

My Black Bag Made Me Cry

Cathy Crowe

Grudgingly: in a reluctant or resentful manner; unwillingly

A trusted friend recently implored me to bring my nursing black bag (actually it's a knapsack) to a very public event that we were planning to attend. He advised me, as only he can do: "People will find your bag so interesting they will learn a lot about what you do when they see what's inside." So I **grudgingly** lugged my 30-pound black **outreach** bag, which had given me nine months of a rotator-cuff injury last year, on a five-hour trip to Ottawa for its five minutes of fame.

I wonder what is in her black bag that people will find interesting?

Outreach: an organization's involvement with or activity in the community, especially in the context of social welfare.

It was a very public show-and-tell.

Conspicuously: standing out so as to be clearly visible.

The last time I had opened my black bag so **conspicuously** was on the altar of a United Church in Toronto. It was the minister's idea. She invited the children to the altar to sit with me, before they dashed off to Sunday school, at which point I would give the first sermon of my life to adults on the topic of homelessness.

One by one, the children were invited to put their hands into the darkness of my black bag to pull out a surprise. To each surprise, the minister asked each child: "Why do you think Nurse Cathy carries socks in her bag? Why does she carry granola bars and milkshake drinks and vitamins?"

Why does Nurse Cathy think it is sad the kids knew the answer?

The children, with sweet and innocent expressions of concern, quickly responded with all the right answers. Sadly, I thought to myself, they knew the answers.

This time, the show-and-tell was meant for adults. The message: See how bad homelessness is – I'm a

How do these items show how bad homelessness is?

nurse, but I have to carry socks, mitts, a blanket, vitamins, even food!

Intimacy:

close
familiarity or
friendship;
closeness.

On cue, my hands nervously groped inside my black bag to find the right contents to demonstrate the **intimacy** and horror of what I and other nurses do every day. In a clinical fashion, I explained their purpose to the adults in the room:

“You see, we now see signs of starvation and malnutrition, so I carry **Ensure**.”



“We don’t have enough sleeping bags in Toronto, so I carry these **space blankets**.”

Space blanket: a light metal-coated sheet designed to retain heat

“The duct tape is for taping the soles back on shoes, but also for taping cardboard together for a roof.”

As I spoke, my heart raced. I wondered later – how had the contents of my bag and the way I nurse changed so much? To my surprise, I began to cry.

It is said that your body holds memories, and my nurse hands clearly remembered better days. My nurse hands once did more useful things.

My bandages no longer cover the wounds of my patients. My vitamins will not prevent the white plague of **tuberculosis** from taking another victim. I cannot even help someone achieve one peaceful night of safety and sleep. Only roofs will do that. And I am not a carpenter.

Tuberculosis: an infectious bacterial disease

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