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Row, Row, Row Your Boat: What Can You Learn from Ocean Rower Katie Spotz?

by Doreen Stern



Dr. Doreen Stern bills herself as “America’s Success Coach.” She is also a motivational speaker and author. Her mission is to help you realize your dreams. Based in Hartford, Conn., she is currently writing a book entitled, “When You Love Yourself.” She can be reached at DoreenStern.com, or at 860-293-1619.

You may not have heard of Katie Spotz, yet she has an important message for you: Start small and dream big. Join with others to make your dreams come true. And stay in the here and now.

Last February, 22-year-old Spotz became the youngest person to row across the Atlantic Ocean. From Africa to South America. Seventy days of sleeping wedged between stores of food in a cramped cabin while waves lapped around her. Thirty miles of rowing a day, under sunny or stormy skies. With blistered hands and monotonous loneliness.

Not your idea of a good time? Not mine either, yet I thought of Spotz last weekend, after I went out for my first run in 19 years. Spotz went out for such a run shortly after her high school graduation. Although Katie had been on three teams in high school (track, tennis and swimming), she had played the same position on each: benchwarmer. Says Spotz: “My swim team nickname says it all: ‘Turtle.’ It reflected my marginal athleticism.”

So Spotz joined a running class after graduation to get her going. Like most of us, and certainly me, when I showed up for my first running class last week in Bushnell Park, Katie wondered if she would be able to keep up. She surprised herself (as did I).



Not only did Katie keep up, she loved doing it. “I can do this,” Spotz thought to herself. She gradually increased her mileage. Until one fateful day when she ran five miles. Five whole miles. Easily.

“Wow,” Spotz marveled, “If I can run five miles, I bet I can run a marathon.” She kept training and achieved her goal. Next she said, “I never thought I could run 26 miles, but now that I’ve done it, maybe I can do something even BIGGER.”

In the four years since Katie showed up for her first running class, she’s dramatically expanded her vision of what’s possible.

Spotz has run a 62-mile ultra marathon in Melbourne, Australia, to raise money for Oxfam International. She’s cycled 3,300 miles across the United States, from Seattle to Washington, D.C., to raise money for the American Lung Association. And she became the first person to swim the entire 325-mile length of the Allegheny River. She completed a month-long swim to raise money for the Blue Planet Run Foundation, which saves lives by providing safe drinking water around the globe.

The remarkable thing about Katie Spotz is that she keeps going outside her comfort zone. And is willing to do poorly at first, knowing that she’ll eventually improve.

Consider this: Spotz began rowing a mere two years before her ocean voyage. While studying in Australia during her junior year of college, Katie found herself chatting with someone on a bus who had done it. “The idea found me,” she says. When Spotz returned to the United States, she joined the crew team at her college. “I was the worst person on the team,” she admits. But she stuck with it anyway.

“Rowing across the ocean doesn’t have anything to do with how fast you are,” Katie points out. “It’s about mental toughness.”

Dr. Morris Pickins, a sports psychologist who has

trained golfers like U.S. Open winner Lucas Glover and British Open winner Stuart Cink, describes mental toughness as, “the ability to control your mind in a way that allows you to be composed, confident and mentally prepared for the challenges you are about to face.”

In order to sharpen her mental preparedness, Spatz learned to meditate before her record-shattering voyage. Indeed, she attended a meditation retreat where she meditated for 12 hours, 10 days in a row. She credits meditation as being the essential skill that enabled her to row across the Atlantic. To be in the moment. To focus on the here and now.

“I really couldn’t think too far in advance because otherwise it was overwhelming,” Spatz says. “I had to keep thinking about these doable, achievable baby steps.” That’s what got her across the Atlantic. That and the peace she experiences when she goes beyond her fears into the here and now.

I invite you to consider what small step you can take today to go beyond your fears, so you can realize a deeply-held dream. A dream like being in better shape, feeling happier, or having more intimacy in your life. A small step like going out to walk at lunch, even though it’s blustery. Or going to bed a half-hour earlier tonight, so you can be more rested tomorrow. Or hugging your spouse—or kids—before you leave tomorrow morning, even though you’ve got a lot on your mind.

Because all of these activities can—and will—improve your day-to-day performance at work. And your overall life satisfaction.

And if your conviction wavers, just think about Katie Spatz’s 2,817 mile voyage in a 19-foot rowboat. ●



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