

# “Life, with and without a map”

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19 January 2014

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Looking back, John Aldridge knew it was a stupid move.<sup>1</sup>  
When you're alone on the deck of a lobster boat  
in the middle of the night, 40 miles off the tip of Long Island,  
you don't take chances.

But he had work to do: He needed to start pumping water  
into the Anna Mary's holding tanks to chill,  
so that when he and his [business] partner, Anthony...,  
[his best friend since grade school,]  
reached their first string of traps a few miles farther south,  
the water would be cold enough  
to keep the lobsters alive for the return trip.

In order to get to the tanks, he had to open a metal hatch on the deck,  
[which] was covered by two 35-gallon Coleman coolers,  
giant plastic insulated ice chests that he and [Anthony] filled  
before leaving the dock in Montauk harbor seven hours earlier.

The coolers, full, weighed about 200 pounds,  
and the only way for Aldridge to move them alone  
was to snag a box hook onto the plastic handle of the bottom one,  
brace his legs, lean back and pull with all his might.

And [that's when] the handle snapped.

Suddenly Aldridge was flying backward,  
tumbling across the deck toward the back of the boat,  
which was wide open, just a flat, slick ramp  
leading straight into the black ocean a few inches below.

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<sup>1</sup> As told by Paul Tough, in “A speck in the sea,” *The New York Times*, 2 January 2014.

Aldridge grabbed for the side of the boat as it went past, his fingertips missing it by inches.

The water hit him like a slap.

He went under, took in a mouthful of Atlantic Ocean and then surfaced, sputtering.

He yelled as loud as he could, hoping to wake [Anthony], who was asleep on a bunk below the front deck.

But the diesel engine was too loud, and the Anna Mary, on autopilot, moving due south at six and a half knots, was already out of reach, its navigation lights receding into the night.

Aldridge shouted once more, panic rising in his throat, and then silence descended.

He was alone in the darkness.

A single thought gripped his mind: This is how I'm going to die.

That's how Paul Speck recently told this true story in his riveting essay called "A Speck in the Sea."

As gripping as the opening scene is, what follows is a powerful account of one man's will to survive.

What follows, to me, is the evidence of how habits of thought can combine with a lifetime of experience to save one's life when it matters most.

After years of fishing in those waters, Aldridge fell back on what he knew in hopes of saving himself.

Years of discipline, not so unlike a devoted spiritual practice, equipped him with the tools he needed to think and act as he bobbed in the chilly waters off Long Island Sound.

Aldridge was quite strong, and relied on that strength

to power through the physical demands of the eighteen hour trips that he and Anthony took twice each week.

There, alone in the water, he drew on that strength  
“to push down the fear that was threatening to overtake him.  
*No negative thoughts*, he told himself. *Stay positive. Stay strong.*”

Fishermen know that the first thing you do when you fall in the ocean is to kick off your boots,  
as “they’re dead weight that will pull you down.”

“But as Aldridge treaded water,  
he realized that his boots were not pulling him down;  
in fact, they were lifting him up,  
weirdly elevating his feet and tipping him backward.”

“Aldridge’s boots were an oddity among the members of Montauk’s commercial fishing fleet:  
thick green rubber monstrosities that were guaranteed to keep your feet warm down to minus [50 degrees Celsius], a temperature Montauk had not [seen] since the ice age.”

Everyone made fun of his boots, “ but Aldridge liked them: they were comfortable and sturdy and easy to slip on and off. And now, as he bobbed in the Atlantic, he had an idea of how they might save his life.”

“Treading water awkwardly,  
Aldridge reached down and pulled off his left boot.  
Straining, he turned it upside down,  
raised it up until it cleared the waves,  
then plunged it back into the water,  
trapping a boot-size bubble of air inside.  
He tucked the inverted boot under his left armpit.  
Then he did the same thing with the right boot.  
It worked; they were like twin pontoons,  
and treading water with his feet alone  
was now enough to keep him stable and afloat.”

The boots gave Aldridge a chance to think.

It was clear he wasn't going to sink, at least for awhile.  
At 3:30, in the wee hours of a July night,  
the water was chilly but bearable.

Dawn was still hours away, and so Aldridge set his first goal:  
to simply stay afloat until sunrise.

He knew that once the sun came up,  
someone would surely start searching for him.

For the time being, though, "there was nothing to do  
but scan the horizon for daylight and watch the water for predators."

"For the first hour, the sea life mostly left him alone.  
But then, in the moonlight, he saw two shark fins circling him,  
less than 10 feet away..."

"Aldridge pulled his buck knife out of his pocket,  
snapped it open and gripped it tightly,  
ready to slash or stab if the sharks tried to attack.

Eventually, though, they swam away, and Aldridge was alone again,  
rising and falling with the ocean's swell."

In the darkness, he wondered what would happen if he didn't make it back—  
who would get his apartment, who would take care of his dog.

He thought of the many funerals he had attended for other fisherman lost at  
sea, and wondered who would turn out for his, if he didn't make it back.

He thought about his parents, who always feared for the worst,  
and the crushing blow the news of his death would be to them.

He thought of the promise he had once made to his sister  
over beers in her backyard: "*If I ever get into trouble out there, just know  
that I'm going to do everything I can to get back home.*"

It was just after 6:00am when Anthony, back on the boat, woke up.

He and his mate had told Aldridge before going to bed, shortly after they set out at 9:00 o'clock, the night before, to wake them at 11:30.

But Aldridge had let them sleep, knowing they would all need their energy for the long night and day of work that lay ahead.

As they tried to make sense of the daylight and wondered how long they had slept, they immediately knew that something was wrong.

Even if Aldridge had given them a little extra time to sleep (as he sometimes did), they still should have been up hours ago.

They searched the boat and found no trace of him. They checked their position and found that they were 15 miles past their traps, some 60 miles offshore.

Anthony quickly radioed the Coast Guard to let them know that they had a man overboard.

In short order, they reported that Aldridge wasn't wearing a life jacket, that he didn't have a GPS distress beacon, that he hadn't left a note, and that, yes, he could swim.

The Coast Guard sprung into action, scrambling helicopters and a plane, and alerting boats in the area.

The problem was that the search area was impossibly vast and the boundaries of the zone difficult to even know.

It wasn't clear when Aldridge had fallen into the water and where the boat might have been when he did.

Normally, elaborate software programs can run simulations to hone in on a fairly small zone, taking into account the weather and the movement of the currents.

But with little information to input into the system,

there was little to guide them.

He could be almost anywhere,  
and precious, critical hours that could mean the difference  
between life and death had already been lost.

Based on his height and weight and the temperature of the water,  
the searchers knew that, even under the best case scenario,  
Aldridge had 19 hours before hypothermia would overtake him  
and his muscles tire out.

And so search crews swiftly began to divide up the search area—  
some 1,800 square miles—looking for a speck of hope.

Meanwhile, in the water,  
Aldridge had already been awake for 24 hours when the sun finally came up,  
but he was “alive and afloat” at daybreak, which had been his first goal.

“To most people, the Atlantic Ocean 40 miles south of Montauk  
is just a big, undifferentiated expanse of waves,  
but Aldridge knew roughly where he fell overboard—  
a few miles south of [what was called] the 40-fathom curve.

“And he knew that several lobster fishermen had trawls nearby—  
he knew them by name, in fact.  
Each lobster trawl is a string of 30 to 50 traps,  
spaced 150 feet apart at the bottom of the ocean,  
and at the end of each string,  
a rope extends up from the last trap to the surface,  
where it is tied to a big round vinyl buoy.”

“If [he] could make his way to a buoy, he figured,  
he would be more visible to the searchers,  
and it would be easier to stay afloat.”

As he rode the swells through the first hours of daylight,  
Aldridge scanned the horizon for a buoy  
each time he reached the crest of a wave;  
but he searched for hours with no luck.

Eventually, though, he spotted one some distance away and swam toward it, against the current and with the burden of those boots.

“Each time he looked up, the buoy was a little farther away.

[He] realized he was exhausting himself, and...decided to cut his losses.”

He could see “that the buoy he had been swimming toward had a flag on top of it, which lobster fishermen attach to the west end of their strings.”

Knowing that “lobster traps are always laid out along an east-west line, [he] figured that a mile or so to the east..., he would find the other end of that string of traps, and with it, another buoy.”

“He started swimming east—*with* the current this time instead of against it....”

And an hour later, after angling himself at it and working with the current, Aldridge reached the buoy, grabbed the rope, and held on for dear life.

His relief was short-lived, though, as it became clear the buoy was too big to wrap his arms around and too small to ride on top of.

Instead, he had to hold on to the “black vinyl eye at the bottom of the buoy that the rope was threaded through.”

But being tethered to traps at the ocean’s bottom, the buoy didn’t rise completely with each wave, but was instead partially submerged under each crest.

Which meant that every wave dunked Aldridge under the water as well.

After he’d been in the water for nine hours, he started to shiver uncontrollably.

“Sea shrimp and sea lice were fastening themselves to his T-shirt and shorts, claiming him as part of the [ocean]. Storm petrels swarmed around occasionally, squawking and diving.”

In time, Aldridge saw the helicopters and search planes running their patterns back and forth.

The problem was “everyone searching for him seemed to be at least a mile to the east.”

They had assumed he was still drifting rather than being anchored to a buoy.

In that moment, he knew that if he was to be found, he was going to have to meet his rescuers half-way.

So he took out his knife, cut the rope that held the buoy in place, and began swimming east, holding it out in front of him.

As he swam, he felt his energy draining as the sun rose higher, giving him a horrible sunburn.

At one point, almost like a mirage, “he spotted the Anna Mary, less than a quarter-mile in front of him.”

He could see his friends standing on the deck. He screamed with all his might before they headed in the opposite direction in search of him.

He eventually reached the other buoy.

He tied the two buoys together, straddled the rope between them, and waited, knowing this was as far as he could go and that he would not survive another swim.

In the air, the search crews were growing discouraged.

They had been searching for hours and found only false alarms.

“The truth of working as a search-and-rescue helicopter pilot... is that you don’t get to do a lot of actual rescuing.”

For all their training, it is the rare exception

that anyone is found alive.

Late in the day, as one of the helicopters had dangerously neared what's called "bingo fuel"—the amount of gas required to make it back to home base—someone on board spotted Aldridge, bouncing between the "two buoys, clutching his boots and waving frantically."

In a matter of minutes, the crew had lowered a rescue basket and helped him to climb in.

As they were "about to raise him up, Aldridge realized that his [funky green] boots were floating away, and he yelled to [his rescuers] to grab them and put them in the basket with him."

Moments later, the call went out on the radio:  
"Anna Mary, we have your man. [And] he's alive."

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Now, you may well be wondering why I have told you such an extended story about a man lost at sea.

In this month, when we're looking at what it means to live a life of discipline, here's why—in Aldridge's own words:

"I always felt like I was conditioning myself for that situation," he told a reporter a few months later sitting in the safety of the Dock.

"...once you're in it, it's like: All right, I can do th[is]. [And] I did it. I had [a] sense of accomplishment. I mean, thank God I was saved, yes. Thank God they saved me. There's no better entity than the Coast Guard to come save your ["bum."] when you're [in] the water. But I felt[, he said, that] I did my part."

I've told this story because all of us have known—or can or will know—what it means to find ourselves or those we love plunged into dark and frigid waters,

feeling uncertain where to turn and unsure how to survive.

It helps to have the conditioning that Aldridge spoke of.  
To have developed some practice to help sustain us through  
the bewildering times that most any journey through this life will encounter.

And, it's useful to have deep grounding, even and especially when  
the shore is far from sight.

Aldridge had that.

Even there in the water, because he had paid attention  
on his previous journeys, Aldridge knew where he was.  
He carried the map in his mind.

He discovered, quite literally, that he had resources, right at his feet.

He knew there were buoys all around  
that could anchor him amid the waves.

He knew, ultimately, that he was not alone.

He recalled the promise made to his sister long before  
to keep trying to get home.

And he did all he could to keep his word.

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A life of discipline can take many forms.  
The dedication to the task isn't always obvious.

It's not always clear what specific practices  
will best equip us for the particular challenges we will face.

It's not clear that John Aldridge ever thought that what he was doing  
was in any way spiritual, or that it involved practice or discipline.

And, yet, the will and the strength to live that he summoned from within  
was exactly that: testament to all the conditioning  
he had done up to that point in his life.

May we do likewise.

May we dedicate ourselves to a life of discipline,  
conditioning our hearts and minds for whatever may come.

May we summon and strengthen the Spirit of Life day in and day out,  
that it might sustain us when and where we need it most.

Amen.