

Betsy Raskin Gullickson, Editor

The Cost of Baggage

BY BETSY RASKIN GULLICKSON WITH CALVIN YEE

I've been shedding all summer. Not my dog. Me. Our kids are remodeling their house, so they're moving in with my husband and me for three-plus months—lock, stock, and grandsons. Consequently, Gary and I are migrating to our garage, long ago converted to a

cozy guesthouse. The switch pushed me into planning mode for several weeks: How can we make room so that nobody feels cramped and everybody can access what they need? I took advantage of the process not simply to push things into a distant storage area, but to think about what I could shed. After several loads to the local thrift shop, consignment store, and, yes, garbage dump, I'm shaking my head at myself.

Some things were easy to let go of: toys and videos my grandkids haven't used in three years, duplicate files, clothes that were a mistake—bought and worn once, if at all. Yet I'm amazed at how hard it was to let go of so much. Gifts from friends—What if they visit and look around for the item? So-called “collectibles”—What if they're worth more money than I think and I figure out how to sell them someday? Clothes that

are too big or too small—What if I lose or gain weight? I hear my internal dialog and am bemused and amused.

Then there are those things that *really* grip me. The engraved silver-plated bowl from when I won a sailboat race; the bronze medallions awarded from a business association;

the ashtray, letter opener, and artwork given instead of honoraria; and work files—things I produced and resources I gathered over time. That's not to mention the LP(!) of Richard Burton's *Hamlet* that my sister gave me for my 16th birthday, the first antiques I ever acquired, and the dress I bought the last time I spent an afternoon out with my father.

All just *things*, most of which I will never use again. But as I look at them, they evoke memories and thoughts. I've deposited small pieces of identity in each item. They've become the physical evidence of a human fact: We carry with us thoughts about ourselves shaped by our history.

In other words, we all carry baggage. And just as we must fork over new fees to the airlines for our heavy suitcases, we pay a price for our baggage—in our personal lives and in business.

Calvin Yee, a principal with Accompli, started me thinking about this subject. Calvin reflected on a friend who led negotiations as his company, a local icon of a major Northeast city, was sold to a rival from another city. Within the indus-



*The Phoenix is a female rising out of her own ashes
shedding bad experience like a tired skin
rejuvenated by the hope that something better is coming
she creates that possibility and so,
more often than not something better comes.*

—*Dao Tsim*

try, the deal was an inevitable occurrence. Seen as the hero from Day 1, Calvin's friend stayed to lead the company (now a division) into the future. He became the head of a team of people he knows well as friends and colleagues, and he's finding that while history and knowledge are valuable and helpful, they also include memories of experiences that aren't always positive—in other words, baggage.

Baggage hides between the good memories and joys as slivers that are no longer part of our conscious thinking. Forming subconscious assumptions or "rules" that propel our behavior, baggage is more dangerous than human adversaries. In an openly nonfunctional relationship, the issues are often obvious and, therefore, can be addressed. But unstated assumption is trickier. How can we overcome that which we aren't even aware of?

Of course, it's easy to see—even be entertained by—other people's baggage. For example, each episode of *Sex in the City* starts with a monologue that explores how New York women survive in an idealized city. By the end of the episode, after trying, humorous, and, more often than not, risqué exchanges, the main characters experience life differently. They show no clear recognition of whatever has been holding them back. In the fantasy world of TV, those characters mysteriously resolve

their issues. All ends better for those involved.

But real life demands a different approach: facing the assumptions that too often send us lurching through our lives on autopilot. Overcoming hidden thought patterns doesn't just happen like the resolution of a TV script. It requires a commitment to being aware—to explore and understand the thinking deeply embedded in our history. This can lead to better interactions.

For example, a newly hired functional lead for a major technology company recently inherited a team of direct reports. The team was a mix of personalities and included one person who had been with the company for more than 10 years—a seasoned veteran who had been passed over. Inevitably, the relationship between the new hire and the veteran was a topic of discussion for all. Would the two men be able to work together?

Rather than tripping over the veteran's baggage, the newly hired leader addressed the issue head on. Adopting a reflective listening mode, he framed discussion of how the two of them could address assumptions—on both sides—that could drive behavior. Without such openness and curiosity, we pay for our baggage in the coinage of wasted effort, added stress, and missed possibilities

Even a single event can shape a worldview that leads us to defense

mechanisms. Past experiences solidify assumptions that drive behaviors designed to limit or decrease the chance that we will be hurt or encounter angst in the future. Paradoxically, by trying to protect ourselves, we end up limiting our opportunities for exploration of new ideas and growth. A healthy embrace of our baggage allows us to free ourselves of old constraints, to liberate energy to pursue new possibilities and positive outcomes.

Consider the opportunity to understand your baggage, and then work with someone to understand their baggage and their assumptions. Include such questions as: What belief lies behind or beneath an action or reaction to a situation or circumstance? Could someone else look at the same "facts" and see something different? What evidence supports one view or the other? And is that evidence objective, observable fact or just another belief? What if I'm wrong? What might it cost me to be "right"?

But that's just the first level of inquiry, the "turning over all the rocks and see what crawls out" stage. Go down one more level and consider:

Does this old way of thinking still serve me? If so, how might I use it to good ends? If not, can I drop it? Or, at least, can I hold my baggage more lightly and be gentle with myself and others until I can see a different way?

The journey itself can energize you and open up new possibilities for a better future. As my summer's shedding did for me. ■

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