

What to Take for the Journey

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Glenda Gray
on January 24, 2010**

We do it every day—every day we begin a new journey. The day may be one filled with errands; it could be a day of work, a day of play, a day filled with people, or one spent alone. Every day is a new journey, and every day we have to decide what to take with us. Rev. Victoria Safford asks, “How much honesty and integrity; how much anger; how much arrogance; how much compassion; how much humor; how much gratitude; how much suspicion; how much hope; how much do we start the day’s journey with a willingness to change or be changed, if necessary.” Every day we pack these things in our backpack or briefcase or tote bag, along with our lunch, a bottle of water, medications, datebook, papers. We pick it up—the baggage and belongings of our life—and start out . . . every day.

Imagine what it must have been like for the Israelites fleeing Egypt; they didn’t get to pack their suitcases or a nice picnic lunch or to grab the maps (which sure could have come in handy about twenty years into the journey!). They went, the story goes, into the wilderness and wandered for forty years. At that time, a person’s life span probably wouldn’t make forty years. That is likely the reason for the forty years of wandering: many of those who started out did not see the end of the journey. Those who had been slaves in Egypt would have had the slave mentality, would have had experience with the pagan gods, so they did not get to enter the Promised Land. Many were born in the desert and grew to adulthood knowing nothing but the journey; homes in Egypt did not need to be forgotten because they were never known.

The Promised Land, for the followers of Moses and for us, is not just the destination, it is a way of going. We need to be sure we will have what we need for such a spiritual journey—and that place of hope and security and freedom is carried inside of you. So you might want to think about what you are going to need, what you are going to take on the journey—to get to the Promised Land, over the rainbow, or to Kansas, or wherever the road you travel puts you.

A UU favorite son, Ralph Waldo Emerson, makes a good case for self-reliance. In his essay “Self-Reliance,” he wrote: “There is a time in everyone’s education when you arrive at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to you but through the toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to you to till. . . . Trust thyself. To believe your own thought . . . a person should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his or her mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages.”

And it *is* your own mind that will be the ultimate chooser for what goes in your luggage; you sort through what you have been taught, what you have read, what you have experienced and say, “I’ve got to take this with me on my journey.” Let me suggest some that I think worthy of your consideration.

Simplicity, living lightly in this world, was a constant theme for Henry David Thoreau. One of my favorite quotes of his is, “Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes.” Another is, “Our life is frittered away by detail. Simplify, simplify!” And, “Most

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of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts, of life are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of humankind.” To learn to get along without, to realize that, while the world gives us all manner of good things, our wants and our needs are not the same, and our wants may be bankrupting us and the rest of the world. So toss your electronics into a drawer for a while, forgo that new outfit that will just take up precious space, and sit under a tree and ponder nature *and* the greater needs of the world and simplify, simplify, simplify.

Perhaps you remember some of these words of William Blake’s:

To see a world in a grain of sand,
And heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.

These words, to me, vividly describe the power of imagination, to which we owe much that makes life worth living: music, art, poetry, and drama are inspired by imagination working through experience. Imagination carries one person’s spirit into the dwelling place of another; put yourself in the other person’s shoes, we are admonished. Our spirits could never take flight in dreams or hopes or aspiration if there were no wings of imagination given as part of our equipment for life. When your journey begins to become a bit of a slog, when you feel frozen into a present you do not embrace or desire, reach into your knapsack and take the wraps off the oddly shaped, malleable package that is your own imagination.

And travel on this journey with a big package of enthusiasm tucked away right next to imagination. Emerson again: “Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm.” Anonymous wrote, “Years may wrinkle the skin, but to give up enthusiasm wrinkles the soul.” Amen! Enthusiasm is a wonderful word and feeling; its synonyms include rapturous interest, excitement, eagerness, zeal. It is a magic spark that transforms “existing” into “living.” About what are you enthusiastic? Be sure you put some of that into your valise.

The road you travel may be made smoother if we show some courtesy along the way. Courteous treatment is the recognition by one person that another person has the same dignity as a human being as do we. The practice of courtesy develops the habit of treating others as equals; it is an old word for an older concept: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Hopefully, very few of us are cruelly and greatly wronged, but on our journey we do take a lot of blows to our self-esteem and jolts to our vanity. So a person given the finger in a traffic situation proceeds to overtake the person, ram their car, pull out a gun, and shoot. If ordinary civility, the courtesy we expect to be shown, were extended to every person with whom we come in contact in our daily lives, what a contribution we would be making to human brotherhood and sisterhood.

And a large dollop of humility is always useful to carry along in the same package as courtesy. This quote from Will Rogers can be written over and over again on the paper that wraps up courtesy and humility: “We are all ignorant. We are just ignorant about different things.” Tuck that away in your pocket for easy access as you travel.

John Dewey wrote that the most useful virtue is patience, and we have always heard that patience is a virtue. Life is growing more and more complex; we have to deal

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with more and more people and more and more information. In this high-speed age, with its many choices, we may find ourselves moving so fast that we make haste and make messes that we then need to clean up; it is easy for frustration to slip in. Without patience we don't take time for quiet thinking and planning; without patience, calmness escapes us. Another old saying that alludes to patience is: all things come to those who wait. In this busy age, I think we have mostly jettisoned that old adage for "all things come to those who go out and grab them." I recall going on a backpack trip to the New Mexico high country with my then-husband. He never stayed in camp, hiking all over in the search for mountain goats and other wildlife. I, exhausted after climbing to over eleven thousand feet, stayed around camp a lot. Now he undoubtedly saw some vistas that I missed, but I saw almost everything else that he saw and a few things he didn't—like the brown bear that came to drink at the stream. Maybe we need to put a little patience in all of our pockets as we go through life's journey.

When we get weary on our journey we might do well to remember Christopher Columbus and the entry that, day after day, he put down in the private log of his first voyage across the uncharted North Atlantic: "This day we sailed on. Course WSW." He must have written it in a spirit alternating between blind hope and quiet despair, but he had set the course that his intuition and logical intelligence led him to believe was the correct one. During times of distress, doubt, and weariness, you might find your spirits renewed by this quote written on a note card that is in the side pocket of your suitcase: "This day we sailed on."

How does our faith, our faith tradition and community, inform this journey? My hope is that it is always one of the things that we put in our duffel bag. If we are living up to the principles of Unitarian Universalism, there should be plenty of room because it is inclusive of most everything else we have chosen to take along. My hope is that we *not* find room for a faith that is exclusionary, like the one in this real-life story: A friend of mine moved to a city at the request of her son and daughter-in-law before their fourth child was born. They had lived close together before, and the arrangement seemed to suit them all—and I am sure the children enjoyed having their only Grammy spend so much time with them. Recently my friend got a call, suggesting that it would be better if she didn't come over to the house any more. A few months ago, it seems her daughter-in-law became part of a faith tradition that thinks homosexuality is evil, and since my friend is a lesbian, she was no longer the welcome family member she had been before. May our luggage not carry such baggage!

I hope there is still a bit of room in your suitcase for something else—an everyday spiritual practice that you can take on the road with you. My suitcase contains a small chalice. Maybe you have one that you light before the evening meal and sing a song, or say a table grace, or both at once: [to Mary Had a Little Lamb] Loving spirit, be our guest, dine with us, share our bread, that our table, might be blessed, and our souls be fed. The spiritual practice might be meditation, or social action, or simply lying in bed at night and asking, "What was the happiest thing that happened today?" No matter what kind of a day you've had on this journey, there is always a happiest thing; a happiest thing is rarely a big thing, but more of a fleeting loveliness. A few of my recent ones: the delight in a cousin's voice when I called her unexpectedly, a friend calling me unexpectedly because he missed hearing me laugh, one of my cats leaving the napping place and joining me on the bed, the honking of some geese flying over.

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Pack your bags well. While no one can tell you what to take with you in your light baggage, I hope you choose to put in things that will feed you and water you and comfort you, that will stretch you and help you grow. I hope you choose to put in things that serve others and the world and the interdependent web. They don't weigh much, and without them we lack substance; without them we might aimlessly wander in the wilderness.

Every day we begin a new journey. Every day we have to decide what to take with us; then we pick it up, the baggage and belongings of our life, and start out—every day. Every day.