

Adrift by Adam Khan

In 1982 Steven Callahan was crossing the Atlantic alone in his sailboat when it struck something and sank. He was out of the shipping lanes and floating in a life raft, alone. His supplies were few. His chances were small. Yet when three fishermen found him seventy-six days later (the longest anyone has survived a shipwreck on a life raft alone), he was alive -- much skinnier than he was when he started, but alive.

His account of how he survived is fascinating. His ingenuity -- how he managed to catch fish, how he fixed his solar still (evaporates sea water to make fresh) -- is very interesting.

But the thing that caught my eye was how he managed to keep himself going when all hope seemed lost, when there seemed no point in continuing the struggle, when he was suffering greatly, when his life raft was punctured and after more than a week struggling with his weak body to fix it, it was still leaking air and wearing him out to keep pumping it up. He was starved. He was desperately dehydrated. He was thoroughly exhausted. Giving up would have seemed the only sane option.

When people survive these kinds of circumstances, they do something with their minds that gives them the courage to keep going. Many people in similarly desperate circumstances give in or go mad. Something the survivors do with their thoughts helps them find the guts to carry on in spite of overwhelming odds.

"I tell myself I can handle it," wrote Callahan in his narrative. "Compared to what others have been through, I'm fortunate. I tell myself these things over and over, building up fortitude..."

I wrote that down after I read it. It struck me as something important. And I've told myself the same thing when my own goals seemed far off or when my problems seemed too overwhelming. And every time I've said it, I have always come back to my senses.

The truth is, our circumstances are only bad compared to something better. But others have been through much worse. I've read enough history to know you and I are lucky to be where we are, when we are, no matter how bad it seems to us compared to our fantasies. It's a sane thought and worth thinking.

So here, coming to us from the extreme edge of survival, are words that can give us strength. Whatever you're going through, tell yourself you can handle it. Compared to what others have been through, you're fortunate. Tell this to yourself over and over, and it will help you get through the rough spots with a little more fortitude.