

MELISSA STOCKWELL

SOUTHERN UTAH UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

May 3, 2019



On April 13, 2004, I woke up with both my legs and I went to sleep that night with just one. I can tell you that was NOT part of my to-do list for the day. That's supposed to be funny. Not really part of my life plan either. But I guess the beauty of life is that we can only plan so much for it, right?

I knew that my chosen profession as a military officer was a high risk one, especially in a time of war. But I joined the Army because I love our country and wanted to give back regardless if it was peacetime or wartime. And you never think that something like losing a limb will happen to you, until it does.

When I woke up in the Baghdad Emergency Room on that fateful day, my ears were still ringing from the deafening noise from the explosion of a roadside bomb, I could still smell the metallic smell that only a bomb could produce and I still had parts of my torn desert camouflage uniform scattered around me. I asked the surgeon next to me if something had happened to my leg. I knew something had, but I didn't know the extent of it. When he looked at me and said, it's gone, you don't have it anymore, I said to him, 'well can you check again?' Just kidding, I didn't really say that. But his words seemed to pass over my head as though it was a simple everyday comment. It wasn't until the surgeon handed me a phone to dial up my parents and I heard the agony only a mother can convey as he told them through the phone that I had lost my left leg. In a war. To a

roadside bomb. As a mother now, I can imagine it as a worst nightmare. And it was then that I realized the severity of the situation. But I was alive, right? And looking back 15 years, I realize how defining that moment was. We all have those defining moments, sometimes it just takes a little reflection to find them. But in that moment, hours after losing my leg, I made a conscious choice to accept what had happened. Yes, I lost a leg. But I still had my life.

Getting to Walter Reed Army Medical Center where all the severely wounded soldiers went at the time from Iraq and Afghanistan, is one of the best things that could have happened to me. Not only for the medical care I received but the perspective it gave me. Looking around and seeing soldiers missing 2, 3 or 4 limbs, their lost eyesight, Traumatic Brain Injuries. I was one of the lucky ones. I ONLY lost 1 leg. I had my life.

I was told I was the first female to lose a limb in active combat. Certainly not a title I ever strived to have. And as I worked in physical therapy alongside other soldiers who had worn the similar military uniforms, we were all trying to find our new normal and gender was the least of my worries.

The staff at Walter Reed was incredible. So were my friends and family who dropped everything they were doing to be there by my side, often times reassuring each other that things would be ok. Eventually I started to gain my strength back and then got fit with my first prosthetic leg in a series of castings and measurements. And then a few days later they handed me this piece of metal and plastic and said, here is your new leg, now walk. My new normal.

So walk I did. First in the parallel bars, then crutches, then a cane and then the day came where I realized I could be independent and my life would go on. I chose to take advantage of all the opportunities that came from being at Walter Reed, the organizations whose mission it was to come into our hospital rooms and get us out doing things we never thought we would do with two legs, much less with one. Before I knew it, I was out in Colorado learning to ski again, this time on one leg. I competed the NYC marathon on a bike that was powered by my arms. Doing these things and realizing that I could still be

an athlete. And after being an athlete my whole life, I longed to be one again. When someone came to Walter Reed and put on a presentation about the U.S. Paralympics I sat there and listened as they told me that I could compete on the world's biggest athletic stage, at the U.S. Paralympics, and represent a country I defended over in Iraq. It was a no brainer. Somehow, someway, I was going to be a Paralympian. But first, I was medically retired from the Army with a bronze star and a purple heart and set out with my sights on trying to qualify for the 2008 Beijing Paralympics.

I joined a swim team where I was the only one missing a leg. I spent hours in that pool dedicating myself to a dream. And guess what, it worked! Almost 4 years to the day after losing my leg there was a Paralympic trials and I was a total long shot to make the team. My times weren't anywhere close to where they needed to be. But I had the swim of my life. And when I touched that wall in my 400 free, I set the new American Record and I punched my ticket to Beijing! The next day, when they announced the 2008 Paralympic swim team, my name was on it. The whole journey from Baghdad and now going to Beijing. It all came full circle and seemed to make sense.

I had high hopes for my performance in Beijing but, as can happen in life, it didn't go as I planned. I didn't have best performances, I didn't make finals and at the end of the meet all I got was a damn participation medal. At the time, I wanted to chuck it out the window. I had come all that way and that's what I got! But I learned an important lesson and I want to you all to remember this. As you go about your life, we all want the recognition, we want the medals and want to be on top. But it's not always about the medals. It's about the journey. It's about overcoming obstacles that come your way and having the heart to persevere through them and come out better on the other side. I learned this first hand when Team USA nominated me to carry the American flag in closing ceremonies, an honor typically reserved for someone who has those gold medals. Not someone who just got a participation medal. But a moment I will never forget carrying an object I am so proud of into a sold out stadium representing the entire U.S. delegation. What a moment it was!

After Beijing in 2008, I turned to the sport of triathlon in 2009. So going from just swimming to swimming, biking and running. If any of you are triathletes out there, I am sure you have been called crazy a few times. Doing all three of those at the same time, in the same day. And often paying to do it! But I quickly fell in love with the sport and the challenge of all 3 disciplines. Early on I became part of the Paratriathlon national team and was able to travel around competing around the nation and around the world. I was able to come across the finish line first at my first 3 world championships and finally got on the podium and redeeming my Paralympic performance.

When it was announced that Paratriathlon was going to debut as a Paralympic sport in the Rio 2016 Paralympics, that was the new goal. The new dream. I decided to get married and have a quick kid first, a little boy named Dallas, but got back into athletics as quick as I could hoping to once again represent our country on the Worlds stage. I put in the work, took motivation from my son and qualified for my second Paralympic Games.

So in September of 2016, I found myself in Rio preparing for the biggest triathlon of my life. Of any days our race could have taken place, the date was Sep 11th 2016, 15 years after the Sep 11th attacks that changed the world. You can imagine the meaning of that day. Putting on my USA uniform and knowing that my race was about so much more than swim, bike and run. But every step I took out there were for those that no longer could, for those that gave the ultimate sacrifice. I swam, biked and ran my way up and down the streets of Copacabana Beach and came across the finish line in third, getting a bronze medal that felt like a personal gold. On a historic day because my friends and teammates got gold and silver. So I got to stand on a podium as part of a USA sweep. See not 1, not 2, but 3 American flags go up as they played our national anthem. And standing there, on that podium, on Sep 11, 2016, showing the world how much ability is in a disability. And that obstacles that come your way don't have to stop you. One of my proudest moment.

I now live with my husband and two kids in Colorado Springs so I can train at the Olympic Training Center in hopes of my 3rd Paralympic Games in Tokyo 2020. Trying to show my younger competitors that this old, beat up, stretch marked seasoned mom of 2 can still hang.

So, that's me. But today is about you! Your big day, celebrating a new chapter, a new beginning as you go off to big places. New dreams, new jobs and the start of something wonderful.

Along my journey, I have learned a lot about life and what it can bring. I want to share a few of those lessons with you as you begin your new journey today.

The first is that life never goes as planned. When we are younger we have these ideas of what we want our life to be. What profession we want to be in, where we want to live, when we want to marry and have kids. But I am sure if I asked all of you if your life has gone as you had planned the answer would most likely be no. Perhaps it's a different degree, a different job offer, a new state. But by all of you being here today, you have thrived through those changes.

I have learned the value of teamwork. In the Army teamwork resonated in everything we did. Nothing is more true of that then when my soldier, my teammates, literally saved my life. I've also experienced teamwork outside of the military, in my life as a Paralympian. When I crossed that finish line in Rio and stood on that podium it wasn't just me up there. It was my family, my teammates, my coaches and all those who supported me along the way. Today you are surrounded by YOUR team. Your teachers, your classmates, your families... People that believe in you and your dreams. Remember your team. Trust in them. Rely on them because we are all in this life together.

I've also come to believe that greatness lies within all of us. We are all capable of so much more than we realize. As a Paralympic athlete, I have met gold medalists, athletes who are the best of the best in their respective sports. At first glance they seem like super heroes with super powers. But I am here to tell you they are not, there are just

too many of them! I believe instead, they are regular, every day people, but what's different is they are tapping deeper into more of their potential...perhaps because they have to. I believe the traumatic thing that happened to them, in my case losing my leg to a bomb, was the catalyst that sparked them to try harder, to dig deeper, and eventually to accomplish things they may not have previously thought possible.

I can honestly say I've done more in my life than I ever would have done with two. But I have come to see that I was capable of accomplishing just as much with two legs...the same abilities were always within me.

So, then the bigger question is, how do you skip the traumatic incident part, how do you avoid the roadside bomb, the part that's no fun...and move straight to accomplishing more in your life, to tapping into more of your potential. I believe a huge part in being able to do that is simply believing there is more in you, in just choosing to say, "No, I've got more in me, I can do that, I can "blank." Fill in the blank with whatever you may have ever dreamed of trying to accomplish. I've come to learn, there is more potential in all of us.

The beauty in life is that we all have the power choose our own stories, to write the book of our own lives as we go. You can't go backwards, and rewrite the past, you can only impact the story from today, here in this moment, but you can choose how you do that. The great part about today, graduation, is that this isn't the end, but it's just the beginning! While I sincerely hope you never actually encounter an actual roadside bomb, when you experience metaphorical roadside bombs periodically throughout your lives, there will be plenty of small ones, and some big ones, but how we choose to react to them is up to us, that's a conscious decision that I believe is within our own power to control.

After losing my leg, I could choose to say 'oh woe is me, I lost my leg' ...and I don't think anyone would have blamed me for doing so...but I chose to say 'ALL I lost was one leg. Not bad. Now let's figure out how to get back to living.'

You cannot change the circumstances that happen TO you, but you can control how you react to them.

That bomb in Iraq took my leg, I can't change that...but it was completely up to me to decide if I would let it take the rest of my life.

You will remember this day for the rest of your lives. A day of celebration and achievement. Reflecting back on past trails and successes and hope for the future. As you walk out of here today, remember. To be bold. Be courageous. Take chances. Be proud of where you've come from. Learn from failure. Take opportunities in front of you. Dream big. Follow your heart. Fly your flags high and proud. And most importantly, remember that in life we all have the power to choose our own story. So choose wisely and be proud of the path you take.

Congratulations on such a huge accomplishment. It's your time to shine.

Thank you.