

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website
Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist, Palatine, IL
Covenant Group Session
The Carpet Bag

Preliminaries

Chalice Lighting (Participant lights chalice while this is read)

The Chinese sage Lao Tzu once said, “He or she who knows that enough is enough will always have enough.” May we learn to be grateful for whatever we have so that it may be enough.

Check-in

Meditation Reading (Read by Participant)

“Walking Toward Morning” by the Rev. Victoria Stafford

You know we do it every day. Every morning we go out blinking into the glare of our freedom, into the wilderness of work and the world, making maps as we go, looking for signs that we’re on the right path. And on some good days we walk right out of our oppressions, those things that press us down from the outside or (as often) from the inside; we shake off the shackles of fear, prejudice, timidity, closed-mindedness, selfishness, self-righteousness, and claim our freedom outright, terrifying as it is—our freedom to be human, and humane.

Every morning, every day, we leave our houses, not knowing if it will be for the last time, and we decide what we’ll take with us, what we’ll carry: how much integrity, how much truth-telling, how much compassion (in case somebody along the way may need some), how much arrogance, how much anger, how much humor, how much willingness to change and to be changed, to grow and to be grown. How much faith and hope, how much love and gratitude—you pack these with your lunch and your medications, your date book and your papers. Every day, we gather what we think we’ll need, pick up what we love and all that we so far believe, put on our history, shoulder our experience and memory, take inventory of our blessings, and we start walking toward morning.

Meditation (read quietly by facilitator)

(Instruct for body position, eyes closed, deep breathing, and listening)

As the reading says, we “put on our history” every day. But I’d like to take you back now to another time, another history. Cast your mind back and visualize the time of the great European migration to the United States. Picture a young man or woman--perhaps a young person from your own ethnic heritage--walking with other pioneers across the endless prairie next to a very small Conestoga wagon. Now put yourself, your being into that person. Feel the earth under your feet as you go forward step by endless step. Feel the wind on your face and hear the birds calling.

Now send your mind back further, and see through the eyes of your young immigrant as you stand in a long line at Ellis Island, holding everything you own in a carpet bag or very small trunk. It’s not heavy to carry.

Now, go back still further. You’re in the bedroom of a small cottage in the European countryside. You’re staring into an empty carpet bag or small trunk resting on a chair. You turn your head and look at your things-- carefully laid out on the bed. There are material things there. Spiritual things. Philosophical things. Political things. Emotional things. All the things you’ve had and carried around your whole life. Added to bit by bit and year by year. But the carpet bag is too small to hold everything. You have to decide: What will you take with you on your journey to the New World, and what will you leave behind—never to see or touch again for the rest of your life. You’re facing a major transition, transforming your life, starting over. What are the most important things for you to take with you.

Keeping the silence, return to today. To yourself. Like your pioneer, you, too are in transition. You, too, are in constant life transformation. Assume that what you can take with you into this future journey of your life is limited by the size of the small bag our immigrant carried. What will YOU take—materially, emotionally, spiritually—for the next phase of your life, and why is that important?

(Silence)

Deep Sharing/Deep Listening

In the respectful process of deep sharing and deep listening, let’s talk about our own carpet bag, our own baggage. If space were limited—space for material, spiritual, or emotional things—what would be most important to take with us and why?

Optional Questions for Facilitator—Open Discussion

- **Did anyone else’s chosen baggage attract you? Are you willing to swap something out to take that along?**
- **What other things struck you as important to carry with you?**
- **What would you leave behind?**
- **What can we do to make sure we always pack lightly?**

Check-out

Closing Reading/Extinguishing the Chalice

(From Achaan Chah, Thesavada Buddhist Monk)

Do everything with a mind that lets go.

Do not expect any praise or reward.

If you let go a little, you will have a little peace.

If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of peace.

If you let go completely, you will know complete peace and freedom. Your struggles with the world will have come to an end.

So may we be.

Participant “Pre-Thinking” for Covenant Group Session: “The Carpet Bag”

In 1986, Robert DeNiro was in a film called “The Mission.” You may have seen it. He played Rodrigo Mendoza, a Spanish slave hunter in 18th Century South America. In a fit of rage, he kills his brother and is so overcome with remorse that only the guidance of a Jesuit priest prevents his suicide. Fr. Gabriel brings Mendoza to work at his mission with the natives.

The film is rife with symbolism of all kinds, most of it not really important to our discussion. Except one. While Mendoza doesn’t commit suicide, he takes on a great penance. He carries his brother’s full body armor literally on his back as they travel through the South American rain forest—hacking through jungles and climbing steep mountains. Several times he almost loses it, and scrambles desperately to retrieve it. Another time the burden almost costs him his life. Only at the end of his journey does his connection with a native tribe convince him to let go of his guilt, and the chief’s encouragement leads him to throw his guilt—literally, the armor—over the cliff. In the film, you can sense his relief, physically, mentally, emotionally.

We all carry around a lot of baggage. Not necessarily as specific or intense as that carried by Rodrigo Mendoza, but hard to carry nonetheless. “Baggage” isn’t always about guilt, although Mendoza’s is. More often, it’s the result of an accumulation of expectations, losses, successes, failures, loves, hates, desires, fulfillments, ambitions, and the words of many “teachers” still ringing in our heads.

We take on ideas or viewpoints, then fail to examine them to see if they’re still relevant—or indeed, if they ever made any sense. So they just stay in the “bag.” We feel hurt by the actions of others and fail to understand or forgive, so that hurt just stays in the bag. We form opinions of ourselves and others; we determine what is “essential” to our lives materially; we adopt behaviors that were at one time perhaps valuable coping mechanisms but have outlived their usefulness. We’ve learned some important life lessons that should never be forgotten.

Each of us has a carpet bag full of “stuff” that we carry around all the time. That carpet bag is fully as heavy as Rodrigo Mendoza’s brother’s armor, but not so easily seen. At our next covenant group gathering, we’re going to open those bags a bit and examine what we might do to lighten the load. To prepare for the session, you have a reading and a few questions for your “Pre-thinking.”

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Food for Thought

- If space were limited—space for material, spiritual, or emotional things—what would be most important to continue carrying with you and why?
- What would you like to leave behind if you could?
- What can we do to make sure we always “pack lightly?”

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