

In August of 2011, I took a leave of absence from Harvard and set out on a journey that would reshape my understanding of my physical and psychological limits. The quest: to row for the United States in the 2012 London Olympic Games.

In rowing, there are several different boat categories raced at the Olympics. My spot would need to be in the Lightweight Double Scull, a two-person boat rowed by athletes averaging 155 pounds. I spent that fall switching between potential double partners before settling in with Will, 9 years my elder, and a veteran from the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Together, Will and I began pushing ourselves to exhaustion, session after session, day after day.

Psychiatrists and high-school guidance counselors often talk about finding happiness and success through a balanced lifestyle. But, when you are chasing an Olympic dream, the task at hand is really to live as un-balanced a life as you can tolerate. There is no room for nights out at the bars, no room for stable relationships, no room for your dream career. There is only rowing.

Logging countless hours and hundreds of miles a week in the boat, I sank deeper and deeper into an obsession with the singular goal of making the Olympic team. When the Charles River froze, we moved to New Zealand to continue pounding

out sessions on the water. Diet, sleep, relaxation, everything soon became a parts of a function designed solely to maximize performance in the boat. Nothing else mattered.

For Will and me, qualifying for the Olympics would require two giant leaps: First, we would need to first win the US Olympic Trials; and then place in the top two at the International Olympic Qualifier.

In April, we won the US Trials, securing our spot for the International Qualifier and buoying hope that this could all actually work out. As eyes turned to us as our country's hope, I became increasingly anxious. My life's work, the only thing I cared about, the only thing that defined me would soon be put to the test. Failure would be simply catastrophic.

In May, we fought that final battle on a lake in Switzerland. After six and a half excruciating minutes, we crossed the line in third... one place, one second, a few feet short of realizing the Olympic Dream.

Needles to say, I was crushed.

I returned to Boston angry and dazed. Even after the Olympics came and went, I spent the better part of the next year asking, "If I am not a winner, who am I?" "If I don't have my goal, what do I have?" "How can I possibly step back into the sport that has caused me all this pain and sacrifice?" The frustration was unbearable.

When I returned to school that fall, I tried and tried to make sense of what had happened. I tried talking about it. I tried forgetting it. I tried distracting myself. But, nothing could stop those moments on that Swiss lake from replaying over and over in my head.

I considered giving a speech about that loss last year. In retrospect, I am very thankful I didn't.

For, it wasn't until the spring of 2013 that I felt myself moving past the Olympic letdown. Looking back, I never had a sudden feeling clarity, a "eureka" moment or an awakening. Rather, I slowly came to a somewhat strange realization. I was still alive. I was still sane. I was still a healthy, breathing human being.

I found that, actually, I had a heck of a lot more. I have friends and a family that value me. I like what I study in school. And after a little while, I discovered that I still enjoy the practice of moving a boat through water. Even without achieving my goal, I was still very much capable of happiness. Maybe that goal, that obsession, that singular identity doesn't define me. I am more than just a rower, more than the outcome of a race.

And so, as I mount my campaign for the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, I see things differently than two years ago. I know that I am more than what happens on the water, and that I will always have the final word.