What’s In Your Backpack?
A good, intriguing title. Titles are important. And this is the first of nine questions that Clooney asks his audience. Questions can be effective in a speech because each audience member will answer them in a way that is meaningful to him or her. Effective use of a prop. He opens the backpack and leaves it on the table in full view for the entirety of the speech.

How much does your life weigh?
Great opening. An unusual and provocative question that makes us think. Nice pause after this line. Clooney uses pauses very effectively throughout the speech.

Imagine for a second that you’re carrying a backpack. I want you to feel the straps on your shoulders. Feel them?
We know what a backpack is and most of us have worn one at one time or another. Thus, we can identify with the situation.

Now I want you to pack it with all the stuff that you have in your life. You start with the little things, the things on shelves and in drawers, the knickknacks, the collectibles. Feel the weight as that adds up.
So far, so good. We are being asked to fill up the backpack, but with little things. Notice the pauses before and after the final sentence.

Then you start adding the larger stuff: clothes; tabletop appliances; lamps; linens; your TV.
Clooney is now asking us to do something that is physically impossible. There is no way that a backpack can hold all of these things. But because the request is unexpected, it holds our attention. Clooney has, figuratively speaking, opened a hole. (He fills it soon thereafter when we realize that the backpack is a metaphor for our lives.)

The backpack should be getting pretty heavy now and you go bigger: your couch, bed, your kitchen table. Stuff it all in there. Your car, get it in there. Your home, whether it’s a studio apartment or a two-bedroom house. I want you to stuff it all into that backpack.
Building on the example.

Now try to walk. It’s kind of hard, isn’t it?
Nice humor. However, the point is an important set-up for the main theme of the speech which comes immediately after. A couple of nice pauses.
This is what we do to ourselves on a daily basis. We weigh ourselves down until we can’t even move. And make no mistake, moving is living.
Now it becomes clear what the metaphor represents.
Nice alliteration with the letter “m” in the final sentence.

Now, I’m going to set that backpack on fire.
Another unexpected statement. We’ve just stuffed all of our worldly possessions into that backpack and now it is going to be set it on fire! What will happen?

What do you want to take out of it? Photos? Photos are for people who can’t remember. Drink some ginko and let the photos burn.
Another important question for the audience. What would we save? It’s not coincidental that photos are offered as a first choice. Studies show that photographs are among the things that people hold most important when it comes to their belongings. And, of course, most of our photographs have people in them. This is important because the second part of the speech deals with the people in our lives.

In fact, let everything burn and imagine waking up tomorrow with nothing. It’s kind of exhilarating, isn’t it?
At first blush, “exhilarating” is probably not the word that jumps to mind when thinking about “waking up with nothing”. But Clooney’s purpose is to get the audience to see that possessions weigh us down and that giving them up can be liberating and rejuvenating.

Now, this is going to be a little difficult. So stay with me.
With this line, George raises the stakes. He signals that the subject matter is going to be difficult and asks the audience to bear with him. On one level, it is a somewhat cumbersome transition, but the reference to the difficulty ahead raises our curiosity.

You have a new backpack. Only this time, I want you to fill it with people.
Same metaphor — the backpack — but this time different, more important, contents.

Start with casual acquaintances, friends of friends, folks around the office. Then you move in the people that you trust with your most intimate secrets. Your cousins, your aunts, your uncles, your brothers, your sisters, your parents. And finally, your husband, your wife, your boyfriend or your girlfriend. You get them into that backpack.
He follows the same pattern that he did for the objects; namely, start with with people who occupy a relatively small place in our lives and progressively move to those who are most important to us.
Don’t worry I’m not going to ask you to light it on fire. 
Humor and a callback to the previous backpack that he did set on fire.

Feel the weight of the bag. Make no mistake, your relationships are the heaviest components in your life. Do you feel the straps cutting into your shoulders? All those negotiations and arguments and secrets and compromises.
A callback to when he asked us to put on the first backpack and feel the straps. Only now, instead of just feeling the straps, we feel them cutting into our shoulders. The image and sensation is powerful. People weigh more than things.

You don’t need to carry all that weight. Why don’t you set that bag down?
Here is the call to action.

Some animals were meant to carry each other, to live symbiotically for a lifetime. Star-crossed lovers, monogamous swans. We are not those animals.

The slower we move, the faster we die. We are not swans. We’re sharks.

Nice symmetry in the first sentence: slower / mover; faster / die.
Reinforcement of the theme.
Had this been a speech in real life, it would almost certainly have gone on for longer than three minutes. The ending would likely have been different, perhaps with a repeat of the call to action.