



UNION

*Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project*

## **The Things We Carry: Exploring Student Identities through Sacred Objects**

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### **Abstract:**

This project invites students to explore lived religion, personal and collective identity, and the immigration/refugee experience – all through the use of sacred objects. Students will use objects to learn about others as well as themselves.

By the end of this project students will have identified five objects that tell a story about their own identity. Students will use the following categories to guide their work - family, religion/spirituality, friends/significant other, ancestry, and self. Students will create a presentation to showcase the items that will include the actual object (or a photo it) and a written analysis exploring its significance.

### **Guiding Questions:**

How does religion inform who we are?

How does immigration reveal character?

How do the experiences of children and adults differ?

What can I learn from hearing a personal story?

How can I learn more about other people?

Why do immigrants leave their home countries?

How do the objects we surround ourselves with change over time?

Will the objects that are important to you today still be important to you in 5, 10, 20 years?

Which objects might have timeless value?

Is it the object itself, or what it represents that is most important?

## Learning goals and Criteria for Success:

Students learn to engage with objects and texts in a way that is personally meaningful while addressing academic standards.

Students are able to explain symbolism through photographs and writing. Students are successful when they can explain what the object symbolizes for them personally, as well as how objects are used to create symbolism in literary texts.

## Key Texts:

The project focuses on two specific books (though it could be adapted to any texts in which characters use material objects to create symbolism):

Thanhha Lai, [\*Inside Out and Back Again\*](#)

Tim O'Brien, [\*The Things They Carried\*](#)

The project also draws on discussions of material religion and sacred objects in S. Brent Plate's [\*A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects\*](#).

And for inspiration, see Tom Kiefer's photographic essay [\*El Sueño Americano \(The American Dream\)\*](#), which focuses on the discarded personal effects of migrants apprehended by the US Border Patrol.

## Implementation:

### Part 1: What did you bring with you today?

Students make an inventory of things they have with them at that moment, in their backpacks, pockets and on their person.

What can we know about you and the people next to you just by looking at the objects? (Possible answers - age, grade, ethnicity, religion, etc)

What did you bring with you today that we *can't* see? (emotional "baggage" - worries, fears, excitement, etc)

What about ancestry and where we come from (culturally, religiously, actual place), did you bring any of that with you today? Make a list of how you may have brought some things that correspond to these questions.

Based on this, what can we know about a person FOR CERTAIN, by looking at the things they carry? What do we not know?

Choose one of your objects to write a few sentences about. Describe the object in detail, the mood it evokes, and reasons for its importance.

## Part 2: Objects in Religious Life

Lesson draws on S. Brent Plate's [\*A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects\*](#).

Teacher brings in several religious objects -- for example, a candle, incense, printed image of a saint or deity, drums, etc.

In groups, students examine, describe and take notes on the object without interpretation - using only the senses - "it shows a guy with a robe..." or "it is a glass full of red wax"

Then explore interpretations - brainstorm potential meaning, symbolism

And imagine the objects sensual effect - how will the object affect the people using it?

Use the internet to figure out what the object might mean to people who consider it sacred.

## Part 3: Objects and Identity in Literature

In groups - students make a list of the characters in *Inside Out & Back Again* (or book of choice) and the things that were special to them.

Use Socratic method to facilitate a discussion about the items that hold significance in the chosen piece of literature. Go through the characters. Students should take notes.

In groups - students make a list of the characters in *The Things They Carried* and the objects the soldiers carried.

Use Socratic method to facilitate a discussion about the items that hold significance in the chosen piece of literature. Students should take notes.

Engage in a whole group discussion to compare and contrast the items from each story. How are they alike and different? Make sure to remind students to be aware of the role each character played in the Vietnam War (Vietnamese people vs American soldiers). What can we learn about people in general (identity, hopes, values, etc) by looking at the things they carried? Does it matter that these are fictional stories?

Try to categorize items into the following: family, religion/spirituality, friends/significant other, ancestry and self.

#### Part 4: Objects and Identity in our Own Lives

Students choose 5 objects, one for each category (family, religion/spirituality, friends/significant other, ancestry, and self) that they will focus on for their project. They can either bring in the objects or photographs of the objects.

They will then write a paragraph describing the significance of the object for them personally and, if time allows, can engage in research to see if/how their objects have appeared in other literary works.

Students will present their objects and findings to the class.

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