

"Re-packing Your Bags"
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Have you ever imagined yourself setting out on a journey into unknown territory? I don't mean the kind of trip in which you pack all your gear into a pop-up camper to commune with nature and a thousand other campers. I'm thinking of the kind of wilderness that strips you down to the bare essentials you need to survive.

The people of Israel trekked through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. It took them forty years.

Jesus fasted in the wilderness for forty days and nights to prepare himself for a life of the Spirit through baptism. And then he fasted for forty days and nights in the desert to divine his life's purpose in the weeks before his death.

Both the wilderness and the desert provide locations for living with the bare essentials. They make space for things of the spirit by freeing us of our illusions and worldly distractions.

If you were to set out on a journey into the wilderness, what would you take with you? for forty days? forty years? how about a week? What would you leave behind? How would you determine how much is enough to carry with you?

Those are the questions that face many of us throughout our lives. How much is enough to carry through the journey that is our life? This is a literal question. But it is also a figurative question. Don't all of us carry "baggage" of one sort or another throughout our lives?

Some of us do it more than others. We journey through life stuffing our illusions in a bag each time another one is dispelled. If you're like me, you may acquire physical reminders of people and past lives. Shells, stones, sea water, sacred soil... books... post-it notes... clothes... photos... journals... more books... All sorts of souvenirs... These physical reminders become imbued with memories of a time that was meaningful at one point in a life.

In their book, *Re-packing Your Bags*, Richard Leider and David Shapiro ask the question: "How much is enough?" They suggest that:

Each of our lives is, in fact, a short trip. In the grand scheme of things, we're penciled in for a very brief journey. On the other hand, this is all we've got. So it's no surprise that many of us go through life weighed down by the importance of it all, crushed beneath our load of literal and figurative baggage.

In order to know where we are on this journey called life we must turn our gaze inward. We must ask the questions: where am I? where do I want to be? and how will I get there?

To answer these questions requires that we pause and also ask: where have I been? The past is what may interfere with the future. We must begin by unpacking the bags of the past.

I used to think that I lived simply. This was a source of amusement to anyone who ever helped me move – seventeen times in my life. In the best of all possible worlds, I would have sorted through everything carefully before packing up and moving it. In fact, I did that for the first five moves or so. But the last few moves were quite an eye-opener. When I moved in with my partner Jerry back in 1997, one of the many boxes we moved turned out to be curtains – curtains I had moved twelve times in the twenty years I had them. I had been waiting for the right size window to dress. By the time I found even one window that could use a pair of curtains, I no longer even liked curtains on the windows! I happily donated the curtains to Goodwill.

But it's a lot harder to unpack the bags of heart and soul. As human beings, we are always processing and assessing our lives and what we do. We are works in progress. We make choices based on what we need at any given time. These choices may include marriage, parenting, career changes, returning to school, or moving away from family. Hopefully, each choice provides us with what we need at that particular time in our lives. Some choices are harder to change than others. Parenting is one of those choices. Being a spouse is another.

Other changes are not as freely chosen. An adult becomes unable to live alone and must "choose" to move into an assisted living facility. A child may "choose" to have an ailing parent move into her or his home. A life-choice career ends when the employer is bought out by another company. A marriage ends because the couple has moved in different directions. Once the children are grown and leave home, the common ground which held the marriage together disappears also. The relationship has a lot of history. What it lacks is the substance on which to build a future.

For many years I hauled bags of former lives that no longer fit. And yet I wasn't quite ready to let go of the bags – or the illusion of comfort – they brought. I kept them as reminders of that which used to keep me grounded, even when I felt adrift.

Since moving back east after a 34 year absence, I have unpacked many bags. Some have been the physical bags I transported. Others have been the ones I carry in my heart – the little "altars" that contain

touchstones of the good times and people in my life. Tables and shelves with photographs and mementos, all strategically placed to remind me of people and home. The most these reminders can provide, though, is a semblance of home. For many years they filled up the empty space inside that was longing for something I couldn't even name. I still remember when I finally recognized that all the things I had accumulated were not enough. Yes – I could see them. I could touch them. I could attach memories to most of them. But I could no longer feel them. What was missing was the love that they represented.

The question many of us never dare ask, perhaps because we already know the answer, is the most important question we should ask when making choices of what to keep, and what to leave behind:

“Does all this make me happy?”

This can be challenging because we might confuse what makes us happy now, with what made us happy in the past. I wish I could take to heart the wisdom of Carl Jung who said:

We cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of life's morning – for what was great in the morning will be little at evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie. (cited by Leider and Shapiro, vi Repacking Your Bags)

According to Leider and Shapiro,

...the formula for the good life is:

“Living in the Place you belong, with the People you Love, doing the Right Work, on Purpose.”

Each life choice we make is carried with us into the future. Before we can pack our bags for the current leg of the journey, we must first unpack the old ones. This can be challenging because we might have trouble letting go of what worked for us in the past. Leider and Shapiro suggest that:

If your pack is too heavy, it means you're too attached to the life you are leaving behind. If it's too light, it means you may not have enough to stay alive. The question becomes: 'How much is enough?' The weight of your pack ultimately determines the quality of your trip.

Why did I haul around bags of fabric that belonged to my grandmother? Someday, I was going to use all the fabric and create a work of art as a tribute to my grandmother, the milliner.

Why do I carry the bag of letters my father and this same grandmother exchanged during World War II? I think, "Someday, I will write a book about mother/son relationships and give it to my son."

There's more, but I'll spare you that....

I moved from Ohio to New York almost ten years ago. Before that move I really cleared things out. Most of my professional books were left in the library at the Akron church. I sold some furniture on Craig's List. And put many of my precious things out on the front lawn for a Tag Sale. Still – it took a full-size Budget Rental truck plus several car loads to move my belongings to Brooklyn – to a four room apartment that my partner Jerry had already occupied for six months. Most of my stuff went into a storage unit. Every week or so I would make a run to the storage unit to rummage for something I needed. The contents of the storage unit were moved intact right into the basement when we bought our condo. The basement I swore I would never have again.

Why? Because I know that I will fill any available space I am given – and then some. To help curtail the accumulation of more stuff, and to keep from re-creating my parent's basement, I decided that the only hope was not to have the space to begin with.

Unpacking – and then re-packing – our bags means being intentional about our choices. Leider and Shapiro suggest:

Unpacking simply means taking a long, hard look at what we're carrying and why. Seeing if our possessions, responsibilities, and relationships are still helping us move forward, or if they're dragging us down.

This is the process I began when I moved back to New York. For three years I worked as a hospice chaplain for Visiting Nurse Service. Until I began work as interim minister in 2012, most of the things associated with church work were stored in the basement – some in boxes, some in bags. I had no place for them in my life as a hospice chaplain. And frankly, some of the bags were just too painful for me to unpack.

Some of the packed items are back in use since my return to the parish. I feel blest and grateful. I am back where I belong – doing the right work, on purpose, with people who value the life they have found in a UU congregation. But I continue to take stock of my own life as I walk with you through your transition time.

This is the process in which we are participating during this interim ministry. We're looking at the life of the Congregation with new eyes. We need to determine what to keep, and what needs to be discarded – or at least relegated to the Archives. What traditions, things, or people

can help move the Congregation forward? And what of these is holding you back from becoming the Congregation you wish to be? What do you really need to be the congregation you want to become?

Repacking...is the ongoing activity of reevaluation and reinvention. Rearranging our priorities. Reframing our vision of the good life. And recovering a new sense of being alive. (Leider and Shapiro, p. vii)

Ask yourselves: "Does all this make us happy?" Or are we holding on to some things – or ways of doing things – that were once meaningful, but are not needed anymore? Ask, "does this serve our purpose right now?"

Your purpose is not something you have to invent – it's something you discover. Whether you're aware of it or not, it's already there. But when you do name it, you will know that you've "known" it all along." (Leider and Shapiro)

And you will arrive at the place you belong, as if for the first time.

May it be so. Amen.