

In praise of being (temporarily) discalced

I wrote a poem once in which I explored aspects of my father's personality through his relationship with his feet. Unlike me or my mother or my two siblings he couldn't stand the beach, or maybe it would be better to say he liked the beach – but only from a distance. Up close he had to deal with sand and its capacity to insinuate itself into every nook and cranny. In the poem I put it like this:

*He couldn't stand the grit of sand between
his toes; the rub which in the oyster makes the pearl.*

I might have been critical of other aspects of his life but I felt for his poor feet;

*Inside his socks, salty with sweat, his feet suffered; two pale fish
gasping.*

To avoid sand's unwelcome intrusion he elected to wear his shoes or sandals with socks – big boat-like shoes which filled to overflowing and made his progress along the beach labourious and ungainly. He was the only man I ever knew who in the 70s sat prim and encased on his beach towel in knee-high socks and shoes, wrapped up like a someone from the Victorian era. His aura of disapproval contrasted sharply with the Aussie beach atmosphere of openness, the celebration of release from constraint.

Perhaps I'm wrong to judge my father for his dislike of sand between the toes and to draw conclusions about the rest of his personality from this fact. But even the monk-poet Gerard Manley Hopkins seems to make something of the fact of being constantly shod;

*Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is smeared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell; the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.*

Gerard Manley Hopkins from *God's Grandeur*

I'm of a different ilk. As soon as summer brings the first real warmth to the season I can't wait for that inaugural beach trip so I can pull shoes and socks off and walk gloriously barefoot along the shore. I love the sensory bonanza that first barefoot walk of the year brings, the press of stones, even the sharp ones wake my feet up. They have been dumb and mute all winter and much of autumn and spring too, even at home – too cold to be comfortably unshod for long. They are feet desperate to loose their winter-white pallour, their sissy-soft smoothness, to develop the calluses which will protect them and allow increasing feats of endurance – walking barefoot across sun-hot macadam or

concrete footpath, rock jumping, even striding across a pebbly river floor without flinching.

On their first outing they feel everything as if the sensory control has been turned up high. The water, ocean-cold, shocks all the senses into alert. The gritty granulations of sand, moist and dry, pleurably abrade the way the texture on a towel does when it is rubbed all over the body.

Sand's instability is also welcome to me, calling forth a different gait from normal. There are 52 bones in the feet allowing them to flex, tighten, shock absorb and rotate permitting these specialised movements. Walking over such an uneven surface and one which also slips and slides necessitates a reversal of normal consciousness. The centre of gravity is brought down, earthwards, out of the head and its concerns, down into the immediacy of legs and feet and the simple reality of perambulation, awareness of the ground underfoot. It requires attentiveness and lending that kind of attention to any activity is enlivening.

There is an order of discalced nuns and monks who are said to be unshod although most now wear sandals, adding socks in winter. The word *disclaced* comes from *calceus*, shoe, which in turn comes from *calx*, a part of the heel. The discalced custom was introduced by Francis of Assisi, undoubtedly an expression of his dedication to poverty but I suspect he – so connected to brother sun and sister moon and the whole natural world – knew also how going barefoot keeps your awareness alert and alive in the simplicity of the present moment.

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