



THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

THIRD EDITION, UPDATED & EXPANDED

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repacking your bags

LIGHTEN YOUR LOAD
FOR THE GOOD LIFE

An Excerpt From

Repacking Your Bags: Lighten Your Load for the Good Life
Third Edition

by Richard J. Leider and David A. Shapiro
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Why Did We Redo It Again?

The world told us it was time for another edition of this book.

We knew the concept of *Repacking Your Bags* had really arrived when Hollywood got in on the act.

In the 2009 critically-acclaimed film, *Up in the Air*, superstar actor George Clooney plays Ryan Bingham, a corporate downsizing expert who gives motivational speeches on relieving one's life of excess physical and emotional baggage, using the metaphor of unpacking and repacking one's "backpack."

Coincidence? Perhaps.

Plagiarism? Well, we admit it crossed our minds.

But probably the best explanation is that the collective consciousness, or what is sometimes referred to as the "zeitgeist" has, over time, firmly embraced the *Repacking* concept.

In the years since 1994 when *Repacking Your Bags* was first published and 1999 when the second edition came out, we have witnessed the emergence of *Repacking* as a true cultural phenomenon.

Back in the day—the waning years of the 20th century, that is—the ability to "repack," or systematically take stock of one's life and develop an authentic, individualized conception of the good life—was essentially an *option*, mainly for middle-aged people who had achieved a modicum of success in their personal and professional

lives. Now, however, well into the second decade of the 21st century, it is an *imperative*, for men and women at all ages and stages. Repacking is an essential survival skill, one required of young job-seekers, midlife career changers, and older adults facing their own challenging transitions to life in a new post-work world.

The tragic events of September 11, 2001 marked a transformation for people not only in the United States, but around the world. Since then, more than ever before, men and women, young and old, are desperate to make sense of their lives. Ironically, more than ever before, people are finding that sense elusive.

Technological advances, major economic shifts, longer life spans, and new attitudes toward aging are revolutionizing the way we live and work. These revolutionary changes are prompting people to ask questions that cut to the core of who we are, individually and as a society.

People feel worn out by overwhelming responsibilities and non-stop changes. We're exhausted — weighed down by shouldering too heavy a load at work, in relationships, and in our communities.

Above all, people have misplaced their sense of fun and play, their native curiosity, their feeling of wonder about the world. Too many of us aren't happy — or at least not as happy as we'd like to be. More and more of us feel a sense of disconnectedness with our work, our relationships, and a deep experience of something larger than ourselves.

The good news is we are all essentially hard-wired to find those connections. We just need a framework, or guidance system, to do so. This new version of *Repacking Your Bags* provides that guidance system, and does so in a way that encourages our natural sense of play and wonder, inspiring us all for the journey ahead.

Countless changes have occurred in the seventeen years since the release of the first edition of *Repacking*. Back in 1994, for instance, hardly anyone we knew had a cell phone, and the internet was still

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, purpose and work are still helping us move forward, or if they’re weighing 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.

This book was originally written as a chronicle of our own repacking. This revision revisits that chronicle and expands upon it by referencing unpacking and repacking episodes that have emerged in the years since. In the nearly two decades since *Repacking* first came out, we’ve often been enlightened—but more often, humbled—by others’ 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 as the current version of a guidebook to the future for our fellow travelers. May it help you lighten your step on the road to the good life.

The Question That Started It All . . .

Does all this make you happy?

— Maasai elder

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.

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 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 enormous herds of animals— more than a million and a half 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 twelve midlife 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 group. 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, first fixing his gaze 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 leader. 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 elder, 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 ultra-light 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 the 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 is nothing more than a spear and a stick used for cattle-tending. Eventually we get to talking about my backpack, and he expresses his eagerness to see 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 un-snap 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 "great explorer" articles, 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 he is 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 afterwards, 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 essentials 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, 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 life's load. The insight I've gained

has contributed to, and been informed by, my work as a life 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 overwhelmed. At the same time, many are questioning the point of it all. They're wondering if what they're working so hard for is really worth it. Time and again we hear people say things something like, "I don't even feel like I'm living my life. What's it all for? What is my true purpose? What is my life really all about?" In short, we hear them asking for a sense of authenticity: a clearly rendered, easily understandable, and most importantly, *individualized* conception of happiness or the good life. This is what we explore in Chapter 1, *What Is the Good Life?*
- 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 to be carrying. This is the focus of Chapter 2, *Unpacking Your Bags*.
- We've developed a new appreciation for what the "good life" entails and how important it is that, in creating a vision of the good life for ourselves, we take into account four critical factors: Work, Love, Place, and Purpose. The first three of these are con-

sidered in turn, in Chapter 3, *Repacking Your Place Bag*, Chapter 4, *Repacking Your Relationship Bag*, and Chapter 5, *Repacking Your Work Bag*.

- We've learned that it's not just *what* we carry "in our bags" that determines the quality of our lives; it's also, more importantly, *why* we carry what we do. That's the Purpose component. It's vital to become clear about our life's purpose so that we can carry what we're carrying with balance, fortitude, and joy. With that in mind, 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 feeling of aliveness. This is what Chapter 6, *Repacking On Purpose*, is all about.
- Finally, we've come to understand that repacking is a process that doesn't end; it's a mindset and an approach to living that goes on continually. Living with passion and purpose means that we must consistently re-evaluate our lives and make changes — usually subtle, but sometimes more significant — to rebalance what we're carrying and why. This is the focus of Chapter 7, *The Freedom of the Road*, as well as the Epilogue, *Lightening Your Load*.

Over the past two decades we've thought a lot about the lessons of *Repacking*, and our questions and our learning have continued. The conversations we've had sitting around late night fires and trekking across windswept plains have given us insight into ourselves and our culture. These experiences remind us that the freedom to choose is not something we *have* — and can therefore lose — but something we *are*. It is of our deepest essence, just waiting to be unpacked.

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, midlife 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 in calmer times. 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 of late, people have shared with us questions like these:

- “What’s next for me?”
- “Why doesn’t all this make me happy?”
- “Who do I want to be when I grow up?”
- “How can I find my life’s work?”
- “How can I re-imagine my life?”

If any of these echo your own feelings, then *Repacking Your Bags: Lighten Your Load for the Good 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 at this point in your life.

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 way 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 what's next in their lives.

For those of you facing midlife and beyond — no doubt a very different sort of second half than previous generations faced — *Repacking* may have special appeal. Similarly, for those of you just starting out in your adult lives, *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 life — a job loss, a relocation, a relationship change — then *Repacking* can act as a compass as you get your bearings for the journey ahead.

Repacking starts with the assumption that 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 innovative 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 “courageous conversation” — with yourself and others.

Third, *Repacking* uses the metaphor of travel 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 — but choice that springs from inner needs and a whole person 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 at the root of it all:

Does all this make you happy?

What Is the Good Life?

In the Woody Allen movie, *Midnight in Paris*, Owen Wilson plays Gil, a successful Hollywood screenwriter visiting Paris with his fiancé, Inez. Gil, who is struggling to complete his first novel, falls in love with the city, and fantasizes about moving there, a prospect Inez, who can hardly wait to get back to Southern California, considers just silly romantic nonsense.

Although Inez's dismissal of Gil's dream is a symptom of deeper problems in their relationship, she has a point. Because it's not even contemporary Paris that Gil adores — not the Paris of the 21st century — rather, he has fallen in love with a dream: Paris of the 1920s, the Paris of Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, and the whole Lost Generation of Americans who made the City of Lights their home after World War I.

In fact, so powerfully does Gil long for this time that one night, to his surprise and consternation, he is magically transported back to that world: he is picked up at midnight by Scott and Zelda and taken in a limousine to a party, where he meets such luminaries as Cole Porter, Josephine Baker, and of course, Hemingway himself. At first, understandably, he can't believe what is happening, but eventually, he comes to accept that it's real, and is thrilled by his good fortune.

The next night, he invites Inez to accompany him, but she tires

and goes home before the magical limousine appears. When it does, at midnight, Gil goes off alone into the past, and Hemingway takes him to the salon of Gertrude Stein, who to Gil's delight, agrees to read and critique his novel. He meets Salvador Dali and Pablo Picasso, and most significantly, makes the acquaintance of a beautiful young woman, Adriana, Picasso's muse and lover. We come to know that her relationship with the famous artist is tumultuous and certain to end badly, soon. But for Gil, it is love at first sight; he can't get her out of his mind, even when he returns, in the morning, to his contemporary life.

Gil makes up excuses to Inez so he can keep going back to the past. And what transpires is that he comes to see his life there, back in the 1920s, as his "real" life. So desperately has he wanted to live a life that wasn't his own, a life that he has glamorized as more beautiful, more poetic, more meaningful than the one he has made for himself, that, soon, he has fully embraced that world, so much so that he wants to stay there always.

He begins an affair with Adriana, who, as predicted, has been dumped by Picasso. They share their hopes and dreams, Gil revealing his belief that Paris of the 1920s is the perfect world, the time and place where art, culture, and society reached their apex. Adriana, by contrast, contends that it was Paris of La Belle Epoque, the time of Impressionism and Art Nouveau, when the city was at its apogee.

And indeed, so fervent is her desire for that lost time, that one night, as she and Gil stroll along, a horse-drawn carriage appears and transports them back to a café in Montmartre, circa 1870, where they meet the famous painters Claude Monet and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. Unfortunately for Gil, Adriana decides to remain back in her idealized Paris; she bids Gil adieu and he returns to the present, once and for all.

Although he is saddened by the break-up, he arrives at a new and profound understanding of himself and his life. He realizes that in his desire to escape the present and flee to an image of a world he believed

to be better than his own, he was reaching for something ephemeral and ultimately, unreal. He was imagining himself to be someone he wasn't, trying desperately to fit into a place that, in the end, he didn't belong. In short, he was being inauthentic, or to put it another way, he was striving for a version of the good life that wasn't really his own.

Back in the present, he decides to stay in Paris after all, break off his engagement with Inez (with whom he realizes he has little in common), and pursue his true passion of novel-writing, even if it turns out to be less profitable than being a Hollywood hack.

As the film ends, we see Gil striking up an acquaintance with an attractive woman he has met briefly in an antiques shop during his time in contemporary Paris. We don't know how their relationship will unfold—and neither does Gil—but we get a sense that whatever happens to our hero, it will spring from the true core of his character, and an authentic expression of who he really is.

Over the years, we've met many people who are in the same place as Gil was during his sojourn into the past. They seem like they're not really living their real lives. They're reaching for a vision of a lost world, one they're trying to grasp by adopting a lifestyle that isn't their own. It's as if by embracing someone else's conception of how life should be led, they'll discover for themselves the life they want. But as a result, they never quite feel fully at home with themselves. 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 several different ways:

- "I'm so busy these days. I don't know how to have fun any more."
- Or, "I wish my life was different, like a character in a movie or on TV."
- Or, "It's just the same thing day after day. I never do anything that's fun."

That's not quite true. Many 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. In fact, for many of them, "fun" has become an addiction. But as with most addictive substances, people build up a tolerance to it. So despite all the "fun" people have, they're still not happy.

What's really missing is a sense of joy. People find that they no longer feel authentic joy 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 uniqueness, their *authenticity*. 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 adopt their strategies to preserve our jobs, our incomes, and our relationships. 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 opposite to eccentricity. These days it suggests a pre-configured package formatted for easy consumption. "Lifestyle" now refers 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 life that isn't authentic?

Why Do We Feel So Bad?

Everywhere we look, we 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, let it surprise you. You have to discover what it means to you *authentically*, rather than trying to adopt a version of it from someone else.

Dave was reminded of this when, upon Richard's recommendation, he went to see *Midnight In Paris*.

That was me, as a young man. I lived that experience, just like Gil. Right after my wife, Jennifer, and I were married, we sold everything we owned and moved to Paris, in hopes of finding something. But the search was doomed, because what I was looking for was something that didn't come from within. Rather, it was an image of a life — or of a lifestyle, really — that I thought would make me happy. But I didn't realize that as long as it was someone else's image, that would never be so.

The lifestyle I lusted after was that of 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.

When we got to Paris, I bought into the whole “tortured artist” scene. I dressed only in black, and even took up smoking cigarettes to complete the picture. I refused to do anything that might contrast with this image, even things that might possibly have been fun. So, for instance, in no way would I consider visiting the Eiffel Tower. That was only for tourists, for the bourgeoisie, for simple-minded Americans (I pretended I wasn't one) looking for enjoyment. I did my best to sustain this attitude in spite of the dreary time I was having in one of the greatest cities in the world. In fact, I might have been fairly miserable the entire time that Jen and I lived over there, were it not for one moment when my dark veneer of self-importance sustained a major — and truly enlightening — crack.

this material has been excerpted from

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