very public about what they want, what they're striving (and suffering) for, and then being equally public about the results. When they're just like, "Look, here's what happened. Here's how I feel about it, here's what I learned, and here's where I'm going next." That's real, and that's exactly the type of behavior I was envisioning when I created my seven-word pledge for 2014: Be vulnerable, and give all the fucks.

So, yeah, I could have put off telling you this story until after the race. That way, if I totally imploded from taking a risk and running too fast, I could have just kept it all to myself. And if instead, by some wild miracle I managed to cross the finish line in 1:50:xx, I could have included this story as part of a neatly tied-up race recap. "See how well things always work out? Lalalala."

But, since I'm not in the business of airbrushing my life, let me just lay it all out there right now:

At 7:45am on Sunday February 2, I'm going to line up with the 1:50 pace group and give it everything I have.

It's time to learn how to suffer, and how to come out stronger on the other side of the storm.

"And once the storm is over you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure, in fact, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what this storm's all about."

- Haruki Murakami

June 2014

Are You Committed?

Let's talk about commitment.

Because honestly, you don't need motivation to do what you want to do. You don't need superhuman willpower. You don't need to be fired up every second. You just need to be committed.

Here's what I've learned in training this year:

When you focus solely on your progress or on your desired end result, it's surprisingly easy to talk yourself out of doing what you know you want to do. It goes like this: "I've made so much progress on eating well, so it doesn't matter what I eat this weekend."

Or like this: "I said I was going to complete a 5k race and I did that, so now I'm just going to stop running."

We feel so good about our progress and our success that we use it as a reason to stop doing the very thing that made us feel good in the first place. Which, if you think about it, makes absolutely no sense.

If eating well or exercising or meditating or writing or practicing the guitar makes you feel fulfilled and alive, why do you stop doing it the moment you've hit a certain benchmark? I'll tell you why: because you aren't committed.

Seriously, the mindset shift I made when I went from "working toward a goal" to "being committed to a certain behavior" has changed everything for me. Because sure, I have big scary running goals right now, but the only thing that matters is that on a day-to-day basis I am committed to the behaviors it will take to make those goals a reality.

On any given day, it doesn't matter how well I did the day before - I am committed to my training, so I train the best I can that day, regardless. When my training calls for rest, I rest. When it calls for me to run easy, I run easy. When it's time to push hard, I push hard. And while progress is great, commitment is the only thing that matters to me right now. I am committed to my training - I've said that to myself over and over and over, and it's so deeply ingrained by now

that I no longer have to struggle to decide whether or not I “feel like” running on any given morning. I’m committed, so I run.

That’s one of the most powerful things about commitment, actually: it frees you up from having to make tons of daily decisions. I no longer have to agonize over whether I’m in the mood to run or not - I just run. So often, we think that commitment is limiting. We want all the options! All the choices! All the possibilities! All the spontaneity! When actually, having that kind of freedom doesn’t make us happy. It makes us stressed and exhausted, constantly forced to decide what’s best or how we feel or blah blah whatever.

So, seriously, if you’re struggling to do what you want to do, stop making it optional. Stop leaving things up to the whim of your fickle little feelings.

Trusting yourself and your intuition and your deeper feelings is crucial for the big decisions, but not during the day-to-day grind.

Of *course* you won’t feel like waking up early to get your run in. Who does?! Last Saturday when my alarm went off at 4:45am so I could go run 20 miles before it got too hot, I was a bitter hag. I did NOT want to get out of bed. That’s one of the myths we tell ourselves about people who make shit happen: that they’re different, that it’s just hearts and stars and sparkly unicorns and everything is easy for them because those people *want* to do their thing all the time.

Spoiler alert: NO ONE WANTS TO DO THEIR THING ALL THE TIME!

4:45am is EARLY! I do not ever ever want to get up at 4:45am. And if I left things up to my “feelings” or if I focused only on progress it would be easy to tell myself that I wasn’t going to run that day because I wasn’t in the mood, or that I didn’t have to run because I had been doing so well recently and had already made so much progress. And then I would stay in bed. But, because I am committed, I do not stay in bed, and if I am able to successfully accomplish any of my current running goals this will be the entire reason why.

The good news here is that you can stop searching for motivation. You can stop waiting for things to be easier or for you to be in the mood or for whatever it is you’re waiting for. Just decide to commit, and value your commitment above all else. Value your commitment above your progress. Value your commitment above your performance. Value your commitment above your end result.

Performance ebbs and flows and results happen and pass, but commitment is your port in the storm and your path to joy and fulfillment. That's true in your health and fitness, in your creative projects, in your personal life, in your relationships - commitment matters more than anything else, and the funny thing is that commitment will almost always lead to the best possible results.

So sure, whenever people ask me how I stay motivated during the pursuit of my long-term goals, I can give them some superficial answer about how I set smaller benchmark goals to meet along the way, but the real answer will always be commitment.

And honestly, it's my commitment that keeps me sane each time I get overwhelmed by the enormity of my goals, because I just remind myself that I don't have to think about the whole goal right now - I just have to be committed to what I'm doing today. Sometimes, thinking about all that I want to be and do and accomplish makes me want to freak out and crawl into a hole and hide forever. But daily commitment is my savior, because it gives me something tangible that I can wrap my mind around and pour myself into.

So today I will remember my commitment and I will run an easy 6 miles. Tomorrow I will run an easy 3 miles. I will rest on Friday, and then over the weekend I will get up at crazy o'clock and do everything I can to run 26.2 miles on Saturday and 26.2 miles on Sunday. That's what I'm committed to, and I'm trusting that everything else that follows afterward will get done the way anything gets done: one step at a time.

July 2014

When It Hurts, Remember This: You Can Do Hard Things

Last weekend, I ran back-to-back marathons. 26.2 miles on Saturday, and then 26.2 miles all over again on Sunday. These weren't races, which means there were no spectators, no aid stations, no finish line, no closed course, and no shiny medal at the end. It was 80+ degrees with 80% humidity, and my coach's instructions were simple: "Just survive it."

And I did.



There's a lot I could tell you about running those 52.4 miles, but the overwhelming thing is this: It was hard. No flowery language, no excuses, it was

just *hard* - and there were points during both days when I didn't know if I could make it.

This is the story of how I made it.

I've been studying the mental side of athletics lately, reading books on how to train your mind for peak performance and then putting those techniques into practice. And this past weekend was nothing if not a ripe testing ground for practice. The mental toughness tactic that helped me the most was a two-step process for overcoming the downward mental spiral that takes over when things get really challenging.

Step 1: Interrupt negative thoughts as soon as you notice them

Many times throughout these back-to-back marathon runs I would start thinking things like, "I'm so tired. I'm sore. This is insane. I have a stomach cramp. I can't do this. It's too hot. I have too many more miles to run." And just as soon as the thoughts would start, I'd tell myself, quickly and strongly, "STOP" or "ENOUGH" or "NO MORE."

Step 2: Flood your mind with positive thoughts

After giving myself the command to stop thinking negative things, I'd immediately begin filling my mind with short, powerful phrases instead. Things like: "You're strong. You're fit. You're in control." And then I'd repeat those phrases over and over again for a few minutes or a few miles - however long it took to lift the dark cloud of self-doubt and re-focus on the present moment in which I was 100% in control of myself.

Guess what? It worked. Every single time, it worked. And I know it sounds too simple and I know you might be rolling your eyes but, for real, it worked. But just because it's a simple tactic simple doesn't mean it's easy, and I know I still need a lot more practice in order to really gain control over my mind.

That concept, though, the fact that we can control our minds, it's one that took me a long time to admit. In fact, you know what, I think this is the first time I'm actually admitting it to myself - admitting that I do have complete control over my thoughts. And god, that's a scary thing. Because (real talk) it's so much easier to play the victim to my feelings and to outside circumstances and to let

those things control me, instead of going the hard route of learning to control myself. But here's the truth:

Lasting change and peak performance are only possible once you accept 100% responsibility for yourself and your life.

Once YOU accept 100% responsibility for yourself and your life.

What does that mean? It means that whatever is wrong isn't your mother's fault, it isn't your boss' fault, it's not because you're lacking willpower or because you're not good enough or because you don't have enough money or haven't lost enough weight or whatever. If you aren't seeing the results you want to see in any area of your life, it's because you haven't taken full (and I mean *full* responsibility) for yourself. Period.

When I gave up at mile 10 of my last half marathon, it's because I hadn't taken full responsibility for my thoughts and feelings. I was letting them rule me.

When I struggled at first to switch to a plant-based diet, it's because I hadn't taken full responsibility for how I was eating. I had an excuse for everything ("I'm too busy to prep food!" "It's too expensive!" "It's my friend's birthday!" "My cravings are too strong!") and I chose to let these excuses control me instead of doing the hard thing and taking full responsibility for the fact that I'm the CEO of my own body and can eat or not eat whatever the fuck I want.

There are other examples I could share - literally hundreds of them - but they all boil down to the same conclusion: Step up, take responsibility for yourself and your life, train your mind to perform the way you want to perform, and you will be able to do hard things. That's how it happens, that's how you get out of your own way.

And honestly, if being part of the constantly inspiring running community has taught me anything over the past three years, it's this: **we can do hard things.**

There's something very attractive about the path of least resistance. Being comfortable is exactly that, it's comfortable. Sometimes, I feel frustrated at the way our entire culture seems to be set up around comfort and instant gratification, because it just makes it that much more difficult to walk a steeper and more grinding path. And it is more difficult, but you can do it. You can handle it. You can do hard things.

I battled with that truth a lot this past weekend, and I had to keep reminding myself over and over that effort is not the same as pain. I can work hard! I can keep going even when I'm uncomfortable! Even when I don't want to!

And let me tell you something else that I learned from two days of pushing onward through the weight of my own excuses: fun and joy aren't the same thing, and something doesn't have to be fun in the moment in order to make me feel joyful in the end.

Running brings insane joy into my life, even though hardly any of my runs are "fun." It's the same with writing - writing is hardly ever fun while I'm doing it, but I feel fulfilled and joyful once the words are on the page.

And listen, I love to have fun, but this weekend really opened my eyes to the fact that while fun is fleeting, joy is not. I accomplished something this past weekend that I never, ever would have believed to be possible. I kept going when I didn't think I could keep going. It wasn't even a little bit fun, but every mile that I didn't quit added more fuel to my fire of joy, and now that same fire is burning stronger and brighter than ever before.

Because the truth is that joy outlasts fun.

On Sunday, when I hit 26.2 miles and clicked the stop button on my watch, there was no announcer calling out my name. No kind volunteers to hand me a medal and a banana. It was just me, alone on the street in front of my apartment, absolutely dripping with sweat, more exhausted than I have ever been, and the joy I felt was unimaginable.

These back-to-back marathons were hard, but they showed me a little more of who I really am. That's what running (or any other challenging pursuit) does, it shows you who you are. And is there anything more worthwhile than that?

So go do it - whatever your "it" is. Push your limits. Uncover the truth about yourself. And when it hurts, remember this: you can do hard things.

October 2014

Stop Playing Small. If You Want It, Own It.

A few weeks ago, I found myself in a conversation with a couple of new runners who were preparing for their first ever 5k race.

The subject of goals came up, and one of the girls was quick to tell me that her goal was “just to finish” the race. Her friend looked at her and blurted out, “No it’s not, you want to finish in 30 minutes!” The first girl hesitated, “Well, yeah, but...”

My advice to her after that? If your goal is to finish in 30 minutes, own it. Don’t hedge. Stand up and speak up and admit what you want, because it gives you the strength to really go after it - and it gives other people the courage to do the same.

So often, our fear of failure makes us shy away from admitting what we want most. Guess what? Fuck that. I’m over it. **WANT WHAT YOU WANT**

If you wind up finishing in exactly 30 minutes, great. If you finish in 29 minutes, great. If you finish in 35 minutes, that’s fine too. Regardless of the outcome, you can be proud of the fact that you were gutsy enough to admit what you truly wanted and then to go for it - guns blazing. It might sound silly, but there’s a lot of power in owning your desires and pursuing them with abandon. And yet, we hardly ever do this. Why?

Well, let’s step back and look at it honestly for a second. Let’s say (in keeping with the 5k race example) that you know you want to complete the race in 30 minutes. Why don’t you admit that to yourself or anyone else? My guess, if you’re like me (because, uh, I’ve done this exact same thing **ELEVENTY MILLION TIMES**) is that you don’t want to wind up falling short of your goal. You think that not finishing in 30 minutes would be a failure, and that experiencing that failure - especially after telling people your goal - would feel disappointing and embarrassing. It would make you feel like you weren’t good enough, because if you were good enough, you would have met your goal, right?

Wrong.

When did we all collectively agree that being “good enough” or “worthy” or “successful” meant never ever falling short of a goal? Especially since those

types of stories - the ones about people who seem to effortlessly meet every goal they set for themselves - aren't the ones that actually inspire us in the first place. Think about it: when's the last time you felt truly moved by a story of something just landing in someone's lap? Never ever. That's not what lights us up.

We - all of us - are inspired by truth and vulnerability, not by someone who appears Pinterest-perfect all the time and effortlessly gets what he or she wants without any setbacks or struggles. And yet, that's exactly how we're all trying to appear. WHYYYYYYYYYY! This makes absolutely zero sense. I do it sometimes myself of course - we all do - but that doesn't mean we can't change.

Personally, I feel an enormous sense of relief when someone is honest about what they truly want, how scared they are about it, what they're struggling with, and how hard they're working. Once they've pulled back the curtain on these things, I'm equally impressed whether they wind up reaching their stated goal or not.

Think about it, don't you feel less alone when someone shares how much they want something? And let's say they can't make it happen, don't you feel inspired and relieved when they're also honest about how frustrated and hurt and insecure that makes them feel? Because that's real life, and it's time we all started living it out loud.

You don't want to fail? Neither do I. But it's time to redefine "failure." Why does failure have to mean not reaching your goal? Why can't failure instead be marked by not giving your best?

Somewhere along the way, it's like we all collectively agreed that failure is what happens when you don't reach a specified outcome. We've also agreed that feelings of shame, embarrassment, disappointment, insecurity, and self-doubt must inevitably follow if you work toward an outcome and don't reach it. Because not reaching a specified outcome means you "failed." But it doesn't have to be that way. We're the ones who decided that that's what failure means, so it's up to us to change the definition.

Here's my new definition:

Failure is when you don't give yourself permission to want what you really want.

Failure is shying away from honesty in favor of trying to appear "perfect."

Failure is playing small instead of fully showing up and saying, “This is who I want to be and what I want to do,” and then going for it.

That’s my new definition of failure: not showing up. And if you do show up? If you go after what you want and you put dedicated effort into who you want to be and if you’re honest about it and you work hard, and if it still doesn’t turn out the way you hoped? Then you didn’t fail. You might feel disappointed, sure, because that’s part of the cycle, but you didn’t fail. You might kick and scream and cry and feel like hibernating for awhile, and that’s fine too. But it still isn’t failure.

And the first step in all of this is admitting what you really want.

That’s what I’m working on right now. I’m asking myself, “Who do I want to be? What do I want to experience? How can I fully show up for myself? How am I going to speak up and share what I’m going through in hopes of letting others know it’s okay for them to speak up too?”

Because at the end of the day, we’re all in this together, and I believe that it’s our duty and our privilege to support each other in pursuit of our wildest dreams.

November 2014

Are You Afraid of Hard Work?

If I'm being honest (like, really really honest), I have to admit that the #1 reason I moved to Bend, Oregon is to be the best runner I can possibly be.

And admitting that makes me feel crazy. Like truly for real crazy.

It would be different if I were a better runner. If I had the talent to truly be competitive, people would understand. Moving to an unfamiliar city would make sense if I were pursuing a professional running career and the dream of making it to the Olympics, right?

But that's not me at all. I'm a middle-of-the-pack runner, and I don't have any warped delusions about suddenly waking up and being a contender for anything. There's no false hope or rose-colored glasses.

And yet, here I am. In Bend. With no friends and no connection to this entirely new city. Nothing other than a burning desire to push myself to reach my peak performance as a runner and a mysterious but unshakeable belief that this is the place to be to make that happen.

Why *this* place? I'm seriously not even sure.

Maybe it's because there are so many pro athletes here - runners who fuel me with inspiration like Lauren Fleshman and the Oiselle Little Wing girls. Maybe it's the gorgeous trails or the outdoorsy mindset (everyone seems to have a sport or outdoor activity of choice in Bend) - or maybe it's just that I've lived in huge, distracting cities my entire life and feel that the simplicity of a place like Bend will help me focus on the things that truly matter to me - with running being near the top of that list.

Honestly, though, I can't pinpoint a specific reason. Which makes this whole "move to Bend to be a better runner" thing even crazier somehow, especially when I also come clean and tell you that I've done absolutely nothing but make excuses to let myself off the hook for my workouts since the day I got here.

I mean sure, I'm running, but I'm kind of phoning it in.

Every day I look at my training plan and I'm all, "But I have boxes to unpack!" and "It's too cold!" and "I don't know how to run in the snow!" and "What if there's no parking at the fitness center?" and "I'm too busy with work to do my strength training!" and "What if I get lost on the trails?" And just, oh my god, one bullshit excuse after another.

But the truth is that I'm afraid.

I know what it will take to reach my peak performance as a runner - or at least, I know what the next steps are - but I am afraid of taking them because it's much sexier to fantasize about being a faster runner than it is to wake up in the dark, bundle up, run 90 minutes in the snow, and then come home to do planks and clamshells on the floor of my house.

I call it The Sexiness Factor, and it's the biggest reason why there's a gap between what we say we want and what we actually do. It feels really sexy to think about making 6-figures in your business, but breaking the fetish of the four-hour work week to actually make that happen isn't sexy at all.

It's the same with being healthy; the thought of eating well and feeling incredible sounds very sexy to us, but the unsexy truth of changing our eating habits on a day-to-day basis when we're stressed and busy comes as a rude awakening.

In short: We want the things we want, but only if they're relatively easy to come by. And honestly, I feel like the main reason for this is that we're told through airbrushed marketing and a growing cultural obsession with life hacks that things *should* be easy, that we deserve everything for nothing, and that if we just keep searching for that magic shortcut we'll be able to bypass hard work and skip straight to the sexy end result.

But (and this is my real point here): we need to stop wanting things to be so easy in the first place. We need to stop thinking of the shortcut as the ideal, because it's totally fucking with us. Has anything truly worthwhile ever just landed in your lap? I doubt it.

So, for real, what if we stopped looking for the magic shortcut? What if we stopped binge-reading articles about the "5 quick secrets to ____"? What if we stopped buying one thing after another to "fix" our problems, and what if instead we totally changed our mindset and started looking at hard work not as something to be avoided and outsourced, but as the ultimate path to fulfillment?

Because in truth, that's exactly what it is.

Think about it. Think about your own life, your own experiences, and your own proudest moments. How many of them came as a result of some "trick" you learned on the internet or in some glossy magazine? None of them, I bet. Which is actually kind of awesome, because it means you can stop looking for magic solutions and shortcuts and finally just push that all aside, take a deep breath, and get to work.

It's going to be hard, I know. Believe me, I'm sitting here and I'm in this exact position myself because the thing I want most - to be the best runner I can be - is waiting at the end of a very long road of very hard work. But I'm just so tired of putting off that work, which in my experience is the exact moment when change becomes possible. It's the moment when the weight of not doing the thing you know you want to do becomes more painful than the work itself. And right now, that's exactly where I'm at.

Are you there, too? Is there a giant gap between what you say you want and what you actually do? Does the gap keep getting bigger because the work you need to do to close it seems hard and terrifying? Good. *Good*. Settle into that. I mean it: settle in. Accept the fact that you're about to dig into some hard fucking work, and remember that even if it feels uncomfortable and scary, you can do hard things.

You can wake up early, in the dark, and go for a run even when staying in bed feels easier. You can say no to things that don't serve you and your #1 priority, even if other people don't understand. You can get frustrated and you can come up against obstacles and you can experience setbacks and, through it all, you can keep going.

Even if, right now, what you're doing and what you're chasing doesn't make any sense.

Because I know that the thing you want most - whatever it is that's pulling at your heart and knocking on your soul - I know that it might not make sense. Moving to an entirely unfamiliar (and currently freezing cold) city because I have a feeling it'll make me a better runner (which is something that will never bring in any money) doesn't make sense at all. But who cares? It's what I want. So what if no one else understands? So what if it doesn't make money? What's

the purpose of life if not to work hard and throw everything you've got at something that truly matters to you?

So, look, it's time to stop being lazy and terrified and entitled. It's time to stop looking for shortcuts and waiting for the day that doing what you want will magically be easier. It's time to stop the glorification of "easy."

Instead, try this:

When it comes to hard work, change your entire mindset. Stop trying to work less. Work more, work harder at things you feel a fire about.

What makes you want to act? Do that. What are you waiting for? Stop it. Who do you want to serve? What do you want to change? Who do you want to be? Step up, show up, and go be it. Because every day, every moment is a chance to stop making excuses, dig in, get dirty, and just do the fucking work.

December 2014

The \$10,000 Method

At this time of year, there's a lot of talk about how to stay on track with our goals amidst all the holiday craziness.

We ask ourselves questions like: "How can I stick to my budget? How will I be able to exercise while traveling? What can I do to eat well and still enjoy my holiday celebrations?"

All of these questions are essentially asking the same core thing, which is this:

How do I behave the way I want to behave despite challenging conditions?

And while there are plenty of people out there who will try to sell you their "hacks" and "tricks" for sticking to your plan when an obstacle arises, those so-called solutions are merely treating the symptoms of the issue instead of the issue itself.

To treat the underlying issue, it comes down to a single thing: your beliefs.

What do you truly believe about your own ability to respond to a challenging situation? How do you believe you will respond when conditions are frustrating? What do you believe will happen when you come up against a complication, or when your plans fall apart?

If you believe that you'll give up when things get uncomfortable, then you will. But if you believe that you will be able to find a way to behave how you want to behave regardless, then you'll be virtually unstoppable.

Let's use exercise as an example. Let's say you're traveling over the holidays, and you're wondering how you'll ever be able to stay on track while you're on the road. If you believe that traveling will get you off track, then it will. If, instead, you believe that traveling will make things a bit more challenging, but that you'll be able to find a way around those challenges, then your mind goes to work on finding solutions.

With this mindset, all of the sudden you find yourself making a list of the creative ways you can honor your fitness commitment while you're traveling. You might plan to get up extra early on a travel day to get the workout in

beforehand, or you might choose a hotel with a gym, or you might find a fitness center near where you're staying that allows single-day access. Those are just three small examples, but the solutions themselves aren't the point here. The point is that if you believe you are someone who will find a way to make it happen no matter what, then that will be your reality.

Personally, whenever I'm struggling with a similar situation, the question I ask myself to get some perspective is this:

If someone were going to pay you \$10,000 in cash each time you honored your commitment and did what you said you were going to do, how would that change your approach?

Meaning: if you're struggling with how to find a way to exercise while traveling and you know that someone will pay you \$10,000 for each scheduled workout that you complete, what would you do? When would you exercise? What creative solutions would you come up with? What would you rearrange to make it happen?

With \$10,000 on the line, I bet you'd get real creative, real fast. The "impossible" thing wouldn't seem quite so impossible after all.

And, look, I know it's tempting to throw up your hands and say, "Of course I'd make sacrifices and move things around for that kind of money, but that's not real!"

Obviously it's not real. I know someone isn't going to hand you \$10,000 for spending 30 minutes on the elliptical machine next week. That's not what this is about. The point of asking yourself this question is to get you out of the place where you think you have zero options, because with money like that on the table, believe me, you'd come up with a bunch of options.

And here's where the tough love comes in:

The problem isn't that you don't have any options. You have options. It's not that you can't exercise while you're traveling, it's that you won't. That's the truth.

And if we're ever going to close the gap between what we say we want and what we actually do, we have to start with telling the truth.

December 2014

585 Days

You know all those things you want? The results you'd love to see happen overnight? The things you get frustrated about because they aren't giving you as much instant gratification as you were expecting? Let's talk about those things.

But first, some perspective:

A few weeks ago, I settled onto the couch with my legs propped up on a stack of pillows, resting after my hour and forty five minute long run, which is the longest run I've done since before my injury in early August.

The run went incredibly well, and as I relaxed into the couch I started fantasizing about what this might mean for my goal to PR in the 5k in San Diego on March 8.

With big goals on the brain, I opened my Kindle and did a quick search for books by Olympic athletes, eventually choosing *No Limits: The Will To Succeed*, by Michael Phelps.

If your experience of watching the 2008 Olympics was anything like mine, you were obsessed with Michael Phelps. His hunt for eight gold medals in a single Games was, and still is, my favorite moment in sports. I say "moment" because that's what it was for me - something awe-inspiring that happened over a series of days in Beijing - but afterward I just went back to my regular life.

For me, it was a moment of inspiration. But for Michael Phelps it was a lifetime's worth of work.

We know this. We know that even making an Olympic team is something that athletes pour year after year of training into, but have you ever really stopped to think about that? To think about what it means in real time, in regular day-to-day life, to adopt such a long-term view of your goals?

Phelps started swimming at age seven. After eight years, he made the 2000 Olympic team. Can you imagine what that must have felt like? The culmination of eight years worth of work? And then he went to the Games, competed, and didn't win a single medal. 41 of the 48 swimmers on Team USA came home from

Sydney with a medal that year, and Phelps was one of only seven people who didn't. Can you imagine what *that* must have felt like?

After Sydney, he trained for four more years to make the 2004 team.

Stop for a second and think about that. Four more years of training. *Years*. That's 1,460 days of training that came after the eight years of training he'd already done.

(And yet here we are getting upset and giving up when we don't see the results we want in a matter of weeks.)

So he competes at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens and wins his first medal. His first eight medals, actually, and six of them are gold.

A gold medal at the Olympics. SIX gold medals at the Olympics. Knowing you are literally the best in the entire world at your sport. That's it, right? That's everything.

No. Because after Athens, he trained for four more years. *Four more years* - and then he came to Beijing in 2008, 16 years after he first started swimming, and did the impossible: eight gold medals in eight events in eight days.

And not only that, he then trained for ANOTHER four years, competed in London in 2012, and took home six more medals - making him the most decorated Olympian of all time.

For me, the hugeness of what he's done in sport makes it easy to focus on the shiny results - on the medals and world records - and while that's all fine and good and inspirational, the thing that sets my heart on fire is the day-to-day commitment of what he did.

I look at myself and at my goals, and at the way I get frustrated when things don't fall into place immediately, exactly as I want them to, and it's made me start to wonder what it would be like to take a different approach.

What would it look like to take the long-view with my goals, instead of falling into the cycle of wanting overnight success and then quitting when that doesn't happen?

Right now, I'm sitting here and I'm looking at my calendar. It's December 29, 2014. That means there are 585 days left until the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio. The athletes who are gunning for a spot on that Olympic team have already been training for years, and they still have another 585 days to go.

But forget about the years of work they've already done. Forget about that. Think, for a second, of the upcoming 585 days. Have you ever been truly committed to anything for 585 straight days? I haven't.

But it would make all the difference.

We say we want to change. We say we want it so badly that we're willing to do anything. But we're lying to ourselves when we say that, because even though we're willing to drop absurd amounts of money in search of the "quick fix," we aren't willing to embrace the one thing that will actually bring results: fucking patience.

It's like the frustrated person who says she wants to go back to school, but feels discouraged by the fact that she won't graduate until she's 42 years old. Guess what? You're going to wind up turning 42 no matter what. Not going back to school doesn't mean you stop time. The time is going to pass anyway.

The time is going to pass anyway.

So, think about it. How completely could you change your own life if you committed to something - your fitness, your health, your relationships, your writing, your career, your finances - for 585 days?

Even if you only did one teeny tiny thing per day, the cumulative impact of 585 days would change your life. Writing just 100 words a day would leave you with almost 60,000 words.

As for me, I'm applying this to my running. Sure, I have goals for the spring and an idea of what I'd like to do after that, but for once I'm focusing on the process and not the end result. For the first time in my life, I'm finally starting to understand that the end results I dream about will only come as a byproduct of the day-to-day investment in the process, and that in truth I have absolutely no idea what I'd be capable of if I just kept my head down and did the work day after day after day.

As pro runner Lauren Fleshman says: “Be grateful. Keep it boring. Stay unremarkable. It’s a long road.”

January 2015

Disappointed and Discouraged

It all started a week and a half ago.

I had just crossed the finish line of the Dine n Dash 5k, and I was crushed. It was my slowest 5k time in years - literally, years - and yet I've been training hard all season.

Once I was across that finish line, my mind was short-circuiting with desperate questions.

What just happened? What went wrong? Where did this fall apart? Am I not training hard enough? Digging deep enough? What was the point of month after month of focused training if I couldn't get it together come race day? Does any of this even matter? Wouldn't it feel better to give up? If I didn't care so much and try so hard, I wouldn't have to feel like this anymore.

I ran a cool-down lap, cried, took a shower, cried, went to brunch, cried, and then drove the two hours back home.

For the next few days, I felt a little lost. That race had just been a time trial - a fitness assessment to see how I was progressing en route to my goal race in March - but the poor performance and totally disappointing results were weighing me down. I was going through the motions of getting back into my training, but every step was a struggle. Each day started with a feeling of dread, and by mid-week it took all of my mental energy to pull myself out of bed for what was supposed to be an easy six mile run.

But that run wasn't easy. The trail was a little too hilly and a little too rocky, and with my already shaken confidence and desperate need for a tiny win, the conditions were all just too much. 10 minutes into the run, I stopped in the middle of the trail and burst into tears. I turned around and cry-jogged my way back to the car, tripping a few times (hint: cry-jogging on a rocky trail is not recommended) and launched myself into the passenger seat to wail and sniffle until my husband was done with his run.

By the time we got home, I was a fucking mess. Irrationally convinced that I'd never be able to hit my goal time in March if I missed that day's training, I forced myself onto the treadmill the minute we got home. I was crying so hard

that I could barely turn it on, and after 90 more seconds of cry-jogging, my husband stopped the treadmill, wrapped me in a tight hug, and said, “No more for today.”

He lead me to the couch, burrito-ed me in a warm blanket, stroked my hair and kissed me on the forehead while I cried and said nonsensical things and he just told me over and over again that everything would be okay.

But you know what he didn't say? He never once told me not to be sad. There was no “buck up!” and no “but here's the silver lining!” and that's because it's okay to be disappointed. It's okay to be sad.

I wanted to do well in that race, and when I didn't, it was disappointing. Which is why we shy away from our goals and dreams, because what if it doesn't work out?

I'll tell you what: if it doesn't work out, you're going to be disappointed. But you can handle being disappointed. Disappointment won't kill you.

I thought about this a lot that day on the couch, and even more over the next two days, when I simply rested and let my training journal remain blank. I did not go to the track for my interval session. Instead, I slept and wrote and thought about how the pain from disappointment is very real pain - you can feel it behind your eyes and under your skin and pushing down on your chest. It's real pain. And yet, it's not forever pain.

On Saturday morning I woke up and ran 11 miles. On Sunday, five more. I'm still a little wounded, a little beaten up, and I've been feeling the urge to lower my goals for the March 8 race. Lowering the bar means less possibility for pain, right? Except, I don't know that that's true. The truth is that I want to run a PR in the 5k. Pretending that that doesn't matter to me only brings on a deeper and quieter type of pain - the pain of not letting that which is true just be true.

My best time in this distance is 22:46. On March 8, I will either beat that time or I won't. And if I don't, I will be incredibly disappointed. I will be in pain. But also, I'll be okay.

Disappointment isn't the enemy, and trying to hide from it by making yourself small is exhausting. So, I'm not going to do that anymore.

February 2015

Close Your Escape Hatch

When you start to feel uncomfortable, what do you do?

When a situation gets challenging, when things begin to feel really difficult, how do you respond?

A few weeks ago, I was standing at the bottom of a steep hill near my house, mentally gearing up for a series of hill repeats. I'm no stranger to this workout, and I knew that by standing there I was only delaying the inevitable: hill repeats are fucking hard. And today I was scheduled for 8 x 60-seconds at harder-than-5k effort.

Translation: REALLY HARD.

The more I thought about it, the more I did not want to go anywhere near that hill.

"Okay Nicole, stop thinking about it. Just go."

I took a deep breath, clicked my watch, and started up the hill.

When I reached the top after that first repetition, my legs were already burning. I turned to slowly jog back down to the start, and immediately my monkey mind was looking for a way out.

"I can't do eight of these. Maybe I'll only do four. Four is fine. Can I even do four, though? That first one felt impossible." And on and on until I reached the bottom of the hill.

Another deep breath. "Just do one more and we'll see," I told myself.

Halfway through the second repeat, the thoughts came back, louder this time, and more insistent than ever. "This HURTS! Why are you doing this! Can't we just stop after this one?!?!"

At the top of the hill, I stood there for a minute catching my breath, and I realized what the lazy monkey in my mind was trying to do. It was trying to

protect me from pain by offering a way out - an escape hatch - and coaxing me to crawl through it.

But just because you have access to an escape hatch doesn't mean you need to use it.

In my mind, I imagined myself walking over to my personal escape hatch, pulling out a big padlock, slamming the door shut, and locking it up. I then shook my head firmly at that crazy monkey and jogged back down the hill.

Deep breath, and up that hill again for a third time.

Then a fourth time.

Yes, it was hard. But I reminded myself that the escape hatch - the one that lets you back down and slip out early - was locked. There was no way out, so I best finish what I came here to do.

Up the hill a fifth time. Legs on fire, chest on fire.

Sixth time.

Seventh time.

The recovery jog slower and slower each time.

Deep breath. Number eight. Last one. "The escape hatch is closed," I reminded myself. "Just get on with it."

Up the hill one last time, doubled over to catch my breath at the top, and... done.

In every situation, you have access to an escape hatch. If the project you're working on or the thing you're writing gets uncomfortable, you can click over to Twitter. If the conversation you need to have feels too scary, you can keep putting it off. If your workout feels hard, you can quit.

Or you can practice locking the escape hatch.

Maybe today you're only able to keep it locked for three minutes before you rip the lock off and dive through. Fine, great - three minutes is more than zero minutes.

And then maybe next week you're able to keep it locked for five minutes, and then fifteen, and then eventually you can lock it and keep it locked for as long as it takes to finish your challenging thing.

Because the truth is that you can do hard things, and if the only change you make this year is to gradually increase the amount of time you can go before climbing through your escape hatch, that will change your entire life.

February 2015

How Will You Be Brave Today?

"In the middle of a competition, there will come a time where you will have the choice to go or not go. I am saying you should go."
- Dr. Stan Beecham

I crossed the two-mile mark, and I could see the orange cones up ahead, the ones the signaled the fourth and final out-and-back turnaround section of the race.

Four out-and-backs, four chances to count how many women were ahead of me as they rounded the cones and ran back in my direction.

At the first turnaround, I was the 10th woman. "Good," I thought. "Stay calm, stay relaxed."

I ran on.

At the second turnaround, I was the 8th woman. "Good, moved up two spots. Keep applying pressure. Keep going."

By the time we reached the third turnaround, I was 7th. Coming around that turn, the course went straight uphill. "Hold your form," I thought. Followed by my favorite mid-race mantra: "You're strong. You're fit. You're in control." I repeated that over and over, letting the rhythm of the words merge with the rhythm of my breathing, trying to find that sweet spot where you're giving everything you've got without giving it all too soon.

The two-mile marker came and went. "One more mile to go," I told myself. "Hold it."

I counted the women running toward me after the final turnaround, and I was still in 7th. We ran on for another few minutes, and my eyes were pinned to the 6th place woman, just up ahead.

As I got closer to her, I felt myself start to go deeper into the pain cave. There was still over a half mile to go, and my head was suddenly flooded with self doubts.

“If you push to catch her, you’ll blow up. She’ll run you down in the final minutes. 7th place is fine, you’re running a hell of a strong race. It’s okay, you can hang back.”

She pulled ever so slightly ahead.

“NO,” I thought. It came out of nowhere - this fierce, competitive, almost crazy voice inside of me - and all of the sudden I remembered the words of sports psychologist Dr Stan Beecham.

"In the middle of a competition, there will come a time where you will have the choice to go or not go. I am saying you should go."

“Now,” that fierce voice said. “Go NOW.”

And I went. Eyes fixed on that woman’s back, arms pumping, pulling up behind her, then dead even beside her, and then one stride ahead, two strides ahead. Her breathing picked up and she came after me, pulling even again, and that voice inside of me was like a roar, thunderingly loud, and I pushed harder, into the final quarter mile, taking the risk, turning myself inside out, knowing that it was all or nothing here in the final minutes of this race.

100 meters to go.

I took a quick, sharp inhale and leaned into the pain. Knees driving, arms pumping, I came across the finish line in 6th place and immediately hunched over, hands on thighs, to catch my breath.

Racing without a watch, I had no idea what my finishing time was. All I knew was that I had raced my absolute best, and that when the moment came to go or not go, I went. And truly, I couldn't ask anything more from myself than that.

Still recovering, I thought back to the horribly disappointing race three weeks ago when I ran one of the slowest times I'd run for this distance in years. I thought about all of the days of hard training I'd put in over the last few months. Running in the snow, challenging myself with harder and harder workouts on

the track. I thought back to last summer, to the weeks spent in physical therapy after my injury, and to the very beginning of this training cycle when I wasn't cleared to run more than 10 minutes at a time.

From injury, to rehab, to 10 minutes of slow running, to months of working my way back, to hard training, to disappointing race performances and crippling self doubt, to this. Along the way, there were so many times that I questioned why I was working so hard. But today, I knew why.

I came into this training cycle with a goal of breaking my 5k PR of 22:46, and I had just done it. When I finally saw my official time, 21:43, my mouth popped open and I starred in complete disbelief. 63 seconds. I had taken a full 63 seconds off my time, all thanks to months of hard work, not quitting in the face of painful disappointment, and a split second decision to be brave when it counted most.

In the endorphin-filled hours after the race, that's what I thought about most: bravery. About being faced with the decision to try or not try. Those are the moments, I realized, that define us.

So often, we define ourselves (and each other) by our results. Who did what, who earned what - but the most meaningful thing is who we decide to be in that moment when we are given the choice to try or not try.

It's easy to think that moments like that only come along in high-pressure situations, but they don't. Those moments come along one after another, all day long. There are endless chances to be brave, to put yourself out there, to step up and show up and do the hard thing, even when you don't know how or you're not in the mood or you don't know what the hell will happen next.

Taking action in those moments, that's bravery.

Bravery is what happens when you try. When you show up as your true self. When you lean in and give your best with absolutely no idea where it will lead.

Some days, you'll give your best and it won't be enough to get the results you were hoping for. You'll start to wonder if it's all pointless - why are you putting in so much effort if you keep coming up empty? That's how I felt. It's how I felt when I first got injured and it's how I felt during many tough moments of this training cycle. Why was I working so hard? What was the point?

The point is that eventually, everything connects. All the hard work, all the sleepless nights of uncertainty, all the fear and pain and insecurity. Eventually, it all connects. You just have to keep going.

Bravery is what happens when you try, and every morning, every day, you will have that choice to try or not try. What comes next is entirely up to you.

March 2015

Twenty Twenty Nine

“Oh shit.”

That’s the first thing I said when I got close enough to the finish line to see the clock.

I was running all out by then - dead sprint. I could barely feel my legs, and I had just gotten a glimpse of my family and friends cheering on the side of the finishing chute.

A few seconds later, I crossed the line.

“Oh shit,” I said again.

It’s all I could say. All I could even think.

My mother, who saw me mouth those words, was worried that something was wrong.

My husband, who knows what my strongest running stride looks like better than anyone, was ecstatic. He watched me sprint by, looked at the clock, and thought the exact same thing I did: Oh shit.

This was my goal race for the season, the San Diego 5k, and I had just run the performance of my life. He knew it and I knew it. It was a time I never dreamed I could run. A time I would have told you was impossible even in the final moments leading up to the race.

And yet, there I was. Across the finish line in 20:29.

And do you want to know why I love running so much? Here’s why:

Each and every race result is so much more than the sum of the time it took to cover the course. The fact that I ran 3.1 miles in 20 minutes and 29 seconds isn’t meaningful on its own. On its own, it’s simply a distance and a time. Some people will run faster and others will run slower, so what matters isn’t the time itself, it’s what the time represents to the runner.

And to me, this time is everything, because hidden inside those 20 minutes and 29 seconds you'll find almost four years worth of sweat and pain and fear and growth.

I think back to my very first run, on a Sunday morning in May 2011, when I could barely make it through two full minutes of shuffle-jogging. I was terrified that morning. Desperate to quit drinking, running was the only thing I could think of that might give me a way out of that hole, but I was such a beginner that every step I took felt like a deathly leap into the unknown.

I started running because I needed something to believe in. I needed to believe in myself. I needed to know that I could endure, that I could push myself, that I could start something I had no idea how to do and that I could keep going no matter what.

I vividly remember waking up on day two. Everything hurt and everything was hard and for a girl who had only ever stuck with things she was immediately good at, running seemed like the perfect set-up for failure.

Instead, as the days, weeks, and months went by, running became a way to redefine failure. I had to let go of the belief that success in running meant running fast or looking a certain way. I was slow, and uncoordinated, and struggling to finish among the back of the pack. But I was trying. And what if failure only happens when we refuse to try?

So I kept trying.

I had bad runs and good runs. I surpassed some goals and didn't even come close to others. I self-sabotaged and put too much pressure on myself and I let my crippling desire for control suck the fun out of everything. And yet, in the midst of that swirling mess of self-doubt and blisters, once in a while I would have a day where I found that I could be kind to myself. I realized how much better it feels to treat myself as a friend instead of an enemy. Running taught me that.

Running taught me that I am strong.

Running gave me something to belong to - both the larger community of runners and the intimate No BS Run Club that I created to help people exactly like me who want to start from zero and redefine "impossible" for themselves.

Because that's what running really is: a blueprint for how to get the absolute best out of yourself and your life.

On the hard days (and there are lots of them), running forces you to struggle with some sticky questions. Why am I doing this? Why am I trying so hard? What's the point? What if I never improve? What will other people think? Is happiness dependent on specific outcomes? How can I let go? How can I be present? How can I continue to fall in love with the process instead of obsessing over the end result?

But aren't those the same questions we struggle with in everything? In our work, in our relationships, in our spirituality and personal growth - we're constantly toiling through the hot discomfort of what it all means. What it means to be human, to be vulnerable, and to be part of something larger than ourselves.

And at the heart of it, that's why I keep running. Because it lets me explore what it feels like to be alive.

Running gives you an arena to try. To get behind the start line like I did last Sunday, for my final race in a season that was filled with more disappointments than successes, more hard days than good days, more tough questions than clear answers, and just take a deep breath and go for it anyway.

Running has showed me that on days like that, when I really show up, anything is possible.

Because here's the thing:

We think we know what we are capable of. We fantasize about our big dreams and goals, but we tell ourselves that they can't happen. We constantly whip through our mental list of reasons why we can't do what we want to do and be who we want to be. We let our minds get flooded with bullshit excuses and false beliefs that we are not good enough to reach out and take even the first tiny step toward the life we want most.

We think we have that all figured out. We think we know where our personal ceilings are, and we are stubborn and cocky when we talk about how "positive" we are of what is and is not possible for us.

But if there's one thing I have learned from running, it's that we're wrong.

You have absolutely no idea what you are capable of. Those ceilings you've set for yourself and the limits you live by don't even come close to the heights you can truly reach.

In May of 2011 I couldn't run for two minutes, and last Sunday I fucking ran a 20:29 5k.

Change is real. It's possible. Not just for me, but for you and for anyone who is willing to take that first shy and terrifying step into the unknown.

Regardless of what happened yesterday, or last month, or last year, you need to remember that today is today and that you can try again.

You can always try again.

And if you keep trying, if you keep going, if you keep hauling yourself back off the ground each time you fall, you'll finally start to see that everything you think is impossible might not be impossible at all.

For me, that's what this twenty twenty nine is all about.

About The Author



Hi! I'm Nicole Antoinette:

- recovering self-help addict
- [writer](#) of personal stories
- host of the [Real Talk Radio podcast](#)
- and big believer in the fact that we're all just doing the best we can, and that no matter what we're in this together

To learn more about me and what I'm currently working on, visit NicoleAntoinette.com.

Thanks for reading!
I think you're wonderful.

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