Take Care Handling Heavy Luggage:

Personal Reflections on Returning from the Adult March of the Living (A MotL) 2005

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Life sometimes presents paradoxes: just when everything around, family, friends, health, work seem to be going OK, apparently from nowhere dark feelings emerge. Why does our Dark Side appear at such times? As our days turned to weeks, many of us are entering our second month since our return from the *Adult March of the Living*. How are we coping?

It's natural I suppose that we find ourselves tempted to recall those highpoints that 'feel good'. Fortunately our group was blessed with many moments: Jake's beckoning to join with the angels to lift the roof of the Isaac synagogue for Kabbalat Shabbat, Cracow; sharing quiet conversations; listening to Itzhak Perlman's *A Jewish Violin* on the bus rides; celebrating a Bar Mitzvah at the Kottel on Shabbos. I revisit these memories and relive them with joy.

In contrast, I also find myself recalling tearful, turbulent and distressing moments: my survivor mother's testimony at Auschwitz recalling her mother's last words to my mother's aunty - 'look after my little daughter' – words she repeated 60 years later. Those words I will never forget. My mother echoed those words after 60 years on that cold, grey, wet afternoon we huddled together in Birkenau. The next day the roll-call of names as we Marched, still echo; Shaya's reliving his unbearable, suffocating experiences in that cattle wagon; a mound of ashes symbolize the Dark Side of the landscape surrounded by the silent soundscape at Majdanek. No wonder at times I am tempted to distance myself from those overwhelming moments.

I know that sometimes it is good, even necessary to be detached. Yet, over the years I have become more familiar with myself and learnt that to distance myself from my *real* experiences is a band-aid measure. Such self-protection only works for a limited time before my memories insist on returning. They come back to 'bite' me.

Over the years I have learnt that my real experiences demand to be connected in my life, no matter how much I wish to keep them at arms length. I remain disconnected at my peril. If I persist to neglect my real

experiences they send signals, a deep sense of malaise knocks on the door of my consciousness.

These moments serve as a reminder that I need to attend to some deeper issues in myself. Often I am not ready, I do not allow these flashbacks into my mind. I reject their insistence. I dread their next return, like some difficult guests who I feel obliged to host. Sometimes like such difficult guests, I find it hard work to entertain these guests bearing Dark Gifts from the past, especially if they overstay their welcome, as they do. Of course I am speaking of those mental guests, thoughts and feelings that require us to connect our minds to overwhelming and stressful experiences.

Now as the days turned into weeks and now months after our arrival back from the A MotL, rather that distancing myself in order to forget, I seem to cope better doing the opposite, reconnecting with those Dark experiences. I find that to cope I need to get my connecting aging with what we experienced. I need to remind myself of those shared personal and intimate experiences. To transport me back to that landscape and soundscape I revisit my journal entries, touch and even smell some souvenirs, gaze at the faces in the photos, listen to Itzhak Perlman and Dudu Fisher.

These precious moments all provide me with an anchoring outside my current reality, a reality that needs attention. These moments provide evidence that I have indeed lived through Dark experience even if my mind wishes to deny it. But deny it I can not. Realistically I know that I was there, entwined with events that belong to the past. Somehow those two precious weeks in May 2005 have become part of me. Those two weeks have such an intensely that at times I feel lost in them, they sahke by sense of boundaries.

Sometimes the boundary between my past and future becomes blurred: reflections lead me to wonder about events from 60 years ago like those we witnessed. If communities back then could be gutted by Hitler and Stalin along with lesser know travellers in hatred, I wonder what is to prevent them being repeated in the future? Such reflections from the Dark Side carry a heavy emotional cost.

On the inside, each day my reflections delve into deeper layers of emotional baggage. These moments knock on the door of my consciousness long after my plane and I have landed. Like the delivery of a lost suitcase delivered late, I cannot resist the temptation. Most days curiosity gets the better of me. I must open my mental suitcase, open myself up...to explore my packed mental luggage from Poland, from the Dark Side.

I look inside searching to see what I can find. Some items are joyous memories. I welcome them eagerly. I name them with ease and pleasure. I am eager to claim them as mine. But those other items from the Dark Side, those bits and pieces, fragments, broken pieces, spilt tears staining, they are different. Slowly, day by day, I try to come to terms with those splintered feelings, nameless, suddenly appearing, fleeting, intense moments, then equally suddenly disappearing. Novel they may be, yet I'm not ready to claim them as mine. They seem foreign; maybe someone planted them in my luggage. They don't seem to fit me. I know that they are not mine. I'm sure of it.

I try to send them back to Poland, to Auschwitz, to Majdanek. That is where they belong, to someone else, in the gas chamber. They belong to Alice, my mother, or her mother Esther, or her sister Zsuzsi – Raizelle.

I protest! These memories are not me, they are not mine.

Yet, just as participants we started of strangers and within the first day there we bonded, strangers no more, together we breathed those images from the Dark Side. They bonded to us, with us. Those experiences have become parts of ourselves. When we arrived back home, it seems, we are no longer the same as when we left.

My mental suitcase is filled with such 'foreign' luggage. But each day as I reflect I begin to see that these 'foreign' bits as mine after all. These mental images, burdening my waking and sleeping moments are like the physical luggage I brought back. The physical luggage, items I chose to buy and bring back. Most of us made some conscious choices to pack, to bring back those items, gifts or souvenirs for family and friends: books, CD's photos and videos to read, listen, look at, again and again, as reminders of the landscape and soundscape.

If our physical luggage is overweight the airport staff attach a warning label 'Heavy, assisted lift may be required.' A figure lifting a box is accompanied by the words 'Bend your knees'. What warning should we carry for our mental baggage if that is overweight, too heavy to carry without risk of some mental strain injury? What recognisable image conveys the message as clearly for a heavy mental suitcase as does the 'bend your knees' to avoid self-injury for a heavy physical suitcase?

It seems as participants on the *Adult March of the Living* our minds, no less then our bodies, are carrying heavy burdens even after we arrived home. The burden of our minds include memories that shocked, sights and sounds that disturbed, all those perceptions that we experienced as horror, revulsion, muted screams, unstoppable tears, sense of chaos, loss of control, terror or trembling, fear and helplessness. All these mental burdens we need to name. Some of them we may already know, others are still emerging, not yet ready to make themselves fully felt. We need to treat each of these pieces of mental luggage with respect and care.

Just like the need to bend our knees to take care when we handle physical luggage, so heavy mental luggage needs to be handled with care. We need to be mindful to 'bend our mental knees' when lifting such heavy mental luggage to prevent injuring ourselves. What does this mean in practical terms?

The lessons we learn from preventing physical complications when we handle heavy loads can be applied to heavy mental loads also. We need to keep in mind just how much mental burdens we carried back home from Poland and Israel. Once back to Australia, how can we take care that we do not strain ourselves mentally with this load?

These last few weeks it has come to my notice from my many conversations with participants and their families that we need to seriously attend to this question of self-care. I have spoken with many participants experiencing sometimes severely disabling states: from overwhelming fatigue, crippling migraine, interrupted sleep, inability to concentrate, feeling 'out of sorts', disconnected or dislocated, sad or just not quite right, feeling 'traumatised' to varying degrees and a whole range of physical conditions, from colds, other infections to aches and pains.

We may put on a 'brave face' for some days or weeks even. Yet eventually need to seriously take stock of our well being. Are we continuing to lift 'excess mental baggage'? If so, then we need to care for ourselves, to attend to the heavy mental baggage we returned with, even more so if we departed carrying heavy mental luggage.

As with the physical baggage, we can be penalised for carrying excess luggage in either direction, departing or returning. We cannot expect those who have not made our journey to understand the nature of our heavy mental baggage. The responsibility is to monitor ourselves, to take

note how much we have packed. We are responsible to take measures to 'lighten our load'. Or else we risk paying a penalty.

Our aim should be to travel safely, to lighten our mental 'heavy baggage'. Let us take care when 'lifting' to remember each day to bend our mental knees – plenty of rest; quality 'down time'; daily exercise like walks; eating well and drinking plenty of water; sharing stories; keeping in touch with other participants. We may continue to share our intimate thoughts with our journals, express our wordless sensibilities in drawing, music, dance, movements that soothe and comfort. And of course there is always low calorie comfort chocolates, or cheesecakes. Low calorie, of course.

The idea of returning well from our unique journey is often a matter of choice - just like when we pack our luggage we are mindful to avoid excess luggage, so let us be mindful to avoid excess mental luggage as we are now arriving back home. Maybe then life is no longer such a paradox, it is just how it is meant to be lived.