

Praise for *Packing Light*

Ally Vesterfelt is a gifted writer with a pleasant voice who is a joy to spend time with. Joining her on a cross-country journey makes for a delightful and thought-provoking respite. With refreshing honesty, Ally teaches us how to better navigate life and relationships as she navigates the roads of all fifty states.

GARY THOMAS, author of *Sacred Marriage* and *The Sacred Search*

Packing Light is the latest in a long line of rich and lovely travel memoirs that make the world bigger, that make us long for the open road, and that ask us to consider the important and universal themes of faith, fear, comfort, friendship, love, and what to pack. For any young traveler, literal and otherwise, Ally has given us a gem.

SHAUNA NIEQUIST, author of *Cold Tangerines*, *Bittersweet*, and *Bread & Wine*

This is a good one, an important book for those who are restless. We all have questions, and some brave souls turn to the call of the open road for answers. Thanks, Ally, for sharing your journey with us. I couldn't stop reading.

JEFF GOINS, author of *Wrecked: When a Broken World
Slams into Your Comfortable Life*

Allison Vesterfelt has written a wonderfully provocative book about changing your life. For a long time she was plagued by a thought, "could I live life where nothing held me back?" It would mean leaving a lot behind. But the dream grew inside her until one day she sold everything and, packing lightly, took off for the open road and a life full of possibilities.

If, like her, you're tired of the complicated life you're living, you'll want to read *Packing Light* and consider following her example. In simplicity and abandon, Vesterfelt found the purpose she longed for. It's a great story and a lesson I found invigorating to my spirit.

SETH BARNES, CEO Adventures in Missions

I've known Ally since we were kids. She's everything you want in a writer: smart, funny, honest, flawed, strong, passionate, and after Jesus' kingdom vision. To a generation that's dying for adventure but scared to death of failure, *Packing Light* comes as a much needed kick out the front door. You might read this book on your couch, but you won't stay there.

JOHN MARK COMER, pastor for teaching and vision at Solid Rock:
a Jesus church in Portland, Oregon

Allison Vesterfelt is one of the best emerging writers to come along in years. Her words slip into the next ones in a way that makes reading a delight. And then there's the story she tells. From page one, you feel drawn in, as if you were having coffee together, sharing personal confessions with a friend. This book will occupy a permanent space in your library.

BEN ARMENT, creator of STORY and Dream Year

Ally did what so many of us have dreamed of doing at some point. Her journey was adventurous and life-changing. I vicariously joined in the journey as I read along. *Packing Light* is heartfelt and insightful, and you should read it now!

**ALLI WORTHINGTON, entrepreneur, business coach and consultant,
speaker and fan of all things digital**

Ally tells her story with such grace, honesty, and humor that we can't help but get caught up in her journey with her. Her trip may be unique to her, but the lessons she learned are universal. *Packing Light* is a book for anyone longing to go after that "something missing" in their own lives.

JUSTIN LATHROP, blogger and cofounder of Some Company

Packing Light makes you want to get out large scissors and cut the strings holding you back. Packing your bags with boldness, wisdom, and fresh perspectives, this book bravely takes you on a journey of themes so relevant to people of this day and age. At times you feel like you are truly in her shoes—with her lessons you learn your own, with her broken expectations you break yours, with her found freedom you yourself feel refreshed.

SARAH DUBBELDAM, editor in chief of Darling magazine

packing light

packing light

thoughts on living life with less baggage

Allison Vesterfelt

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*To all those who shared their couches,
their comforters, and their coffee with us.
We couldn't have done it without you.*

*And to my husband, my number one guy,
without whom there would be no book, thanks
for being the climax of my packing light story.*

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You'll never meet a traveler who,
after five trips, brags: "Every year I pack heavier."
The measure of a good traveler is
how light he or she travels.

RICK STEVES

Introduction

where the journey begins

I GREW UP IN Portland, Oregon. That's the first thing I always tell people about myself. It might seem like such a small thing to tell someone meeting you for the first time, but in my case it is not small, and I doubt it is in yours, either. Places are not just places. The place you start your journey is your anchor, the filter through which you process every single stop along the way. Our places shape us and teach us until, before we know it, we do not just live in a place. It lives inside of us.

The second thing I would tell someone if they asked me is that I'm a Christian. I grew up in a conservative Christian home with parents who were missionaries, at least until my dad went back to school to get his doctorate. My mom is exuberant in her love for Jesus. Wherever she goes, she oozes with "PTLs" (Praise the Lord) and Bible verses and invitations to church. My dad, on the other hand, has always stood back, quiet and thoughtful, chewing on belief, letting it fully digest.

This is where I began, somewhere between these two worlds. Somewhere between the careful, conservative upbringing of Christian parents, and the wild, thought-provoking world of the Pacific Northwest. Somewhere between the boisterous faith of my mother and the thoughtful consideration of my dad. This was my starting point.

Your starting point matters when you go on a trip. It is your only frame of reference for what to bring, and what to leave behind. It is your foundation, your beginning. If, along the way, you realize you've been heading the wrong direction, you might change your trajectory, but you can't change where you started. You have to leave home to go on a journey, but you can't leave home without having a home. Portland was that home for me.

Growing up Christian in Portland was its own challenge. The city values individuality and self-expression, a fact you wouldn't miss if you walked the streets on any given day. You would see people of all different stripes, expressing themselves in every imaginable way. You would see the full spectrum from "normal" to "crazy." You would see business suits and Santa suits. There would be dresses with running shoes, and tutus on grown women. We don't try to hide our strangeness from others. In fact, we're really proud of it. We believe it makes us special. Just look at the "Keep Portland Weird" stickers and billboards all over the city.

Strangely enough, the one individual decision that seems to be under scrutiny in Portland is the decision to be a Christian. Although I can see why—Christianity as a whole hasn't exactly gained a reputation for being open-minded, and I can see how the church stands as a threat to personal freedom. But as a result, I grew up knowing faith wasn't something I could talk about safely outside of the church building. My church taught "evangelism," and I knew I wasn't supposed to hide my lamp under a bushel, or

something like that, but I learned the quickest way to lose friends was to talk about Jesus, church, or my parents' job as missionaries to my friends at school.

It's cool to be smart in Portland. It's cool to be politically active, to read books, to use big words like "socially constructed realities." It's important to think for yourself, resisting anything that might be considered "corporate" or controlling or "the man." Perhaps this part of my city's heritage contributed to why I grew up with a hunger to try to experience things for myself and make my own decisions. This sometimes got me into trouble in church, but it rarely stopped me. I learned at a young age that one way to cope with the tension was to lie—especially about books, movies, and music. At school I would laugh at quotes from movies I had never seen, feign excitement over albums I had never listened to, and fake familiarity with magazines I wasn't allowed to read. At church, I would pretend like I hadn't snuck over to my friend Marilyn's house to watch *Jerry Maguire* with her and the other popular girls after school.

I was stuck between two worlds. I loved them both. I didn't always agree with everything other Christians said or did, but I knew I loved Jesus and I wanted to be a part of the huge, messy, beautiful story being written. And for all Portland's quirks, I would defend it to my dying breath.

To outsiders, I defended its people, who I saw as eclectic and beautiful, even when they fell outside of the church's understanding of "acceptable behavior." I defended the weather, explaining to those who had never been that, although it rained nine months out of the year, it was really just a light drizzle. I explained how we were not just a bunch of tree-huggers. We cared about the environment. We wanted to protect and stay connected to the earth God had given us. And they're *not* Birkenstocks, for the last time. They're Chacos, and they're comfortable.

At the same time, I found myself tempted to defend the church to a city that wasn't always receptive to Christianity. I vowed to be the Christian who was nice to people, and tipped well, and didn't stand around holding a sign that said, "God hates fags." The God I knew didn't hate anyone, and I was desperate for people to know it.

One summer I worked at a restaurant with several atheists. One of them got word I was a Christian and invited me over to have a beer with some of his friends (later, I secretly pictured him calling those people saying, "You guys, you have to come over tonight! I found one! A real, live Christian!"). We spent the night sitting in a circle on his front porch, sipping our microbrews talking about God. They asked me a hundred questions, and I said, "I don't know," about a hundred times. At the end of the night, my friend walked me to the door and said, resolutely, "Thanks for coming over. I've never met a Christian who would have a beer with me." Then he added, "Or say, *I don't know.*"

That is the place I lived, where I always tried to bridge the gap.

The collision of church and culture left me confused in many ways, the kind of confusion that is most disorienting because I didn't know it was happening. There was the discussion of bodies, for example, which in the wider culture went something like this: *Your body is a temple. You should worship it, be nice to it, take care of it, always make sure it is beautiful above all else.* As a city, this meant yoga classes and Pilates classes, running, and a careful consideration of everything you put in your mouth. It meant organic, whole foods, vegan, vegetarian, and gluten-free. It meant acupuncture over pills and prescriptions.

The conversation in the church, of course, sounded a little different. It went something like this: *Your body is a temple. It is eternal, and not your own. You should cover it up, keep it from harm, and save it for the sacred and special.* This meant virginity talks and

letters to my future husband and arguments about homosexuality, heaven, and hell.

The two conversations were disparate enough that I could see the disagreement, but just similar enough that the hostility seemed very confusing. I wanted people in the church to see the value of the people in Portland, and the people in Portland to see the value of the church. And I wanted to know why you had to pick one side or the other.

Yet despite the conflict between the church and the wider culture in Portland, the two influenced each other. They danced together, at least in my life, teaching each other things, picking up habits from one another, and sayings, like two people, the odd couple, living in the same house. It was an ever-swirling conversation of art and politics and music and God and taco carts.

I say all this not to promote myself or where I'm from, but to show you how much baggage I was carrying without even realizing it. Baggage is like that. You pick it up one piece at a time, and it grows heavy over time, so you hardly even realize you're carrying it.

And the only way we know we're holding it is if we go somewhere. As long as we stay stationary, we'll never realize how full our arms, and our suitcases, really are. But when we decide to go somewhere, we discover we can't take it with us.

This is my story of my baggage and my trip. It isn't your story—though you no doubt have one just as full of twists and turns and pain and wonder. But I hope that as you read it, you will see yourself in it. We are all carrying baggage—things we've picked up at home, past experiences, expectations for what's ahead. It might look different than mine, but it weighs you down just the same. I hope it will encourage you to go on a trip.

1

plan a trip

“Our battered suitcases were piled on the sidewalk again; we had longer ways to go. But no matter, the road is life.”

JACK KEROUAC

IT ALL STARTED WITH a wedding. So many good stories do. There was a church, a big white dress, a bunch of bridesmaids, and then there was me. Getting ready alone. Driving to the ceremony alone. Sitting in the pew inches from friends, but still very much alone.

It wasn't the going alone part that bothered me. That much I had done at least a dozen times before. It was this strange feeling I was carrying with me—that may or may not have had anything to do with the wedding. It was a restlessness, a confusion, a tension. I was twenty-six years old, with a graduate degree under my belt and a job as a middle-school English teacher to show for it. This is what I had worked and waited for—what I had hoped would be the culmination of all my school loans, studying, and internships. This was supposed to be the climax—but it didn't feel like that. It felt like something was missing.

On the outside at least, many other things were coming together. I had been approved for a home loan, first of all. There was this beautiful condo in northwest Portland that had caught my eye, and I had decided to just see if I could buy it. It was quaint and small, barely big enough for just me, but it was walking distance to restaurants and boutiques and close to the highway I took to get to work. It was in the quiet part of the neighborhood, a few blocks from the commotion—just the way I liked it. And I had friends who lived within biking distance. I pictured dinner parties and dropping by just to say “hi” and calling at the last minute to see if we all wanted to grab dinner on one of Portland’s perfect summer nights. I couldn’t imagine anything better. And according to the broker I had talked to, I could afford it.

But every time I thought about taking the leap, something inside me resisted. It just didn’t seem right. I didn’t want to buy a house all by myself.

My friend Erica, on the other hand, wouldn’t have to.

She looked beautiful as she made her way down the aisle to instrumental music, dragging tiny rose petals in her train trailing behind her. I was happy for her—I really was. I didn’t feel the dull ache of jealousy I had in the past watching wedding after wedding.

But I felt the tiniest twinge of sadness. She was about to cross the threshold into married life—a line I wasn’t sure I would ever cross—and things would never be the same. If I had learned anything in my twenty-six years, I had learned that.

Six years ago, it had happened to me for the first time, although there had been many others since. My college roommate got married. Before the wedding, we did everything together—eating together, doing homework together, watching afternoon reruns of *Dawson’s Creek* together, sitting awake together in a sterile hospital room as her dad slowly faded away from life, until the pressing

questions about God and life and what happens on the other side quietly subsided. But now, we didn't do anything together. She did all these things with her husband. Which meant I did everything alone. Including attend her wedding.

It was fine. I wasn't mad about it or anything. That's what you're supposed to do when you get married, right? You're supposed to do stuff with your husband. That's what getting married is all about, isn't it—the fact that you don't have to do stuff alone anymore. It's just that after several years of finding friends and getting attached to those friends, only to then watch them get married and lose them, you learn not to get too attached to anyone.

You don't disengage from friendships or give up on them forever, you just learn that they're more temporary than you once thought they were. You swear to yourself that you'll never be that way when you get married—but you know in your heart that the truth is, you probably will be—so you question if you even want to get married anyway. You learn the really important coping mechanism to single life: to be independent and take care of yourself. You learn to make the most about being alone.

That's exactly what I was thinking about as I watched Erica float down the aisle that day. I was thinking about how much I liked my single life, about how I didn't much mind being alone. I thought about how I could go anywhere I wanted to go, whenever I wanted to go there, and how I didn't have to ask permission before I spent money. I thought about how I could change jobs whenever I wanted, or move to a different part of town, or even a different city. I thought about how I was able to invest in my career, and my friendships, and my hobbies.

I wasn't just making this stuff up. I really felt it.

But as I sat in the pew and quietly watched Erica give her life to the man who stood in front of her, I couldn't get rid of this nag-

ging question in the back of my mind: *What was I supposed to give my life to?*

After the ceremony ended, I drove carefully through the rainy November night to the reception, where cute little finger food options were offered on trays in the perfectly appointed ballroom. I helped myself to a glass of wine and planted myself on a couch off to the side, where I could watch the party unfold from a distance. That is how I liked it. Life on the sidelines. Low risk. Low-key. And really entertaining.

It was a strategy I had developed a long time ago, without putting much thought into it. Since I didn't really love big crowds, any time I went to an event where I had to be in a room full of people, I would position myself on the fringe of the room. Preferably, I could have my back against an outside wall and plant myself there for the duration of the evening. Usually, I would bring some food with me—rations to sustain me for the night—and also something to make me look like I was busy. Sometimes I would carry a book in my purse; sometimes I would use my phone. Sometimes I would scribble notes in a little notebook.

The benefit of this strategy was that I got to keep tabs on everybody. I got to watch the token single guy make a fool of himself with every single girl in the room, introducing himself and recycling the same cheesy jokes over and over again. I got to watch the “important” people in the room try to downplay their importance, and everyone else try to prove how “important” they were. I could make fun of people (secretly, of course, in my head) for telling jokes that tanked, or for going in for a handshake while the other person went in for a hug—or the most tragic, mistaking a high five for a hug request. That was the worst.

The other benefit of my strategic sideling, I'll admit, is that no one could approach me from behind. This way, I was never

shocked by anything. If someone wanted to talk to me, they could approach me from the front, like a civilized partygoer. I'm not sure why that was such a big deal to me. I think there must have been one too many tragic "cover-your-eyes-from-behind" experiences buried in my high-school psyche. I could keep track of who was friends with who, and who appeared to be nice, and who appeared to be no fun at all.

From my spot on the wall I could watch the whole party unfold. It was like charting the course of the story, with all of its characters, all sticky and messy and wonderful.

And if someone did want to talk to me, they knew where to find me. After all, I didn't move for the entire party. I wasn't really hard to track down. When they came to talk to me, I would be there—ready, with my food prop in place and my tone of voice prepared to meet them enthusiastically (if they were "that" type) or intellectually (because I overheard them talking about the Pleistocene era, and I googled it so I could know what it was).

This was the way to do a party, if you asked me.

I watched my friend Sharaya, one of the bridesmaids, throw her head back in laughter talking to three guys, none of whom I had seen before. Her blonde hair was pinned in a loose up-do and her dress curved flatteringly around her figure. I had watched her at church before, leading worship from stage, and thought about how beautiful she was, how stylishly put together. But tonight, with her high heels and perfectly applied lipstick, she looked more elegant than ever.

I was jealous of people like that, if I'm being honest with you—people who always looked elegant even when they were in the mess of the party, people who seemed to float through life laughing and making the most out of everything.

The problem was, it was impossible to hate her. She was like a cartoon character, always smiling and giggling and swooping in and out of scene after scene with another exciting story. Sharaya was the type of girl who would disappear and show up a few days later, saying she just couldn't help but take a quick trip to Los Angeles or Australia. Whatever. She was always going on flying trips or sailing trips or horseback-riding trips. I could never figure out where she met all these people with horses or boats or airplanes. I wondered if maybe she could introduce me to some of them.

One time she was dropped off at a Sunday night church service gripping a bag full of her belongings. It all happened so quickly that I swear the car didn't even stop all the way as she tumbled out the door. "Hello everyone," she seemed to say as she sashayed into the crowd. "I'm sorry I'm late," she told us, even though she wasn't late at all. "I got tied up wakeboarding." I couldn't figure it out. Her clothes weren't wet or wrinkled in the slightest. Her skin was flawlessly tanned so that she glowed a little, almost like she was wearing makeup, but there were no signs of mascara or eyeliner smudges under her eyes. Her hair was air-dried in this whimsical little ponytail that looked so perfect as it bounced on top of her head.

Sharaya and I couldn't have possibly been more different. We looked different, first of all. She was blonde, petite, and impossibly athletic. Every time I saw her, I wondered what her secret was to keeping her arms so toned. I, on the other hand, was tall with long, dark hair and equally long, gangly limbs. I had recently taken up running, as was the trend in Portland at the time, but I didn't dare play group sports or do any activity where someone could accuse me of throwing like a girl (because I did).

Sharaya was also free-spirited and fun, always making interesting conversation and smiling, even when she was the brunt of

the joke. I was quieter—more serious but more imaginative too, the kind of girl who spends her weekends reading and organizing her closet.

And for my whole life, I had dreamed of being a writer.

When she walked up to me that night at the wedding, I should have known it would change my life forever.

The party was starting to pick up a bit. Everyone had eaten some food and the groom's younger brother had taken over the microphone, so just when things were starting to get interesting, Sharaya came and sat by me.

"Hey!" She greeted me warmly. "Want to come dance?" She might as well have been glowing.

"I don't think so . . ." I told her.

"Come on!" she urged. "It'll be fun!"

I told her I wasn't much of a dancer and, besides, if I came to dance I would have to put down my glass of wine, and I wasn't sure I was willing to make that trade right now.

"Fair enough," she conceded.

Outside the party, the city of Portland looked beautiful, even with the gentle haze of rain settling over it. It had an eerie quality to it—gentle and melancholy. We looked west, toward the river. That's when I saw the billboard.

"I climbed up there once," I said, pointing to the billboard in the distance.

I hadn't planned to say it, but we were sitting there, and I wasn't sure what else to say, so it just popped out. This is why I stay on the perimeter of parties like this. I wasn't trying to impress her, at least not consciously, but I think that somewhere deep inside of me my subconscious was saying, "Hey, I might not have friends with airplanes, and I might not look like a hair model after wakeboarding, but my life is exciting too."

“Really?” she asked. “For what?”

“A friend made me do it,” I said, and immediately regretted it, because it retracted any cool points I may have just earned. She looked at me expectantly.

“I mean, a friend and I climbed up there together,” I corrected myself. “You can see the whole city.”

She seemed interested.

“He and I looked out at the view and talked about life now and dreams we had for life someday,” I told her. She raised her eyebrows a little.

“It’s his job,” I clarified. “Besides, he’s not my type. He’s always jet-setting off to other countries to go on skiing trips or jump out of airplanes. Actually, come to think of it, you two would make a great couple,” I told her. “I should introduce you.”

The newlyweds were on stage now, starting their first dance together.

“What would you do with your life if you didn’t have to worry about money?” I said, after a minute. “That’s the question he asked me while we were sitting up there.”

“And?” Sharaya asked.

“It made me mad,” I said, laughing a little. “He was trying to inspire me, but instead it just made me angry.” I took another sip of wine.

“Why?”

“Because I was working a restaurant job at the time, trying to pay my way through graduate school. And not everyone has the luxury of living the way he lives. I don’t know where he gets all of his money.”

“Did you ever answer his question?” Sharaya asked.

“Yeah, I told him that if I really didn’t have to worry about paying my bills—which I *do* by the way, everyone does—I would

drive across the country and write a book about it.” I shrugged. “But normal people don’t get to just quit their lives and go on road trips.” I ran my hands across the royal blue velvet couch, watching the way it changed colors depending on the direction of the nap.

“Where would you go?” she asked.

“Everywhere. All fifty states.”

Outside, lights flashed, and we watched as the traffic stopped so the road could lift and a boat could pass under the Steel Bridge.

“You know, I’ve always wanted to travel across the country,” she said.

“Really? What would you do?”

“Play music.”

It didn’t surprise me. She had a beautiful voice. I thought so every time I heard her sing at church. I just didn’t know, until she told me, that she’d written a few songs of her own and was working to record her first album.

“It’s just an EP,” she said.

“Well, I don’t even know what that is,” I said. “So you’ve got me beat.”

Over the next few hours Sharaya convinced me to get up from my seat and get into the fray of the party. I had a good time, I’ll admit, watching the bride and groom shove cake into each other’s mouths and meeting all of Sharaya’s friends. She even got me to dance for a little bit.

But she wasn’t quite done prodding me out of my comfort zone. At the end of the evening, when I was finally fishing my keys out of my purse, she suddenly asked, “So when are we going to go on that road trip?”

It was midnight, and the couple had just left. We’d blown bubbles at them as they drove away, and I couldn’t believe I had stayed this late. I laughed a little and shook my head. I was proud

of myself for getting off the couch, but a road trip? That wasn't going to happen.

It was a nice thought, I told her, but not in the slightest bit realistic. It would cost too much, first of all—between food, lodging, gas, and then anything unexpected like the car breaking down or someone getting sick. You had to plan for things like that. Plus, we both had jobs and apartments, and I had a roommate who was counting on me to pay rent each month. Even if we were to move out of our apartments, or quit our jobs, what would we do with all of our stuff? After all, I had worked really hard to get my job. Hadn't she? Four years of undergraduate. Two-and-a-half of graduate school. Internships. School loans. Sweat and sleepless nights and tears. Finally, I had the job I had worked for. What was I going to do, just quit? What would my parents say? What would our friends think?

"I'm twenty-six," I told her. "I don't think it's wise to be planning cross-country road trips."

"Listen, Ally," she said, looking directly at me. "I've been writing more music lately and wanting to play more shows in our area. I think this would be a great way to motivate myself to do that. And sure, you have a good job. So do I. But is this really what you want to do with the rest of your life? Or do you want to write a book? If we went on a road trip, you could write while we traveled. You could even keep a blog, and by the end of it, I think you might have your book. We could sell CDs along the way. We'd make some money that way, and we could order T-shirts too, and collect tips at each of my shows."

It seemed she had a way out for every objection I could come up with.

"We could stay with people we know, Ally. Think about it. We would ask people to take us in for a night—just one night. That

wouldn't be that big of a deal, would it? And all the stuff that's in our apartments—I think if we sold all of that stuff, we could probably make enough money to cover us for a while. Let's get serious, do you really want a couch and a couple of dressers to keep you from what could be the best experience of your life?"

I didn't want to agree with her. I wanted to get mad and tell her she was ridiculous, but something about the sound of her voice and the sincerity of her offer made it impossible for me to do that. Her passion just made everything she was saying sound feasible and exciting. I didn't want to believe it was, but as I climbed in my car I heard myself tell her I would think about it. Not that I would go—but that it was open for discussion and that we would talk about it more tomorrow.

That's the thing with ideas. They start small, somewhere inside of you, and nothing will happen with them until you finally speak them out loud. We hold on to ideas for years sometimes, because we think they're meaningless, or impossible, or that people will laugh at us when we tell them. Or, maybe we hold on to them because we forget we even had them in the first place. But then, if we're lucky, we have a temporary blip in judgment—brought about by the whimsy of a wedding or an extra glass of wine—and we just let the words come tumbling out.