

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“What Will You Pack?”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore March 10, 2019

Call to Celebration

Every day, we have to think about what we will carry and what we will pack. Every morning I decide what kind of tea I will make and carry in my Contigo mug to enjoy and keep me hydrated at the office. I usually pack something for lunch. Often, if I'm working into the evening, I'll bring something for dinner.

For a lot of us, what we need to pack is already in our cars. Many of us have cars full of stuff we are carrying around but don't need on a daily basis. That unnecessary extra weight is a climate change problem. It burns a little more fossil fuel that, over enough trips by enough people, produce *a significant amount* of greenhouse gases.

Those of us who commute using bicycles, public transit or walking are even more aware of how much we are carrying. A briefcase or backpack full of books, files and notebooks becomes a significant burden if we have to carry them a long distance.

Thankfully, the digital cloud has lightened our load. I carry far fewer books now with a Kindle App integrated into my phone. I tend not to carry notebooks anymore either. When I take notes with pen and scrap paper, I scan and save them in an electronic form. I scan everything and don't file paper anymore – I have a scanner for business cards. Even though my desk still is cluttered with paper, I live for the day when I'll have a paperless office.

And we've all had that experience of getting where we are going and realizing we forgot something we needed. We didn't pack that one thing that will now disrupt our day. That medication, the sandwich left on the counter, or sunglasses or hat or sunscreen that could have been so easily picked up ... is just not there.

In these moments we remember just how important packing is. Let us contemplate how we begin a journey by what we pack as we join together in the celebration of life.

Spoken Meditation

A Traveling Prayer by Sam Trumbore

Whether my journey is to the bathroom;
Or to the car to drive across town;
Or to the airport to fly half way around the world
each journey has the potential for danger.

May I be safe, peaceful and free from harm.

Wherever I may go,
even just moving across a room to a chair,
there is the potential for tripping, or stepping on another's foot
The possibility of disturbing another person's life.

May I and those around me be safe, peaceful and free from harm.

As I move on whatever journey I feel inspired to take
 May I find food when I am hungry.
 May I find water when I am thirsty.
 May I find shelter from the ever-changing elements.
 May I find support when I am weary and rest when I am tired.
 May I find patience and endurance when I am challenged and tested.
 And may I remember when I am alone and vulnerable,
 that the presence of love is never far away.

Wherever we journey,
 Whatever our destination might be,
 May we all be safe, peaceful and free from harm.

Readings

from *A Walk in the Woods* by Bill Bryson

Seven miles seems so little, but it's not, believe me. With a pack, even for fit people it is not easy. You know what it's like when you're at a zoo or an amusement park with a small child who won't walk another step? You hoist him lightly onto your shoulders and for a while—for a couple of minutes—It's actually kind of fun to have him up there, pretending like you're going to tip him off or cruising his head towards some low projection before veering off (all being well) at the last instant. But then it starts to get uncomfortable. You feel a twinge in your neck, a tightening between the shoulder blades, and the sensation seeps and spreads until it is decidedly uncomfortable, and you announce to little Jimmy that you're going to have to put him down for a while.

Of course, Jimmy bawls and won't go another step, and your partner gives you that disdainful, I-should-have-married-a-quarterback look because you haven't gone 400 yards. But, hey, it hurts. Hurts a lot. Believe me, I understand.

OK, now imagine two little Jimmies in a pack on your back, or, better still, something inert but weighty, something that *doesn't* want to be lifted, that makes it abundantly clear to you as soon as you pick it up that what it wants is to sit heavily on the ground—say, a bag of cement or a box of medical textbooks—in any case, forty pounds of profound heaviness. Imagine the jerk of the pack going on, like the pull of a down elevator. Imagine walking with that weight for hours, for days, and *not* along level asphalt paths with benches and refreshment booths at thoughtful intervals but over a rough trail, full of sharp rocks and unyielding roots and staggering ascents that transfer enormous amounts of strain to your pale, shaking thighs. Now tilt your head back until your neck is taut, and fix your gaze on a point two miles away. That's your first climb. It's 4,682 steep feet to the top, and there are lots more like it. Don't tell me that seven miles is not far.

Oh, and there's the other thing. You don't have to do this. You're not in the army. You can quit right now. Go home. See your family. Sleep in a bed.

Or, alternatively, you poor, sad shmuck, you can walk 2,169 miles through mountains and wilderness to Maine.

from *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien

The things they carried were largely determined by necessity. Among the necessities or near-necessities were P-38 can openers, pocket knives, heat tabs, wristwatches, dog tags, mosquito repellent, chewing gum, candy, cigarettes, salt tablets, packets of Kool-Aid, lighters, matches, sewing kits, Military Payment Certificates, C rations, and two or three canteens of water. Together, these items weighed about 12 and 18 pounds, depending upon a man's habits of rate of metabolism. Henry Dobbins, who was a big man, carried extra rations; he was especially fond of canned peaches in heavy syrup over pound cake. Dave Jensen, who practiced field hygiene, carried a toothbrush, dental floss, and several hotel-sized bars of soap...

By necessity, and because it was SOP, they all carried steel helmets that weighed 5 pounds including the liner and camouflage cover. They carried standard fatigue jackets and trousers. Very few carried underwear... Ted Lavendar carried 6 or 7 ounces of premium dope, which for him was a necessity. Mitchell Sanders ... carried condoms. Norman Bowker carried a diary. Rat Kiley carried comic books. Kiowa, a devout Baptist carried an illustrated New Testament that had been presented to him by his father... As a hedge against bad times, however, Kiowa also carried his grandmother's distrust of the white man, his grandfather's old hunting hatchet... Because you could die so quickly, each man carried at least one large compress bandage, usually in the helmet band for easy access...

Some things they carried **in common**. Taking turns, they carried the big PRC-77 scrambler radio, which weighed 30 pounds with its battery. They shared the weight of memory... They carried infections. They carried chess sets, basketballs, Vietnamese-English dictionaries, insignia of rank, Bronze Stars and Purple Hearts, plastic cards imprinted with the Code of Conduct. They carried diseases, among them malaria and dysentery. They carried lice and ringworm and leeches and paddy algae and various rots and molds. They carried the land itself—the soil,—a powdery orange-red dust that covered their bodies and fatigues and faces. They carried the sky. The whole atmosphere, they carried it, the humidity, the monsoons, the stink of fungus and decay, all of it, they carried gravity. They moved like mules. By daylight they took sniper fire, at night they were mortared, but it was not battle, it was just the endless march, village to village, without purpose, nothing won or lost. They marched for the sake of the march.

...they carried it on their backs and shoulders—and for all the ambiguities of Vietnam, all the mysteries and unknowns, there was at least the single abiding certainty that they would **never be at a loss** for things to carry.

Sermon

Inspired by revisiting Bill Bryson's book *Philomena* and I read together about 25 years ago, I've been reading about people's experience of walking the Appalachian Trail and others talking about long treks like the Long Trail, the Pacific Ridge Trail and the El Camino de Santiago. At the beginning of their journeys, how much stuff they packed and carried mattered a great deal. Few people's feet, ankles, knees, thighs, shoulders and backs are strong enough, at the outset, for the punishment of the trail. Any of you who have hiked any significant distance, even just carrying a camera and water bottle for a day trip, know the resentment one can feel for the extra weight. With modern, lightweight materials, hikers can carry a lot more gear for a long hike with less weight than in the past. Still, every ounce matters. People cut their toothbrush in half to save on weight.

Most of us pack for short trips, especially business trips. The more of them we take, the more efficient we get. I almost always pack using a small suitcase that will fit in an airplane's overhead bin and rarely check luggage. I've been to our yearly Unitarian Universalist General Assembly almost thirty times now. I know exactly what to bring.

We're initiated into the packing experience at an earlier and earlier age – as children often travel with their parents and/or caregivers. If their parents are separated or divorced, children travel back and forth on a weekly basis and need to keep track of where their stuff is and what they'll need when they get there. They will likely have shampoo and toothbrushes and chargers in both locations, but maybe not the same books or games.

My first big packing experience, maybe yours too, was going away to summer camp. For the first time, I had to decide what personal items I would need to take with me and what I could leave at home. Would I take my stuffed tiger without any fur or eyes that might get laughed at but would be comforting at night? Should I take some snacks with me or would that attract bears that would invade my cabin and maul me? What if there might be a liquid oriented nighttime accident of some sort? How might *that* be handled? These were big questions not always easy to discuss with adults in the packing process. Packing for college or military service is a similar process although maybe with less emphasis on stuffed animals and staying dry at night.

Most of us have moved during our lives, even if we've stayed in the same area. After I moved to California at the age of 20, for the next 26 years I moved every 2 to 3 years, a total of 13 times until Philomena and I bought our first house together in Altamont. Before I met, married and moved in with Philomena in Buffalo, I had very few possessions besides a couple of bookshelves of books. Very few suits, ties and dress shirts back then that now fill up my side of the closet. When I left California to move to Buffalo in 1990, I shipped some boxes of books and everything else fit into my 1981 red Honda Civic hatchback. Our move to Port Charlotte, Florida however, for my first ministerial settlement with wife and 1 year old required a moving van.

As a family, packing all this stuff with each move has become a little exhausting so I'm grateful we've only moved once since 2003. With Andrew grown, we're now at the phase of life when we aren't acquiring a lot of stuff so much as wanting to get rid of it ... all except my love of gadgets like my automated tea maker, Instant Pot and fuzzy logic rice cooker. Today we want possessions that don't encumber us but do improve the quality of our lives.

Reflecting on our stuff and how much of it we really need at any moment is a valuable spiritual exercise and deepening process. After all, we come into this world with nothing and we can't take anything with us when we go. Some believe we might be able to take our good deeds we've done with us into another life or help us attain a heaven realm. Whether this is true or not, our stuff is staying here and going to someone else – unless it gets buried or cremated with us.

Along that line though, we are all carrying a lot of non-material stuff ... in our heads. A lifetime of memories, experiences, names, images, phone numbers and addresses, maybe email and messaging addresses and [http:// URLs](#) too. There is an explosion of information that we couldn't possibly retain without our digital assistants. My cell phone is never more than a few feet away from me, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, interacting with me all day long with emails, texts, calls, and messages. Not only that, I'm checking a bunch of apps that prompt me to do so like Facebook. My latest new app tells me when there is an earthquake or a volcanic eruption anywhere in the world including Antarctica. I didn't even know there was an active volcano down there that is erupting right now. Do I really need an alert that there was

5.5 earthquake off of the coast of New Zealand or a 7.0 in Peru ten minutes later? Probably not. But then I used to get alerts from Accuweather almost every day about weather to worry about – until I deleted the app.

We are not just carrying around so much more information than we ever thought we could. We are also carrying around our reactions to it too. In ten minutes on Facebook, I learn about people who've died I never knew ... but are connected to people I do. I learn about new relationships, marriages and babies, vacations, illnesses and recoveries in thousands of friend's and friends of friend's lives. Email alerts come to me about terrible things happening in Congress or at the State Capital that I need to respond to RIGHT NOW by calling someone or signing a petition! Several times a day I get these messages and so do you. Right now there is an explosion of response to [a UU World article](#) about Trans folks that offended the Trans community. The ink was barely dry on the page before the UU World editor [was authoring an apology](#) for the piece. People were hurt and angry that this editor could be so insensitive. It might even cost him his job. We'll see.

The increased electronic communication we are experiencing seems to be increasing people's level of reactivity. And that escalating reactivity seems to be driven by social media, especially Twitter and Medium.

Add to that emotional hurts, injuries, unhealed wounds, strains, reactions, judgments and opinions from real world encounters with each other. Put both together and that emotional baggage can, at times, feel as heavy as a fully loaded backpack. These heavy feelings can weigh us down and limit us, draining us of energy, verve and drive.

Ultimately, the things we've packed and the things we are carrying can prompt a meaning crisis as we come to the point of having way too much to carry and the need to let go of something, *anything*, that will give us a little relief.

That's why I'm beginning a class Tuesday on "letting go."

I came across [Dr. David R. Hawkins](#) books researching another sermon. Hawkins was a psychiatrist who had powerful spiritual experiences that shaped his approach to helping people with their mental and emotional problems. The last book he published before he died was titled, "[Letting Go: The Pathway to Surrender](#)." As I looked through his books, I appreciated how much wisdom I was encountering in them. That led me to want to share some of his insights and methods in a class using his book. I found a lot of resonance with Buddhist and Christian teaching but in simple and direct language.

Like the Buddha, Hawkins diagnoses the human dilemma as attachment that gets integrated into the sense of self. He writes:

Attachment and dependence occur because we feel incomplete within ourselves; therefore, we seek objects, people, relationships, places, and concepts to fulfill inner needs. Because they are unconsciously utilized to fulfill an inner need, they come to be identified as "mine." As more energy is poured into them, there is a transition from identifying with the external objects as "mine" to being an actual extension of "me." Loss of the object or person is experienced as a loss of our own self and an important part of our emotional economy. Loss is experienced as a diminution of the quality of ourselves, which the object or person represented. The more emotional energy invested in the object or person, the greater will be the feeling of loss and the greater the pain associated with the undoing of the bonds of dependence. Attachment creates a dependency, and dependency, because of its nature, intrinsically carries with it a fear of loss.

So, that fear of loss keeps us stuck holding on to what we are carrying ... until it is suddenly taken away from us or we just can't hold it any longer. And our heart breaks with the loss.

Hawkins says it doesn't have to be that way. We can consciously learn to let go of what we don't want to carry anymore or wasn't "me" in the first place. He has a specific technique that I find echoes Buddhist principles and methods too.

His secret to letting go is not in our intellect but in those emotional brain centers that operate at a deeper level than language. The secret to letting go, Hawkins says, is "being aware of a feeling, letting it come up, staying with it, and letting it run its course *without* wanting to make it different or do anything about it. It means simply to let the feeling be there and to focus on letting out the energy behind it."

There is a lot more to it of course, but this is the basic strategy in a nutshell. Not so easy to just "let feelings be" however because strong feelings typically cause strong reactions for good reason. Feelings are the survival mechanisms that keep us alive and safe. We just aren't very wise about how to work with them, as they can take over and start to control and dominate our minds. Come on Tuesday and learn more!

So, yes, we are all carrying a lot with us, but we can be much wiser about what we take with us and what we leave behind. And the lighter we travel the better.

And if we lighten our load enough,
maybe we'll finally get enlightened!