

*Walk a mile in my shoes, walk a mile in my shoes,  
Yeah, before you accuse, criticize and abuse  
Walk a mile in my shoes.*

-□□ □ Joe South and The Believers



In 1970, the lyrics from a 45-rpm recording written by Joe South resounded from a Magnavox stereo in the living room of my childhood home in Pennsylvania. The idea of putting yourself in someone else's shoes and taking their walk has merit. My take on these clichés is the importance of listening to, focusing on and empathizing with the other person, "seeking to understand rather than be understood," as the good St. Francis taught.

Along with the seriousness of the message, there is a lot of fun to be had with the act of putting on different pairs of shoes. In my lifetime, I've worn big white clodhoppers that were supposed to correct my flat feet. Black patent leather Mary Janes, saddle shoes, penny loafers, moon shoes, Converse and green and white Adidas Stan Smith leather tennis shoes have all been part of my ensemble. Today, the bulk of my footwear includes my habitual choices of Keen's, Crocs, Asics running shoes, Minnetonka moccasins or Enzo Angiolini slip-on loafers. I'd rather wear swim flippers and the thought of summer coming and putting flip-flops back on sounds inviting.

But let's get back to the idea of putting yourself in someone else's shoes and ways to metaphorically do it. Just this afternoon in a cell phone conversation with a friend of mine, she reminded me that life is really all about serving others. She said she'd heard a story about Oprah making a conscious decision to use her money in service to others. Now Oprah has a little bit more dough to fling around than you or me and I'd bet she has more shoes in her closet than Imelda Marcos, but my friend and I agreed that a kind word to the postman, smiling at the lady in the grocery store checkout line or just being an all round decent human being can be defined as service. It doesn't have to include sharing personal wealth although that is a key to charitable contributions and claiming tax deductions. You can't write off shoes with any regularity.

There are prescriptive shoes for people with foot problems, prosthetics with shoes to complement viable limbs and there are no shoes at all. Wheels can completely take the place of walking or wheeled walkers often provide stability for those less steady on their feet. There is military footwear to consider, nursing shoes and waders. I used to wear hunting boots and steel-toed shoes. I've never put on a pair of ballet slippers or tap shoes and probably never will.

Dance is my goddaughter's passion and she's earned every bit of the wear and tear on the heels and toes of her dance shoes.

I like the idea of remembering shoes I've worn and trying on a few imaginary pairs that might not otherwise be my style. That doesn't include putting on a pair of four-inch stiletto's and living in someone else's fantasy. When I consider "other shoes," I am reminded that I have never worn the shoes of a young parent or an aging one. I've never been a teacher standing for hours in front of a classroom or anything but Caucasian in a job interview. I've never been in a CEO's shoes or walked the long hallways of an airport terminal pushing a trash receptacle. I've never worn football cleats or riding boots. I've put on pairs of ice and roller skates but that was an exercise in futility.

The moral of this indirect Thom McCann parable is consideration. Before I open my mouth and insert foot (no matter how the foot is clad), it is incredibly important to step back and think

for a moment. Why does this person behave like he does? What are they trying to say and what's underneath a person's exterior? If I put myself in her shoes, how would my perceptions change? Can I better understand them so that my actions provide balance to our mutually beneficial goals? Where are you in life and how can I help? When am I going to quit judging first and making allowances second?

Maybe slippers are the best answer. Cozy, worn-out scuffs with flannel tops and soft leather soles that provide warmth and quietly move through a fresh morning before life takes hold and you put on your work shoes. If I have to put myself in your shoes, I want them to be slippers. That way we'll both be comfortable, relaxed and open to the possibilities of a new day.