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 Arlington Street Church  
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## **The Longest Mile**

I am remembering a particularly long day of backpacking in the Sierras — coming down out of the high mountains and back into so-called civilization. We’d been descending for hours when late in the afternoon, the trail emerged from the woods and unceremoniously dumped us out onto a seemingly endless and not particularly scenic dirt road. We were elated at having matched the strenuousness of our time in the backcountry and were sad to leave it, but now our energy was flagging. And so, as I often do in such times, I began to serenade Kem. I call these rambling, made-up songs my “odes,” but you should not be jealous.

Of all the odes I’ve ever composed, this is the only one that has ever stuck. I’ll spare you the tune, but the words say,

The last mile is the longest,  
 the last mile is the longest,  
 the last mile is the longest  
 when you’re on your way home.

I had no idea then that there’s actually a name for this truth: It’s called the third quarter phenomenon. “First named in 1991 by researchers studying people living in cold regions, the [third-quarter] phenomenon ... is characterized by mood shifts among people nearly finished with a long period of isolation. Those affected often feel anxious, withdrawn, and increasingly vulnerable. Researchers haven’t been able to definitively prove the phenomenon exists, in part because its effects can vary from person to person. But anecdotal evidence and research suggest it often strikes people beginning 75% of the way through an isolating event.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tara Law, “We’re in the Third Quarter of the Pandemic. Antarctic Researchers, Mars Simulation Scientists, and Navy Submarine Officers Have Advice For How to Get Through It,” 2/26/21. Please see [time.com/5942577/third-quarter-covid-19-pandemic-advice/](https://time.com/5942577/third-quarter-covid-19-pandemic-advice/)

A few years ago, our young friend Gracie worked a split shift and went out for a late dinner with her best friend. Afterwards, she dropped off her friend and headed for home. She never made it. Just a short walk from her driveway, she was asleep at the wheel when her car left the road. There was nothing anyone could do to save her life.

The police were not surprised. A third of all car crashes occur between one and five miles of home. Most car accidents happen within five minutes or less. People just let down their guard. This is another example pointing to the three-quarter phenomenon — and this one means life or death.

I'm thinking about the pandemic — where we are in this long haul — thinking this is a good time to take stock, double down, and consider deeply how each of us can make it through to the end and finish strong.

Have you all read *Life of Pi*, or seen the movie? In a rare experience, I actually liked both. I'm not spoiling anything to tell you that at the heart of the story is a rather long time spent aboard a lifeboat.

Amidst the supplies stocked on this lifeboat — life jackets, water, and food — there's a book of instructions for surviving. They say, "Set your house in order and begin ... the battle to survive. Establish a strict schedule for eating, keeping watch, and getting rest.... Keep busy, but avoid unnecessary exertion. The mind can be kept occupied by playing card games, Twenty Questions, or I Spy. Community singing is another surefire way to lift the spirits. Telling stories is highly recommended. Above all, don't lose hope."

It occurs to me that there's a way in which we're all on a lifeboat now. The terrible storm of COVID-19 has taken over 2.7 million lives with it — 2.7 million lives and counting. But if the vaccination rollouts proceed apace, and the jabs perform as expected, we are now three-quarters of the way through that storm. One way or the other, each of us has ridden it out. To make it to the end, it's critical that we not relax our vigilance.

What has gotten you through? This is an important moment to avail ourselves of all the resources available to us — and above all, not to lose hope.

Thanks to Patrick Cooleybeck, this is South Carolina poet Dan Albergotti's deep bow to the biblical Jonah. It's called *Things to Do in the Belly of the Whale*.

Measure the walls. Count the ribs. Notch the long days.  
 Look up for blue sky through the spout. Make small fires  
 with the broken hulls of fishing boats. Practice smoke signals.  
 Call old friends, and listen for echoes of distant voices.  
 Organize your calendar. Dream of the beach. Look each way  
 for the dim glow of light. Work on your reports. Review  
 each of your life's ten million choices. Endure moments  
 of self-loathing. Find the evidence of those before you.  
 Destroy it. Try to be very quiet, and listen for the sound  
 of gears and moving water. Listen for the sound of your heart.  
 Be thankful that you are here, swallowed with all hope,  
 where you can rest and wait. Be nostalgic. Think of all  
 the things you did and could have done. Remember  
 treading water in the center of the still night sea, your toes  
 pointing again and again down, down into the black depths.

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McMurdo Station is an Antarctic research base 2,415 miles south of Christchurch, New Zealand. Earth and sea disappear between April and August — four months of endless, icy nights.

Can you imagine the joy at seeing the sun appear  
 from behind the mountains again?

About three-quarters of the way through, those who make their homes in Antarctica begin to get really sick of it. Pedro Salom, who's a manager there with more than a dozen Antarctic deployments behind him, talks about what happens to people towards the end of the dark time. "One of the things I look for is dramatic changes in [their] habits," he says. If somebody has been going to the gym every day at 6:30 a.m., and usually gets to lunch exactly at 11:45, and that person suddenly misses the gym or starts taking food to go or doesn't show up for lunch at all, that's a serious flag in my mind."

Sunniva Sorby and Hilde Fålnun Strøm are climate change researchers who spent more than seven months living in an uninsulated, 90-year-old cabin in the Arctic Circle without electricity or running water. As the end drew near, their excitement about seeing loved ones again was tempered by anxiety. How would the completion of their research affect their friendship? "In the dark," says Sunniva, "we're totally dependent on each other. And then when the light starts to come back.... It can breed insecurity."

Submariner Matt Kilby served three deployments aboard the U.S.S. Florida. He's 6'4"! At one point, he spent 107 days submerged. He says it's hard for it not to feel like Groundhog Day. He was grateful to communicate with his fiancé, family, and friends by email, but it's easy to be afraid you'll be forgotten. Toward the end, the crew gets testy. "It's ... so well known that if someone blows up on you," he says, "it's just like, 'Hey, man, it's ... the last week; everyone's like this right now.' So everyone's ... bonding over the fact that [everyone's ] grumpy."

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"Nathan Smith, a University of Manchester researcher who has examined how people behave in extreme settings, says that "the psychological and social experience of monotony, sensory deprivation, social isolation, [and] proximity with others, is very similar" to that likely being experienced by people isolating during COVID-19. "For some people, this third quarter phase may be really challenging," he says."<sup>2</sup>

What has gotten you through?  
What's getting you through ... to the end?

This is my California colleague Rev. Lynn Unger's *Pandemic*.<sup>3</sup>

What if you thought of it  
as the Jews consider the Sabbath—  
the most sacred of times?  
Cease from travel.  
Cease from buying and selling.  
Give up, just for now,  
on trying to make the world  
different [from what] it is.  
Sing. Pray. Touch only those  
to whom you commit your life.  
Center down.

And when your body has become still,  
reach out with your heart.  
Know that we are connected  
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.  
(You could hardly deny it now.)  
Know that our lives

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<sup>2</sup> Tara Law, *op cit*

<sup>3</sup> written 3/11/20

are in one another's hands.  
 (Surely, that has come clear.)  
 Do not reach out your hands.  
 Reach out your heart.  
 Reach out your words.  
 Reach out all the tendrils  
 of compassion that move, invisibly,  
 where we cannot touch.

Promise this world your love—  
 for better or for worse,  
 in sickness and in health,  
 so long as we all shall live.

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We have arrived at that moment when even the seasoned pros find their willpower giving out. So what to do? Let's return to the lifeboat instructions. Three things:

1. Get your routine down, and stick to it, or, as the book of instructions says, "Set your house in order and begin ... the battle to survive. Establish a strict schedule for eating, keeping watch, and getting rest."

A routine will offer a sense of control. You know I love the expression, "When we take care of the morning, the morning takes care of the day." Whether or not you've been doing it all along, for now, every day, I highly recommend making the bed and putting on real clothes — even if that's only your daytime pajamas as opposed to your nighttime pajamas. Plan your meals. Eat them, then leave spaces between them. If you can wake up and go to sleep at the same time every day, your sleep will be better.

And see if you can think of doing something for someone else — reach out to say hello, show up in the Zoom room. The lifeboat instructions' strict schedule for keeping watch could translate into, Don't spend the whole day on your screen! If you can get some exercise — even a short walk — it could change everything. And you know I'm going to suggest you find your breath and meditate or pray, even for just a few minutes.

2. Look for joy. Be on the lookout for joy.  
*You will find it in giving it.*

And remember the joy in play! Some of us have been making epic jigsaw puzzles over these long months at home, and sharing them when we're done. Some of us are playing Scrabble online. Some of us are getting to Thursday night Song Shares and singing our hearts out. Tell a good story. I've noticed, as I'm sure you have, how a good story can take us right back to where it all happened.

This past summer, my friend Nancy and I had long planned to celebrate 50 years since we met at Girl Scout camp — fifty years of friendship. When it became clear that we weren't going to be able to visit our old camp together, visit the waterfront where we learned to canoe and hike to the outpost where we lived, we began exchanging stories and old photos. EBay proved to be a treasure trove; I found an antique patch from our camp and sent it to her; she found our old camp songbook as well as some postcards and sent them to me. Make someone's day!

You could also plan a surprise. Let me know what you pull off!

... and 3. Keep your spirits up! Have you seen a robin yet? A snowdrop, crocus, or daffodil? Have you seen the moon growing fat again this week? It's full this Passover weekend! Try walking in the other direction, saying hello, listening to new music, a new podcast, new book, making something new to eat, making something for someone else. It all feels so much more manageable when we remember we're all in this together.

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While I come down hard on the side of quality vs. quantity of life, some of the longevity studies point to interesting intersections between the two. In one study of 100-year-olds done here in the states, investigators were looking at their personality traits. Not surprisingly, these long-lived elders tended to be less neurotic and scored higher on competence and extraversion. Interestingly, though, those close to them ranked them a bit high on hostility. The study concluded that “moral righteousness leads to robust temperaments that may help centenarians adapt well to later life.”<sup>4</sup> This is just to say that, while you're busy getting down your routine, looking for joy, and keeping your spirits up, it wouldn't hurt to yell at the news, at least once in a while, and to transmute that righteous anger into changing the world.

Beloved spiritual companions, we can do this. Get your routine down, look for joy, keep your spirits up! We can finish this hard thing, together, while apart.

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<sup>4</sup> Please see [time.com/magazine/us/5159845/february-26th-2018-vol-191-no-7-u-s/](https://time.com/magazine/us/5159845/february-26th-2018-vol-191-no-7-u-s/)

To close, here is one of my favorite poems: Thomas Centolella's *In the Evening We Shall Be Examined on Love*.<sup>5</sup>

And it won't be multiple choice,  
 though some of us would prefer it that way.  
 Neither will it be essay, which tempts us to run on  
 when we should be sticking to the point, if not together.  
 In the evening there shall be implications  
 our fear will change to complications. No cheating,  
 we'll be told, and we'll try to figure the cost of being true  
 to ourselves. In the evening when the sky has turned  
 that certain blue, blue of exam books, blue of no more  
 daily evasions, we shall climb the hill as the light empties  
 and park our tired bodies on a bench above the city  
 and try to fill in the blanks. And we won't be tested  
 like defendants on trial, cross-examined  
 till one of us breaks down, guilty as charged. No,  
 in the evening, after the day has refused to testify,  
 we shall be examined on love like students  
 who don't recall signing up for the course  
 and now must take their orals, forced to speak for once  
 from the heart and not off the top of their heads.  
 And when the evening is over and it's late,  
 the student body asleep, even the great teachers  
 retired for the night, we shall stay up  
 and run back over the questions, each in our own way:  
 what's true, what's false, what unknown quantity  
 will balance the equation, what it would mean years from now  
 to look back and know  
 we did not fail.

*Amen.*

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<sup>5</sup> The title is a quote from St. John of the Cross. This poem is from Thomas Centolella's *Lights and Mysteries*