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The Things We Carry

In 1990, award-winning author Tim O'Brien published a collection of short stories about his time as a soldier during the Vietnam War. *The Things They Carried* follows a platoon of soldiers and their experiences in the Vietnam jungle.

The book opens with a story by the same title as the book itself. In it, O'Brien writes:

The things they carried were largely determined by necessity. Among the necessities or near-necessities were P-38 can opens, pocket knives, heat tabs, wristwatches, dog tags, mosquito repellent, chewing gum, candy, cigarettes, salt tablets, packets of Kool-Aid, lighters, matches, sewing kits, Military Payment Certificates, C rations, and two or three cans of water. Together, these items weighed between 12 and 18 pounds, depending upon a man's habits or rate of metabolism. Henry Dobbins, who was a big man, carried extra rations; he was especially fond of canned peaches in heavy syrup over pound cake. Dave Jensen, who practiced field hygiene, carried a toothbrush, dental floss, and several hotel-sized bars of soap he'd stolen on R&R in Sydney, Australia. [...] By necessity, and because it was SOP, they all carried steel helmets that weighed 5 pounds including the liner and camouflage cover.

They carried the standard fatigue jackets and trousers. Very few carried underwear. On their feet they carried jungle boots—2.1 pounds—and Dave Jensen carried three pairs of socks and a can of Dr. Scholl's foot powder as a precaution against trench foot.¹

We may not be soldiers, but many of us carry a purse, a briefcase, or a backpack throughout our days. Each night before bed (or in the morning if you're a morning person), we check our bags to make sure we have our daily necessities. Our favorite pen. A calendar or notebook. A packet of gum. Headphones to block out the noise of the city on our walk to work.

¹ *The Things They Carried*, pg. 2-3

Perhaps a book to read during a long subway ride. We pack a face mask, wondering where and when and with whom we might need one. We carry our vaccination cards.

What O'Brien knows and writes about so well is that the things we carry with us are not just things—they are symbols for the world we live in, for our hopes and struggles and aspirations. The reader can't help but feel the physical and spiritual weight that the young men of the novel were carrying. O'Brien tell us:

What they carried was partly a function of rank, partly a function of field specialty. [The first lieutenant and platoon leader carried] a strobe light and the responsibility for the lives of his men.²

They shared the weight of memory. They took up what others could no longer bear. Often, they carried each other, the wounded or weak.³

They carried all they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried.⁴

What we carry are not just things—they are symbols. O'Brien weaves together stories about a specific group of men at a specific time in history, but the novel speaks to all of us and forces us to ask ourselves: **What are the things I'm carrying?**

Every day, I carry my vaccination card. 4 inches by 3 inches, it doesn't quite fit in one of the pockets of my wallet. My dad put his card, obtained a few months before me on account his age, in a plastic card-holder. His is pristine; it looks as good as the day he got it. I keep meaning to put mine in a card-holder, but at this point, the card is slightly crumpled. Every time I open my wallet to buy a cup of coffee or to order something online, my vaccination

² Pg. 5

³ Pg. 14

⁴ Pg. 7

card peeks out of the top of the left side of my wallet. **It says to me, "Remember that you live in unprecedented times."** Our vaccination cards remind us that the last 18 months have been some of the most difficult in many of our lifetimes. We've carried sought-after toilet paper from corner stores to our apartments. We've carried meals to friends' homes when they told us they had Covid and couldn't go to the grocery store or stand long enough in the kitchen to make a meal. **I carry my fear in my wallet.**

When I look at my vaccination card, I am also reminded of the ways in which all of us are part of a big group project. Getting vaccinated protects ourselves as well as our friends and family. Getting vaccinated protects everyone we come in contact with. When I look at my vaccination card, I remember my sense of communal obligation. I am inspired by those who I will likely never meet, but who were thinking of my safety and my life when they got vaccinated. **I carry my optimism in my wallet too.**

Every day, I put on two necklaces: a gold heart and a Star of David. My heart necklace was a gift on my sixteenth birthday. It is a copy of the gold heart that my mother wore for as long I can remember. Her heart was a copy of her mother's. I don't remember the details of the family tradition, but the women in our family receive gold hearts when they turned 16. When my mother took her heart necklace to be copied ahead of my 16th birthday, she actually had two copies made: one for me and one for my younger sister.

She had been diagnosed with terminal cancer and she was afraid that she might not live long enough to give my sister her own heart necklace. When she died six years after my 16th birthday, we carried her heart necklace and the Star of David I wear out of the hospital in a

plastic bag along with an assortment of miscellaneous things. The next morning, I put her Star of David on. When I look in the mirror, I see my mom wearing these two necklaces throughout my childhood. **I carry my grief on my neck.**

Each morning when I put my necklaces on, I feel connected to my mom and to my sister and to my grandma. I am reminded of all the ways that I am like my mom—my inability to say no to joining a committee, my need to cook too much food for people I’m hosting. I am reminded of all the ways she shaped and molded me, and of all the ways she continues to shape and mold me. **I carry a memory and my obligation to honor it with me always.**

Our ancestors also carried memory in a way that drove their purpose. Moses smashed the first set of Ten Commandments that he received on Mt. Sinai. The ancient rabbis, in a section of the Talmud where they debate the measurements and dimensions of the Tabernacle that housed the Ten Commandments ask: What happened to the tablets that Moses broke into many pieces? They answer: the Israelites lovingly placed them alongside the whole tablets in the Tabernacle.⁵ **We carry our brokenness with us.** Our tradition teaches that brokenness—whatever has happened in our past that has made us who we are—deserves a place of honor on our journey. **We cannot leave our brokenness behind.**

Before we received the Ten Commandments in the wilderness of Sinai, we left Egypt. After we crossed the Sea of Reeds, Miriam the Prophet “took a timbrel in her hand and all the women went out after her in dance with timbrels.”⁶ The image of Miriam leading the women

⁵ Talmud Bavli, Bava Batra 14b

⁶ Exodus 15:20

in song and dance is a powerful one. But where did the women get timbrels on their way out of Egypt? A midrash answers this question, saying that the women of that generation were so righteous that they were confident God would perform miracles for them and so they made sure to pack their timbrels with them when they left Egypt.⁷ We carry our hope with us. **We should always remember to pack our timbrels with us, in anticipation of the time that we will need them to celebrate.**

I carry my vaccination card. I carry my necklaces. I carry my brokenness. I carry my hope.

What are you carrying? If you closed your eyes for a moment, how would you answer that question?

What is the person next you carrying? In this new year, let us commit to building relationships with one another that give us the opportunity to learn the answer to this question.

What would the world look like if we could talk openly about the things we carry? I imagine a world in which we can be honest about our fears, our joys, our heartaches, and our celebrations. I want to live in that world.

30 years ago, Tim O'Brien published *The Things They Carried*. 30 years from now, what will we say about this moment, our lives, and the things we carried? The things we carry are not just things—they are symbols. **We are what we carry.**

⁷ Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael 15:20:2

Shanah Tova.