

THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

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BY THE AUTHORS OF THE BESTSELLING BOOK
Whistle While You Work

RICHARD J. LEIDER
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repacking your bags

LIGHTEN YOUR LOAD
FOR THE REST
OF YOUR LIFE

SECOND EDITION





an excerpt from

***Repacking Your Bags:
Lighten Your Load For the Rest of Your Life***

by Richard J. Leider and David A. Shapiro
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Preface

why did we redo it?



We rewrote this book because it was time.

Seven years had passed since the release of the first edition of *Repacking Your Bags: Lighten Your Load for the Rest of Your Life*. Much had happened during that time. Many significant changes had occurred in the world. New industries sprang up—practically from thin air—boomed, and went bust, almost overnight. Globalization went from being a visionary buzzword to a fact of life for businesses everywhere. Millions of working people were downsized, upsized, rightsized, and resized as gyrations in the marketplace affected companies and organizations of every size.

In our own lives, the changes, though on a smaller scale, were no less dramatic. Both of us, upon completion of the first edition of *Repacking*, made a conscious choice to dramatically reconfigure our personal and professional lives in an effort to more

fully realize our vision of the good life: *Living in the place you belong, with the people you love, doing the right work, on purpose.*

Richard restructured his corporate consulting business to focus more on writing and coaching. Dave returned to graduate school to pursue a doctorate and teach philosophy to elementary and middle school students. Richard responded to his renewed sense of place by relocating to a rural home on the banks of the St. Croix River. Dave put down roots in the Pacific Northwest, an area he had felt a sense of belonging to for decades. In our personal relationships, we repacked as well. Richard remarried, became an “empty nester,” saw both his children graduate college and enter the “real world,” and became a grandfather for the first time. Dave became a father, struggled to negotiate the challenges of marital intimacy in parenthood, drifted apart from his acquaintances at the local watering holes and nightclubs, and made new friends among his daughter’s preschool PTA members. Even our purposes were revised and revitalized. Richard, who had defined his purpose as “to help people discover and express their essence,” came to repack his purpose more simply as “uncovering callings.” Dave, who had seen himself primarily as a writer, repacked his purpose—now defined as “fostering understanding”—in new ways that included more teaching and facilitating, especially with young people.

Throughout these many changes, we continued to find ourselves—again and again—still taking stock—still reflecting on who we were and why. Still looking over all that we had and all we’d achieved, and asking, “Where do we grow from here?”

With each choice, each crossroad, we examined our lives and our options in light of the lessons of *Repacking*. We wondered what we needed to make ourselves happy: what to bring along and what to leave behind, what to acquire and what to give away, what to do and with whom to do it.

Separately, we had experienced the joys and challenges of repacking—the struggles to figure out what really matters and the sense of liberation that comes from making choices that express that in our personal and professional lives. We had also heard from literally thousands of readers who had repacked their own bags and had vicariously shared in their challenges and triumphs along the way.

Together, we agreed that it was time to revisit the questions that had initially inspired *Repacking*. And to see how the answers had changed for ourselves and our readers.

As it turned out, the most compelling lesson that emerged for us in the years since *Repacking* first came out is that process is not something that happens once and is done with. It's an experience that stays with you, that stimulates thinking and inspires ongoing reflection.

We had originally thought of repacking as something people do once (or at most, a couple of times) in *reaction* to a sense of disillusionment or frustration in their lives. Now we understand it much more clearly as a lifelong *proactive* process of continually refining and redefining our authentic vision of the good life.

We've recognized that repacking is an ongoing activity of reflecting and choosing. Developing one's own vision of the good life is a matter of constant choice, a response to the inevitable shifts and surprises life continually offers us.

We found that with each step along the way, it remains necessary to re-examine what has brought us here, to continue asking ourselves if the choices that have sustained us so far are continuing to do so—or if they're just weighing us down.

And while this does entail a near constant questioning of everything we are and all that we have, it's a kind of questioning we've found that we can't really live without—not if we want to feel alive.

As we approached this revision of *Repacking*, we were no longer young men. Dave was well into his forties and Richard was nearer to the big 6-0 than the half-century milestone that had once loomed so large. And yet, both of us still felt young—particularly in two ways. First, we shared a sense of vitality that seems to come from a willingness to re-examine and reconfigure one's life as needed. And second, more importantly, we felt young in the sense of not really knowing, or claiming to know. Even though repacking is a life mastery process, we realized, as a result of our own repackings, that mastery still is—and would probably always be—a learning process. It had become more obvious to us than ever that repacking is not essentially about reaching the destination, but rather about the learning journey.

And so, we undertook this revision as a means to continue that inquiry, for ourselves and our readers.

We realized, as we moved later into what Carl Jung called “the afternoon of life,” that many of the choices that had served us along the way so far would no longer satisfy us. And yet, how could we be sure which new choices would be appropriate and which ones wouldn’t?

Oddly enough, the very act of questioning that repacking encourages gave us the confidence to proceed. Having developed the habit of reflecting and choosing, we were able to make our way forward into the next leg of our journey through life.

And once again, at precisely the time we felt our lives at turning points, we were surprised by unexpected answers and new sources of aliveness.

We were reminded the living process for not only “afternoon” and “evening” but also the entire day lies within us. To feel fully alive, we must repeatedly turn our gaze inward. To know where we are on the trip, where we want to go, and how to get there, we must learn to count on an inner sense of direction.

Quite simply, we must continually unpack and repack our bags.

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

Repacking, then, is the ongoing and continuous activity of reflection and choice. Rearranging our priorities. Reframing our vision of the good life. And recovering a new sense of being alive.

As we revisited repacking in word and in deed, it came into sharper focus than ever before that repacking is indeed a cradle-to-grave process—one that we must revisit regularly in order to keep growing.

Comments from readers, friends, and family alerted us to some gaps in the original version of repacking. At first, like any authors, we were hurt that people didn’t think “our baby” was perfect. How could they not love every word we had written? Wasn’t it all there in black and white? But as time went on, and we embraced our own repacking experiences and those of readers, we came to see that some revisions were in order.

This book was originally written as a chronicle of our own repacking. This revision revisits that chronicle and expands upon it by referencing experiences, insights, and episodes that have emerged in the years since the original. During the seven-plus years since *Repacking* first came out, we've occasionally been enlightened—but more often, humbled—by people's experiences with it. As a result, and due, in part, to our ongoing efforts to repack our own bags, we both think we've developed a further understanding of the good life and how to go about attaining it.

We offer this revised chronicle then, as the current version of a guidebook to the future for our peers and fellow travelers.

May it also help you lighten your load for the rest of your life.

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April 2002

Prologue

the question that started it all . . .



Life cannot be hurried.

—Maasai saying

Richard explains how it all began.

Late one afternoon, on a trek through the highlands along the edge of the Serengeti Plains in East Africa, I experience a breakthrough.

It is a year in which East Africa is suffering one of the worst droughts in history. The vast plains are parched, stripped to dust. River beds run bone dry. Fields of lush grass have been reduced to crabbed patches of stiff straw, and the myriad flowers, normally painted in deep shades of green, blue, and mauve, are bleached of all color. Only the dust devils, whirling high overhead and then touching down on the hard, fractured ground, seem to prosper.

In the distance, over the scorched Serengeti, move incredible herds of animals—more than 3 million strong—coming together in search of water and food, tracing the

hoof-worn trails that are the highways of their migratory route. They pour steadily across the plains in a broad stream several miles long. It is an extraordinary spectacle, unlike anything else on earth.

The sun is setting, creating water mirages that appear and disappear before our eyes. But the intense heat lingers like a bad dream. It has drained us of all energy. We ride along in our Land Rover, like so many rag dolls strapped in our seats. Small cracks in the vehicle's frame vacuum in clouds of dust that blanket us. The fine silt seeps into our pores until our own bodies feel as dry as the surrounding terrain.

As the leader of this group of 12 mid-life adventurers who have traveled 7000 miles on this "Inventure Expedition" to come face-to-face with Africa and themselves, I feel especially exhausted. The responsibility of assuring their safety and continued involvement in our process is, at times, almost as oppressive as the heat.

We pull into Magaduru, a small Maasai village in the highlands above the Serengeti. We will be camping here for the night before the start of our backpacking trek in the morning.

A tall, lean Maasai man of aristocratic bearing springs upon our vehicles. He plunges the shaft of his spear into the ground and stands in the pose of the heron, balancing on one foot, bracing the other on the inner thigh of the supporting leg. He adjusts the small sword that hangs on his waist, then throws a worn blanket around his body, with a confidence that imparts style and grace to this simple gesture. His dark, penetrating eyes survey us as if scouting the windswept plain that lies behind. No emotion is revealed on his proud, serious face.

Then suddenly, he breaks into a broad smile and greets us in English and Kiswahili.

"Jambo! Welcome to my boma!"

He talks rapidly with our guide, David Peterson, fixing his gaze first on us, then nodding in the direction of

his nearby cattle. Loud laughter erupts from the bushes where women and children are hiding.

“What is he saying?” we ask.

David smiles. “He hopes the smell of cattle dung is not too strong for you!”

This breaks the ice. Our laughter fills the air, joining that of our greeter. He introduces himself as Thaddeus Ole Koyie, the village chief. Gripping my hands firmly, he invites our group to be his guests.

In the lively conversation that follows, Koyie, who will be our Maasai guide for the upcoming trek, tells us that he has been educated at missionary school, where he learned to speak English. He does not explain, though, why he has turned his back on “modern” ways. Clearly, he is an influential chief, particularly for a man who is only forty. But there is something more and it implies a powerful sense of place and deep contentment with village life.

The Maasai are intensely communicative in the company of people they know. For reasons of their own, however, they are aloof and suspicious toward strangers. Happily, we don’t remain strangers for long.

All of us are quite taken with Koyie. A gregarious and witty man, he has the uncanny ability to move easily between the two worlds of our group and his village, transcending the barriers of language and custom. That night, around the small campfire, when he speaks of the drought, tears glisten in his eyes. Through his passionate eloquence, we come to understand that drought, to the Maasai, is very nearly a death sentence.

Early next morning, as we leave Koyie’s *boma* on our trek, I proudly sport a brand-new backpack. It is one of those high-tech ultralight models designed for maximum cargo-carrying efficiency. You know the kind—covered with snaps, clasps, and zippers, full of pockets and pouches, compartments inside compartments, a veritable Velcro heaven—and I have the thing stuffed. I’m a walking advertisement for a Patagonia or L.L. Bean catalogue. But of course, I have to be. As expedition leader, I’m

responsible for the entire group. So, in addition to the required group-size first aid kit, I've also been sure to bring along items that will make our trek not just safe, but enjoyable. I'm no Boy Scout, but I certainly subscribe to their motto, "Be prepared." And I have made it a point to be prepared for just about anything.

As we walk along, Koyie keeps glancing at my pack. Time and again, I see him mentally comparing the heavy load I carry with his own, which consists of nothing more than a spear and a stick used for cattle tending. Eventually we get to talking about my backpack, and he expresses his fascination with seeing its contents. Pleased at how impressed he appears to be, I offer to show him my stuff. I look forward to letting him see how carefully I've prepared for our journey and how ready for anything I am.

The opportunity presents itself late that afternoon as we are setting up camp near another *boma*. Proudly, I commence to lay out for him everything in my pack. I unsnap snaps, unzip zippers, and un-Velcro Velcro. From pouches, pockets, and compartments I produce all sorts of strange and wonderful items. Eating utensils, cutting devices, digging tools. Direction finders, star gazers, map readers. Things to write with, on, and for. Various garments in various sizes for various functions. Medical supplies, remedies, and cures. Little bottles inside little bottles inside little bottles. Waterproof bags for everything. Amazing stuff!

At length, I have all the gear spread out. It looks like that photo they always have in the centerfold of the great explorer article that shows everything necessary for a successful trip to the farthest reaches of the planet. Needless to say, I'm pretty satisfied with my collection.

I look over at Koyie to gauge his reaction. He seems amused, but silent. I understand. Surveying the items arrayed about us, I don't know quite what to say, either.

Finally, after several minutes of just gazing at everything, Koyie turns to me and asks very simply, but with great intensity:

"Does all this make you happy?"

There was something very powerful about Koyie's question. His words seemed to hit right at the heart of my deepest values. I honestly couldn't answer him that evening, and even weeks afterward, I couldn't completely say for sure.

In a split second, his question had gotten me to think about all that I was carrying and why—not just on our trek, but through my entire life.

Compelled by a need to explain it to Koyie—and myself—I immediately began going through all that I had, trying to decide if it *did* make me happy. He and I sat around the fire and talked long into the night. As he listened to me, I listened also, for I found that I was clarifying the core values of my life.

In response to the question, I began to realize the truth. Some of the things did make me happy, but many of them didn't—at least not in any way that made sense to be dragging them along. So as I repacked, I set those things aside, and eventually I gave them to the local villages. I went on the rest of the trek without them. I'm not sure that I'll never want or need them again, but I certainly didn't suffer for not having them at the time.

My load was much lighter after I'd re-examined my needs. And on the rest of the trip, I was quite a bit happier for having repacked my bags.



As a result of this experience, I began to assemble my thoughts and feelings about how to *lighten my load*. The insight I've gained has contributed to and been informed by my work as a life and career planning coach. In discussions with clients, colleagues, and family members, I've developed a new understanding of how important it is to regularly *unpack* and *repack* our bags throughout our lives.

As my co-author, David, and I have worked with these thoughts, we've made a number of discoveries that are at the core of this book:

- We've discovered that many people are laboring through their lives, weighed down by attachments that no longer serve them. Patterns of behavior that have helped them get where they are, aren't helping them get where they want to be. As a result, many people feel desperate. They are grieving over the loss of a life—their own. To overcome this despair—which we all feel at certain points in our lives—we must confront it and quite literally laugh in its face. This is what we look at in *Section I: Does All This Make You Happy?*
- We've discovered that it is possible to simplify one's life without sacrificing the conveniences and comforts we've come to expect. We can *give up* without *giving in*. By having less *in* our lives, we can get more *out of* life. To get to this place, we have to figure out what really matters. We have to examine what's in our bags and decide for ourselves if it's really what we want—and ought—to be carrying. This is the focus of *Section II: Unpacking Your Bags*.
- We've developed a new appreciation for what the “good life” entails and for the importance, in creating a vision of the good life for ourselves, of taking into account four critical factors: Work, Love, Place, and Purpose. The first three of these are considered in turn, in *Section III: Work Bags*, *Section IV: Relationship Bags*, and *Section V: Finding Your Place*. Purpose is woven throughout the book.
- We've learned that what we carry “in our bags” defines how we spend our time. And how we spend our time determines how we live and who we are. Sadly, many of us are laboring in ways that are unrelated to the things we really want to do with our lives. It is entirely possible, though, to redesign our lives—to repack our bags—in order to have, do, and be the person we've always wanted to be. We deal with this issue, and offer suggestions for how to do it in *Section VI: Repacking Your Bags*.
- We've found that happiness has more to do with experiencing than with having. Having is great, but it's not *it*. For most of us, what we're really looking for is a feeling—a feel-

ing of *aliveness*. This is what *Section VII: The Freedom of the Road* is all about.

Over the past two decades, Richard's relationship with Koyie has grown—and the lessons and learning have continued. The countless conversations they've had sitting around late night fires and trekking across windswept plains have given us great insight into ourselves and our culture. Koyie gently reminds us that the freedom to choose is not something we *have* and therefore can lose, but something we *are*. It is of our deepest essence, just waiting to be called upon.

At every moment, in every situation, we are free to choose a simpler expression of our being. We always have the potential to unpack, lighten our loads, and repack.

For many of us it takes a crisis, mid-life or other, to get us even thinking about what we're carrying. And then, unfortunately, we tend to make decisions from within the crisis. Instead of pausing to reconsider, in a purposeful manner, what we've brought along and why, we're apt to cast everything off and just run. Instead of making rational decisions that prepare us for what's ahead, we tend to come from a position of panic or fear—and the choices we make reflect that.

We can use a process for repacking our bags to stimulate thought on this issue outside of a crisis. We can reflect on our lives in a manner that helps us sort out what's really important—what makes us happy—from what's just weighing us down. We can then map out a new road ahead, one that will get us where we really want to go, with the things we really want to bring along the way.

And that, in a nutshell—or should we say backpack—is what this book is all about.

So Who Needs This Book?

Increasingly, people have shared with us questions like these:

- “What *really* matters now?”
- “How can I get my life under control?”

- “Who do I want to be for the rest of my life?”
- “I’m stuck! How can I get unstuck?”
- “What am I here for, anyway?”

If any of these echo your own feelings, then *Repacking Your Bags: Lighten Your Load for the Rest of Your Life* is for you.

It’s particularly appropriate if you find yourself at a place in your life where past patterns are weighing you down. If the person you’ve always been isn’t the person you want to be for the rest of your life.

If you feel as if you have most everything a person could want but are still lacking the one thing everyone needs—fulfillment—then you may find what you’re looking for in *Repacking*.

Conversely, if you’re not sure what it is that you want, if you don’t know what to do with your life or how to make a living while still having a life, then *Repacking* can probably help you, too.

This isn’t a book for people who believe that lightening their load means they have to sell all their possessions and move to the woods or an ashram in India. It’s for people involved in the day-to-day struggle of juggling work, home, and relationship demands in a manner that enables them to make ends meet while burning the candle at both.

Repacking is for businesspeople, professionals, homemakers, students, and retirees—in short, everyone who needs to prepare for and embrace a transition to the next phase of their lives.

For those of you facing retirement—no doubt a very different sort of retirement than previous generations faced—*Repacking* may have special appeal. Similarly, for those of you just starting out in your careers, *Repacking* can offer guidance and direction you may find particularly useful. Finally, if you’re someone who has recently experienced (or is about to experience) a major transition in your work life—a termination, a reassignment, a major promotion—then *Repacking* can act as a compass as you get your bearings for the journey ahead.

Look around. Most of your contemporaries are no longer consumed with consumption. Hardly anyone still believes that the “most toys” wins. Accumulation is no longer the name of the

game—your friends and colleagues are now asking “What really matters?” “How much is enough?” and “What is the good life and how can I live it?”

Repacking Your Bags offers a new life/work model, a fresh way of thinking about what matters most in your life and how to attain it.

There are hundreds of books out there on job hunting. On résumé writing. On money management. On career planning. The topics are virtually endless, but most share an assumption that life can be compartmentalized. Most put forth the position that people can work on an element of their lives independently of other factors.

Repacking Your Bags takes a radically different approach—radical in its simplicity. Instead of breaking things down into parts, the book focuses on reintegration of the whole. It’s about putting it all back together. Instead of viewing life as a collection of compartments, it takes a “whole person” approach that takes into account four elements critical to a successfully integrated life—work, love, place, and purpose.

Repacking starts with an assumption that seems obvious, but which is too often overlooked: Everyone has a different definition of the good life. Therefore, in order to achieve an authentic experience of our own good life, each of us must reflect and choose. *Repacking* offers an approach to do that—an approach that is unique in three ways.

First, by providing a generic formula for the good life into which you can plug your own specifics, *Repacking* enables you to shape your own vision of what the good life means to you, personally.

Second, *Repacking* encourages you to reflect on and commit to your vision of the good life through an emphasis on dialogue—with yourself and others.

Third, *Repacking* uses the metaphor of travel—and baggage—to help remind you that life is a journey and that your experience on the way is inextricably bound up in the baggage—emotional, intellectual, and physical—that you are carrying.

Essentially, it’s about choice—fundamental choice—but choice that springs from inner needs and a lifetime perspective.

The ability to repack our bags and make choices that move us in new, more fulfilling directions is a power that lies within us all. Our experience with *Repacking Your Bags* has helped us do that, and we hope that your experience with *Repacking* can do the same for you.

Ultimately, we're all in transition—always. And what repacking as a metaphor teaches us is that having a process to help navigate those transitions is the key to living our ongoing vision of the good life.


Of course, there are many ways to engage that process and you'll discover your own as you proceed. But perhaps the best way to get going is to begin with the question that started it all:

Does all this make you happy?

Section One

does all this
make you
happy?

refinding your smile



*Pack up your troubles in your old kit-bag
And smile, smile, smile.*

—George Asaf, 1915

In the movie *City Slickers*, Billy Crystal plays Mitch Robbins, a disillusioned radio advertising salesperson who takes a much-needed vacation to a Western dude ranch with a couple of longtime friends. At the beginning of the film, he's reconsidering whether he really wants to go—what with all the daily trials and tribulations of his life, he thinks the trip will be more trouble than it's worth. His wife disagrees, explaining why she thinks it's so necessary that he get away.

"You need to go find your smile," she tells him. She insists that rediscovering his sense of humor matters more than anything else he's doing at the time.

She's right. And over the course of the film, Mitch learns this, too. He comes to understand the value of laughter and what a difference it makes to have a smile in one's heart. At the end of the movie, nothing in his life has changed, but everything has. He

still has the same job, the same family, the same problems, but having refound his smile, he is able to embrace them with a renewed sense of joy.

Over the years, we've met many people who are in the same place as Mitch at the start of the film. They've lost their smiles. There's little or no joy in their hearts. The days ahead look flat and repetitive, as boring and monotonous as high school math class. Faced with this prospect of endless replication, people "lose their edge." They feel dull—and dulled. They feel trapped, insulated. They "go through the motions," of living, but there's no life in their lives.

We hear their dissatisfaction expressed in a couple of different ways:

"I'm so overwhelmed these days. I don't know how to have fun anymore."

Or "It's just the same thing day after day. I never do anything that's fun."

That's not quite true. Most of these people have lots of fun. They've got their garages filled with all kinds of fun stuff: golf clubs, jet skis, mountain bikes, you name it. For many of them, "fun" has become an addiction. But as with most addictive substances, people build up a tolerance. So despite all the "fun" things people do, they're still not having fun.

What's really missing is a sense of joy. People find that they no longer feel an authentic joyfulness in living, despite all the fun stuff they have or do. And this is the case whether they're male or female, young or old, rich or poor, or at any stage of life.

What's happened to people is that they've lost a delicate, but critical, component of aliveness and well-being—they've lost their *eccentricities*. It happens to many of us as we grow up and make our way in the world. We fit in. We see how other people survive and we copy their style—same as everyone else. Swept along by the myriad demands of day-to-day living, we stop making choices of our own. Or even realizing that we have choices to make.

We lose the wonderful weird edges that define us. We cover up the eccentricities that make us unique. Alfred Adler, the great 20th century psychologist and educator, considered these eccentricities a vital part of a happy and fulfilling lifestyle. Ironically,

the very term he coined—lifestyle—has come to imply something almost entirely opposed to eccentricity. It's turned out to mean a preconfigured package, formatted for easy consumption. Lifestyle now relates to things that we buy—someone else's idea of what we need to be happy. But is anyone really satisfied with these mass-marketed ideas of happiness? Is anyone really nourished by a McLifestyle?

It's no wonder so many people feel they've lost their smiles. But more poignantly, how many would even notice if they found them?

Why Do We Feel So Bad?

Forbes Magazine—“the capitalist's tool” no less—devoted its entire 75th anniversary issue to the question “Why do we feel so bad . . . when we have it so good?” Some of the country's finest writers offered opinions on why so many feel so depressed despite having opportunities of which our ancestors could only dream. Their writings echoed a common theme—we're unhappy because something is missing in our lives, something that all the fancy gadgets and fun toys in the world can't replace.

The lifestyle choices surround us, beckoning from glossy magazines and flashy commercials. Yet despite all these choices, few of us really feel much freedom to choose. There's little sense of creative expression, it's always *going somewhere*, never *being anywhere*. As soon as we do opt for something, it begins to chafe . . . because it never really fit us in the first place. We get trapped into thinking we'll be happy if we behave a certain way, live a certain lifestyle, and purchase all the products that go along with it.

Everywhere you look, you see people pursuing happiness, as if it's something they could capture and cage. But pinning happiness down only destroys it. It's too wild for that—it needs room to roam. You have to give it time, let it wander, surprise you.

Dave tells a story about how he learned this the hard—but funny—way.

It's not just glossy lifestyles people grab for. Instead, some of us try to appropriate slightly more tarnished images—but with just as predictable results.

The lifestyle I lusted after was the Henry Miller meets Jim Morrison expatriate poet/writer, eking out a living on the fringes of society. I wanted an alternative lifestyle, but I didn't want to have to invent my own alternatives.

So a few years ago, I moved to Paris and bought into the whole tortured artist scene. I dressed only in black and even took up smoking cigarettes to complete the picture. It was all very serious—and when I look back at it now, all very pretentious and boring. There was one moment, though, when my dark veneer of self-importance sustained a major—and truly enlightening—crack.

I was sitting in a cafe, nursing a glass of Bordeaux, affecting a pose of resigned world-weariness. I observed the passersby outside on the street going through the pointless motions of human life, and my heart was filled with deep existential despair. A small dog appeared, and while I watched, deposited a large turd on the sidewalk just in front of the cafe entrance. It seemed to me to be the perfect metaphor for the filth and degradation of everyday existence.

I ordered another glass of wine and resolved to sit and watch until someone stepped into the mess, feeling that this would sum up perfectly how we move through our days—blithely wandering along until, all of a sudden, and for no reason at all, we are soiled with foul and noxious excrement.

The show turned out to be quite amusing—and exciting as hell. Person after person would almost step into it, but at the last second, either notice and move aside or luckily just miss it. It was like watching a daredevil high-wire act at the circus. I started to have a great time. I was smiling, laughing out loud. I even stopped smoking.

The patron of the cafe, who had always seemed to me to be this forbidding character, came over to me, lured by my good humor. We got into a great conversation about philosophy and American baseball. He introduced me to his wife, who, after remarking that I was too thin, went away and returned with a bowl of the most delicious po-

tato stew I have ever tasted. The patron broke out a special bottle of wine that we shared with great conviviality. I talked to more people that evening than I had in the entire five previous months, and somewhere along the line, forgot all about my artistic angst.

I ended up closing down the cafe, and after bidding a fond adieu to my new friends, stepped merrily out the door . . . and right into the pile of dog-doo. The joke was on me—literally.

That was the loudest I laughed all night. I had re-found my smile, and it stayed with me the rest of my trip.

Prepackaged Lifestyles

Like Dave with his ready-to-wear angst and off-the-shelf torment, most of us try, at one point or another, to buy into a prepackaged lifestyle we think will make us happy. Just look at the catalogues we get in the mail. You've got your choice of *J. Crew's* sensitive urban professional. Or *L.L. Bean's* semireconstructed rural pioneer. *The Sharper Image's* early-adopting techno-whiz with plenty of disposable income. Automobiles, theoretically, provide the same easy answers. A certain kind of person drives a Volvo. He or she wouldn't be caught dead behind the wheel of a Toyota, which is driven by another kind of person. And neither would ever consent to drive their father's Oldsmobile.

Prepackaged lifestyles let someone else—usually someone fictional—do our living for us. The promise, which is also the curse, is that we can slip on a new lifestyle, including the emotions that go along with it, as easily as slipping on a new item of clothing.

The images that go along with prepackaged lifestyles are always successful ones. Models in the catalogues are always smiling and laughing. They're trim and fit. Characters on our television shows are—if not always glamorous—at least funny, and sure of themselves. The message is that their prepackaged lifestyle *works*. So when for us, it doesn't, we don't question the lifestyle, we question ourselves.

We think, "Oh, I just need something else, one more thing, and *then* I'll be happy." It's the catalogue-shopping approach to

the good life. The problem is that every few weeks (or around the holidays, every other day) there's a fresh crop of new catalogues. So we're kept in a constant state of unfulfilled desire. The things we buy don't satisfy us, but we keep grabbing for more. We're addicted to accumulation, but our tolerance level is so high that enough is never enough.

No wonder so many people see their own lives described in *The Overworked American*, the best-seller by Harvard University economist Juliet Schor. As she points out, since mid-century, when given the choice, Americans have consistently opted for higher salaries and more money over more time for leisure and family. Yet has this made us any happier? Polls indicate the answer is no. Thus, she notes, we are trapped on a treadmill of more work, more consumer goods, and more destruction of the earth.¹

And on that treadmill, what happens to one's smile? Well, look around. See the expression so many people wear: half grimace, half fear. Lots of us look like we just ate a bad burrito—with great determination. We're not sure what's going to happen, but we're damn sure not going to let it affect us.

Many of us who have worked hard our entire careers reach a point, usually about middle age, when we examine our lives and say, "Hey! Is this all there is? When does the fun start?"

The problem for many people today is that they've never really developed their own vision of success. They've assumed that if they just bought into someone else's image of what it means to be happy, they'd be happy, too.

It's as if they think they can find their smiles by buying a clown mask. But that doesn't change anything. And as the old song says, it doesn't hide the tears when no one's around.

Refinding Your Smile

In the 18th century, Sebastian Chamfort wrote, "The most wasted day is one in which we have not laughed." How many days have you wasted recently? When was the last time you had a real good belly-laugh?

The famous editor and writer, Norman Cousins, explained in

his best-seller, *Anatomy of an Illness*, how laughter helped him overcome the pain of his severely debilitating disease of the endocrine system. “I made the joyous discovery that ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give me at least two hours of pain-free sleep.”² Part of the therapy he designed for himself included watching Marx Brothers’ movies and reading humor books.

Cousins noted only one negative side effect of his laughter when he was in the hospital—it disturbed the other patients. No doubt because they weren’t laughing themselves. It’s too bad he didn’t have a big-screen TV, because sharing laughter is even better than laughing alone. Two smiles—like two heads—are better than one.

Humor is a gift to both receiver *and* giver. Stand-up comics talk about getting addicted to the rush that comes from performing. “Making a whole room of people laugh is better than sex,” says comic Ralf Leland. “But then again, I’ve never had sex with a whole room.”

Laughter made Norman Cousins feel better physically, but there’s another sense of feeling better, too. Regular doses of laughter also make you *better at feeling*. A good belly laugh loosens you up. It brings all your emotions closer to the surface.

People who are quick to laugh strike us as lively and warm-hearted. Thomas Carlyle, the 19th century Scottish philosopher, said that no one “who has laughed heartily and wholly can be altogether irreclaimably bad.” On the other hand, humorless people usually seem severe and uptight. It’s hard for us to imagine a group of stiff-collared Pilgrims slapping their knees and yukking it up. We tend to envision their lives as emotionally limited—not too hot, not too cold. Under control. Laughter has a way of breaking down that control. It’s subversive. Nothing like a pie in the face to bring a bigshot back down to size.

We all can use a little subversion in our own lives. We can all stand to have a little air let out of our inflated egos. In Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the wood nymph Puck, that “merry wanderer of the night,” delights in poking fun at old gossips, wise aunts, and other pompous self-important types. He tells how his antics make whole crowds of people “hold their hips

and laugh/and waxen in their mirth, and neeze and swear/A merrier hour was never wasted there.”

How many merry hours have you wasted lately?

If you can laugh at yourself, it changes your whole mood. Think of that the next time you’re rushing madly around in the morning, desperate to get to work. Step back and try to see the humor in the situation. Imagine yourself in one of those old time silent comedies. What would the Keystone Kops have to say about your character?

Tips for Refinding Your Smile

You know the feeling you get when you look over your old high school yearbook? It’s an odd mixture of relief and regret coupled with a certain disbelief that you ever could have been there or done that. As you repack your bags you’ll probably have similar feelings. What will sustain you though, and make it an enjoyable as well as rewarding experience, will be your ability to see the lighter side of the choices you made. If you can hang on to your smile, you’ll do a better job of repacking and just as importantly, have more fun while doing so.

As a wrap-up to this part of the process and warm-up for what comes next, here are a few additional tips and suggestions for refinding your smile. As you move on through this book and afterward, we encourage you to revisit them whenever you need a lift.

- *Prime your smile.*

It’s easier to keep laughing than to start. So treat yourself to things you find funny as a means to get your laughter engine going. Rent some Marx Brothers or Three Stooges movies, or listen to a few tapes by George Carlin, Lily Tomlin, or Robin Williams.

- *Laugh, and the whole world laughs with you.*

Laughter has its roots in shared experience. So schedule a dinner party or a picnic to be with people who make you laugh and, more importantly, who find your jokes funny.

- *Play with kids.*

Kids are funny, and they know it. If you spend some time with them—playing, as opposed to trying to make them clean their rooms or whatever—you’re certain to find a laugh or three.

- *Wear an odd article of clothing.*

Put on a loud tie, a silly hat, a patterned shirt that amuses you. It may not seem like much, but it’s pretty hard to stay morose when you look at yourself in the mirror and see Mickey Mouse staring back from between your lapels.

- *Rekindle a romance (preferably your own).*

The world tends to look a little brighter when you’re in love. It’s easier to laugh off a traffic jam or missed connecting flight when you’re sitting next to someone you really care about. So take the opportunity to rediscover your core connection to the person or people you’re most attached to. Spend some time alone and recall some of the best laughs you’ve had together—literally. Act them out. Re-tell the old jokes. Share the wonderful absurdity of caring deeply for one another. If you can find the humor in your closest personal relationships, you can find the humor in anything.

- *Take something incredibly seriously.*

The hardest you ever laugh is when you’re not supposed to—like during a slumber party after Dad comes in and tells you all to be quiet or else. Use this same strategy on something in your life today, preferably something that’s pretty absurd to begin with. Professional wrestling would be perfect. If you can see the seriousness of something silly, it can help you turn things around and see the lighter side of something really serious, too.

- *Enroll in a stand-up comedy or theater improvisation or storytelling class.*

Check out your local comedy clubs or community theaters. Most probably offer some kind of introductory comedy class. Enrolling doesn’t guarantee you’ll become the next Jay Leno, but it is a safe bet you’ll get a lot of laughs out of the experience.

- *Learn to tell at least one joke.*

Lots of people claim they can't tell jokes—all that means is they *don't*. But it doesn't take any special talent to be funny. It just takes practice. So, check some joke books out of the library and inflict them on your friends. Sure, they'll groan when you treat them to a clunker, but you know they'll be telling the same joke to their friends first chance they get.

- *Call in well.*

There's nothing quite so delicious as playing hooky. So "call in well" to work one day and just take it easy. Go see a comedy matinee at your local movie theater. Sit in a restaurant at lunchtime and revel in the joy of being "bad" for a day.

- *Do one "deviant" thing a day for the next ten days.*

Why be normal? Dare to be different. Way different. Resolve to do one out-of-the-ordinary thing every day for the next ten days. It can be as mundane as taking a different route to work. Or as wild as dressing in a gorilla suit and scaring your office. The point is to shake things up. Deviate from your norm. Get out of the routine. See how it feels to do things in a new and different way.

Funny Postcards

Mitch Robbins refound his smile, and you can too. This short "postcard" exercise can get you thinking about ways to do so.

A Note on Postcards and Dialogue

The postcard exercises in the book are designed to remind you that life is a journey, and that it's important to include others in it. To let them know where you are. And how things are going on the way.

Postcards are an especially quick and easy way to correspond with friends, family, and colleagues. Writing a postcard is a lot less intimidating than sitting down and crafting a handwritten letter. And often, it's just as effective. Usually, reaching out to make contact is what matters. It's not necessarily *what* you say, but simply *that* you say it.

It's about getting the dialogue going. Dialogue lies at the very foundation of all Western culture. Our religious and philosophical beliefs are rooted in dialogue. Ironically though, one of the most common complaints we hear about contemporary society is that *no one talks anymore*.

Friends, clients, business associates all echo the same refrain. No one has time for a real heart-to-heart. And when we do get together to talk, it's about *things*—work, sports, fashion, TV. Anything to keep the conversation light and lively and away from what's really going on. Meanwhile, what we really want to talk about is life—our lives—in depth.

Nietzsche wrote about “marriage as a long conversation.” Many marriages quickly descend into short-tempered comments or just as often, total silence. The same goes for many work relationships. The two most meaningful dialogues most people have with anyone at their work are their initial interview and their exit interview. In between, they're too busy, hurrying through each day.

Meanwhile, people *really* want to talk. They need to. It's a human instinct as powerful as hunger or thirst—we all need to tell our story and have it be heard. That's why this book puts such an emphasis on dialogue. The exercises and activities around unpacking and repacking are intended to be done with a partner, or partners, and to stimulate discussion about the issues in question. Consider them a map for your conversations, but don't hesitate to stray off the beaten path if that's where they take you.

This isn't to say that you can't do the exercises on your own. Going through the process of completing them will definitely make a difference. But if you can get a dialogue going with someone else, someone who can reflect back to you what you've expressed, you'll learn more about yourself than you would otherwise. And probably have more fun doing so, too.

So we really encourage you to *send* the postcards you write. Use them to get a dialogue going with your postcard penpal.

Choose your postcard penpal—whom we call your Dialogue Partner—based on the subject of the postcard you're sending. This means you might have a number of different Dialogue Partners. That's okay. But it's also okay if you have only one.

The main thing about postcards is that they are short. Each postcard is meant to be a quick note, a “snapshot” of where you are. Don’t agonize over a long involved letter that you’ll never get around to finishing. Focus instead on a simple, straightforward message that opens the door to further dialogue.

The postcards can be a catalyst for conversation—like sending postcards to someone and then visiting the person after your trip and seeing your postcard on the refrigerator. It reminds you of the experience and gives you a chance to fill in the details. A chance to get a real dialogue going about what happened and how you felt about it. Dialogue that sure beats the standard “Weather’s fine. Wish you were here” type of conversations we usually take part in.

Postcard Directions *Where's Your Smile?*

Think about the following:

1. Are you living your own vision of the good life, or somebody else's?
☐ my own ☐ someone else's ☐ a combination
2. Have you lost or found your smile?
☐ lost ☐ found ☐ neither
3. Are you having more or less fun than you did 5 years ago?
☐ more ☐ less ☐ about the same

Now, create the Postcard.

4. Pick a person in your life who puts a smile on your face. Someone you think would get a kick out of knowing they put a smile on your face. On the front of the card, create an image of how the person makes you smile. Do a collage, make a sketch, spill coffee, whatever. On the back of the card, write a message to that person. Tell them about the characteristics you've illustrated on the front of the card.
5. Send the card to this Dialogue Partner. Wait for a response, or if you don't hear in about a week or so, call up and see what your partner thinks.

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Lighten Your Load For the Rest of Your Life***

by Richard J. Leider and David A. Shapiro

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