Feet: Essays by readers

We gave our readers a one-word writing prompt: “Feet.”

Readers Write in the February 26, 2020 issue

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In response to our request for essays on character, we received many compelling reflections. Below is a selection. The next two topics for reader submissions are **movement** *and* **scar***—read more*.

Our daughter wanted a tattoo. I didn’t think it was a great idea, and I reacted with motherly concern: “But it’s so permanent. Think about it—you will have it for the rest of your life.”

One day soon after Siri’s 18th birthday, we were together in the car. She had her bare feet up on the dashboard. We were talking away, the car being the perfect place to have a long conversation with a high schooler. That day she was unusually chatty. Suddenly I spied out of the corner of my eye what she intended me to see all along. On the top of her left foot was a tattoo. It was three-inch long black cross—a

Chi-Rho, the cross with the rounded top, representing the first two Greek letters of Christ. She was eager to know what I thought.

Well, I thought, now you are *really* marked with the cross of Christ forever!

Mary Halvorson
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Irma was one of the warm, enthusiastic students I taught in my first aid course in the back country of northeast Brazil. One day she asked if I would walk with her to visit her uncle. I hesitated but decided it would be an adventure to join her. The walk took two hours in the full strength of the sun. Our sandaled feet stirred up dust on the dry clay trail that worked its way past sugarcane and then cotton fields. Mud and wattle huts spotted the trail, from which children emerged to wave and shout greetings. Then the path gave way to just occasional spiny scrub bushes.

Balancing a package for her uncle on her head, Irma carried on a running commentary about the Brazilian countryside. Then all at once with great excitement she burst out, “Here we are!” From what seemed like empty hillside, a little house appeared. With grand gestures she clapped her hands at the doorway, as was the custom, and a few moments later we were greeted by a stooped and worn man, Uncle Jose.

The smile in his grizzled face was warm as his callused hands took mine. He sent Irma inside to get me a stool and to find a cola for my thirst. After pressing me to sit, Jose hobbled into his house and came back with a clay basin and jug. With a mighty struggle, he knelt down to the ground, removed my sandals, and began washing my feet with cool water. I couldn’t bear it. “Oh no,” I pleaded, “you don’t need to do this.” How could I watch this old man hurt himself in order to show me such kindness? I could so easily lean over and wash them myself. I again protested, but he would not stop; he just looked up at me and said, “I am so thankful that you came.” Could this have been what the apostle Peter felt when, in that upper room, Jesus stooped to wash his feet?

Ann Berney
Olympia, Washington

My oldest brother, Kennie, had Down syndrome. Kennie had chores like everyone else in the family. His pudgy feet trudged through muck when he helped clean the cow stalls on the farm. They padded to the trash bins as he carried refuse outside or took the compost to the garden. Those squatty feet held him as he washed the dishes after meals, putting them on the drying rack in whatever state of cleanness he deemed right. Six days a week he would walk three blocks to the post office to get our mail. He'd greet anyone along the way.

We included Kennie in backyard games of softball, kickball, and catch. He'd stumble over his feet saying, "Can't do it!" Sometimes his wild swings connected with the softball and he'd lumber to first base and stop to catch his breath, proud he was part of family play.

Kennie faithfully attended the church's communion love feast, held in the Church of the Brethren tradition. During the time of self-examination, he obediently sat beside our father as the leader asked whether we were faithful to the vows of our baptism, if we were in good standing with our community, and whether we had any unresolved differences with another. Afterward, he followed our father slowly down the stairs to the tables for foot washing before the meal.

This was the difficult part of the service for me. I didn't want to sit beside Kennie and have to wash his scaly, coarse-nailed feet. Nor did I relish giving him the kiss of peace after foot washing. But when Kennie knelt barefoot with a towel tied around his waist and washed my feet, my heart changed. He gently wiped my feet with the towel and stood to embrace me with a kiss. "If I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet," Jesus said, "you also ought to wash one another's feet. . . . If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them" (John 13:14, 17). Kennie knew these things—by the Spirit of Jesus in him.

Paul Roth
Harrisonburg, Virginia

From Frederick Buechner, *The Alphabet of Grace*:

“I say that feet are very religious too . . . I say that if you want to know who you are, if you are more than academically interested in that particular mystery, you could do a lot worse than look to your feet for an answer. Introspection in the long run doesn’t get you very far because every time you draw back to look at yourself, you are seeing everything except for the part that drew back, and when you draw back to look at the part that drew back to look at yourself, you see again everything except for what you are really looking for. And so on. Since the possibilities for drawing back seem to be infinite, you are, in your quest to see yourself whole, doomed always to see infinitely less than what there will always remain to see. Thus, when you wake up in the morning, called by God to be a self again, if you want to know who you are, watch your feet. Because where your feet take you, that is who you are.

We met in Guangzhou on the fourth floor of an institutional building in a room with faux leather chairs, fake plants, and fluorescent lights. One by one, the staff called our names and gave us the child we would parent for the rest of our lives.

I was oddly unemotional when they handed you to me—it felt like it was happening to someone else. You just stared at me, with no expression on your face. You kept that up for three days. You wouldn’t interact with anyone, didn’t play with your toys, and showed no ability to crawl, let alone walk. Even though I had been warned that this is a very common reaction for adopted children, I was frightened that you were mentally or emotionally scarred.

On the third day, I decided to play “This Little Piggy.” I said, “This little piggy went to market, this little piggy stayed home, this little piggy had roast beef, this little piggy had none, this little piggy went wee, wee, wee, all the way home!” Your eyes followed me as I sang and grabbed each toe. The second time through, when I got to “wee, wee, wee,” the most amazing thing happened. You smiled, a big happy grin.

Back home, I often took you to a place my friends and I called the Big Food, an area at the local shopping mall penned off for children to play, with giant replicas of eggs, sausages, banana slices, and cereal bowls made out of soft material, perfect for children to climb on. You loved the Big Food.

On your fourth time at the Big Food, you seemed perfectly at home. Then you stopped playing, stomped your feet, threw your hands in the air, and made a sound that can only be described as a whoop of happiness. It's what you did when the joy that seemed to have been born inside you had to come bursting out. The other parents looked at you, at first with curiosity and then they began to smile because joy is contagious, especially in such a tiny package.

Amy Miracle
Columbus, Ohio

I was in between pastoral calls when my daughter told me I had entirely too much time on my hands. She hooked her computer up to the TV and began to scroll through volunteer opportunities. One of the entries caught my eye: Sole Care for Souls, a program of foot care for homeless people.

I started working with Sole Care for Souls during Lent, a time in the church year when we hear about Jesus washing the disciples' feet. More than once I have been asked by one of the men at Sole Care, "Why do you do this?" I've said, "I guess if washing people's feet was good enough for Jesus, it is good enough for me, too."

Often first-time clients are hesitant to expose their blisters, calluses, corns, and ingrown toenails. More than once I have said to a gentleman debating whether or not to avail himself of this service. "Here's the deal, God loves your feet and so do we, so just get over it and let us care for you."

As I sit next to these individuals I hear their stories of heartbreak, addiction, brokenness, and relationships lost. I also hear about new beginnings, sobriety, forgiveness, and new life. Vulnerabilities are exposed, weaknesses shared. I remember Jon, who struggled with mental illness and would not come inside to sleep at the mission even during brutally cold nights. The sight of his feet and calves almost brought me to tears. He allowed us to bind up his wounds, and I was glad that at least during his foot care, he was away from the elements. Mark had owned a home and had a wife and two children. He lost his job, and some months later his wife left him and he lost his home. I only saw Mark once, and I wondered what direction his life had taken. Another client, David, had the worst blisters I have ever seen. I was able over the course of months to see his feet restored and renewed.

When it’s a client’s first time with us, we ring a cowbell and welcome them to the Sole Care family. Did I mention the fee for our services? It’s a hug, to be paid in full, upon completion of foot care.

Jan Bornhoft
Saint Paul, Minnesota

On a rainy Friday night in January 1967, I was driving home in my Volkswagen Bug after an eventful day early in my obstetrical rotation. I had delivered stillborn twins, and I don’t remember offering much in the way of sympathy or care to the mother. I was just learning how to do my job.

Suddenly, there was a loud noise, and the car abruptly stopped. For a few seconds it was darker than usual. Then I realized I could not find my Bass Weejun loafers. One knee was dislocated. My chin was bleeding. My ankles and feet hurt. I knew I couldn’t walk. Later I was told I was hit head-on by a drunk driver in a black Cadillac making a left turn into a bar. When my parents came to care for me, they were told I might not walk again.

I took a leave from medical school to recover. When I went back I became a pediatric radiologist—a specialty easier on my feet. Today, more than 50 years later, I still suffer from the injuries I endured in that crash. Even after multiple surgeries, each step can sometimes be painful. I walk with a quad cane.

When I experience pain in my feet, I remind myself that all the ministries I have loved, and which have brought joy to my life—being a pediatric radiologist, working in recovery, becoming a spiritual director, being a pastoral caregiver—all opened up as a direct result of my broken feet. There is one more balm. When I dropped back into a different class in medical school, I met my husband of now 50 years. We never would have known each other except for the accident that crushed my feet and ankles. Every day my painful, battle-scarred feet remind me of Easter breaking out of Good Friday.

Joanna Seibert
Little Rock, Arkansas

The cow pasture was the worst. During the winter rainy season, bovine hooves had evidently smashed holes deep into the watery mud. But by April the pocked mud had hardened to rock as my friend and I painfully scrambled across the rough terrain, then crawled under the fence, backpacks catching on the bent wires. By the end of that second day of our hike, I found three blisters on the soles of my feet.

I was on the Jesus Trail that ran through Galilee in northern Israel for 65 kilometers. From Nazareth in the west to Capernaum near the Sea of Galilee, the trail took us through fields of wildflowers and towering thistles, and up and down steep hills on stony paths that burned through thick socks and sturdy sneakers. With the help of moleskin and extra padded socks my friend lent me, we finished the five-day, 40-mile journey to the site of Jesus' headquarters in Capernaum. Never have I been so aware of my feet!

Along the journey, I opened my Bible to Mark's Gospel and read, "And Jesus went to Capernaum." "He went up the mountain." "He went about the villages teaching." That little word *went* had new meaning for me.

Jesus' itinerant ministry indicates that he walked everywhere—on scratched, calloused, and sandaled feet bereft of Nikes. I now know kinesthetically how Jesus "went" from one village to the next. I know the mountain where he climbed to pray, and I know that not even feet can help when you've lost the trail and are forced to slide down a steep slope on your backside. I now can picture the torn and dirty feet that slaves and women washed for masters or guests and the feet Jesus washed in John 13.

The intense physicality of my experience walking the Jesus Trail drove me to thoughts of incarnation. The God who fills the universe became human in a time and place and social class where all transportation and communication was by foot. The self-emptying described in Philippians 2 now appears deeper and more intense than if God had become incarnate in our highly mechanized and digitized society.

Reta Halteman Finger
Rockingham, Virginia

When I read Sister Joan Chittister's comment that "a real monastic walks through life with a barefooted soul," I set out one Sunday afternoon to find the truth in her words

by engaging in one of my favorite prayer practices, walking a labyrinth. The labyrinth on the grounds of the Benedictine sisters' monastery near me is a massive outdoor construction, set out in a forest of Ponderosa pines. The Chartres-patterned path is defined by thousands of variously sized rocks and boulders carried in from the surrounding Rocky Mountains and placed there by the sisters and friends of the monastery.

It was a bright blue September afternoon. Fall was in the air, and I sensed that the snow would start flying soon. I parked and walked up a little rise to the entrance of the labyrinth, where I paused to perform two rituals: I bowed before the invisible presence of the mystery of God, and I prayed aloud my prayer of intention: "Holy Spirit, please show me what it means to walk through life with a barefooted soul." And then I slipped off my Chacos and started to walk to the center of the labyrinth.

The first few minutes of the walk were quiet ones. Because I am barefoot often, my feet are pretty tough. But it wasn't long before I started oooching and ouching my way around the dry and rocky path—and I briefly considered just going back to get my shoes. But my prayer of intention kept me on course as I continued to pray, "Please show me what it means . . ." I kept walking toward the center, though the walk got more uncomfortable with every step.

When I finally made it to the center, I stretched out on my back, grateful to get my weight off my unhappy feet. I looked heavenward through tall Ponderosas and prayed again, "Please show me what it means . . ." In the silence, I thought about how unexpectedly difficult the first half of the walk had been. I thought about what it would be like to be a poor, barefooted mother carrying her child over roads like this. I wondered what it would be like to have a disease that made every halting step excruciating. I wondered what it would be like to be hungry and have to plow a life out of this dry and lifeless soil. I wondered how much pain and suffering goes on in my world that I neither know nor care about because of how often I wear metaphorical shoes to separate me from the suffering of others.

My prayer of intention is the only thing that compelled me to walk out of the labyrinth in the same tedious way that I came in. I was reluctant this time, because my bare feet were already scraped up, and I knew that more walking over the same ground would produce more scratches and blisters. The path was painful for sure, but something shifted as I acknowledged the pain as part of my journey. The pokes and scrapes from sharp pebbles and pine cones still smarted—and I paused often to

hug a tall pine for some respite—but I began to see that there was more to this barefoot journey than the painful impediments. I lifted my face to the redolent scent of the pines, listened to a sanctuary of songbirds, and sensed the presence of divine mystery in my afternoon pilgrimage. I witnessed the beauty of the world in tandem with the agony I experienced—and leaned into the suffering of the world up and against the beauty in my own. My afternoon pilgrimage into the labyrinth established a new way of loving God and my neighbor—vulnerable, unencumbered, and barefoot of soul.

Mona Pineda
Fairhope, Alabama

I despised my stepfather, all 300 pounds of his tattooed flesh. I hated his gold tooth and the thin mustache that crowned his mouth. I hated his power, and how he wielded it. Our every exchange became a battle, an epic contest of strength and wit. He was the Goliath to my David, the sure villain to my righteous underdog, and I seized every opportunity to best the mammoth man.

There was only one respite in our struggle. After a long day in the Tennessee heat balancing on ladders, rocking back and forth as he applied brush and roller to the side of a house, he would come home and tell me to help him with his boots. Too stiff to bend down and unlace his paint-speckled Timberlands, too tired to wrestle them off his aching feet, he assigned the job to me.

Curt instructions notwithstanding, my stepfather avoided sharing words with me. Truth be told, I did not mind. I never asked him about why his mother, whom he called Mrs. Kimble, never hugged him. I never asked about why he didn’t finish high school. I never asked him why he had not achieved his childhood dream of becoming a bus driver. I never asked him what it was like to paint houses he could never afford, or what it was like to accept the charge of being a black father in a world that made the whole endeavor impossible. I never really bothered to imagine the world from his vantage point. But when it came to his feet, the one thing in his life that made him more human to me than iron giant, I couldn’t help wondering what it would feel like walk a moment in his boots.

His feet were crooked, bent at the joint that connects the big toe with the rest of the foot. They pointed in opposite directions, as if wanting nothing to do with one

another. Because of how those first toes pushed apart, all the others crowded on top of one another and piled into a gnarly mass. Add to this the fact that on each of his toes were dark brown corns and bunions grown out like angry elbows jostling for space. Then add his toenails—brittle, diseased, or altogether missing. Almost everything about my stepfather was Goliath: solid, intimidating, indelicate. The only exception was his feet. They were fragile, in need of care and protection. He almost always had them covered. Whether in socks or his worn-out Tims, we would almost never see them bare. He was embarrassed of the way they looked, and even more urgently, the slightest stub or the lightest misstep could force a bellowing shriek to issue from his gut and shake the whole house.

But each night, I pulled his boots off and I watched him wiggle his bundle of oppositely angled toes and breathe. I imagined the relief his feet must have felt, finally released and free. I imagined the kiss of that first rush of cool air. I imagined the pleasure of space after spending 12 hours cramped into hot and ill-designed boots. Those little moments were the only times my stepfather and I touched without a belt swinging between us. His feet were our white flag, our olive branch, the Geneva soil on which we established a moment’s peace. In our 16 years together, I never won a battle against my Goliath. I came to learn, however, that compassion can yield its own kind of victory, a victory whereby even the fiercest opponents can become something like friends. David overcame his enemy with a slingshot stone to the head. I overcame mine by helping him take off his boots. As I sat there and watched him wiggle those twisted toes, my Goliath was just a man with aching feet. And I was just a boy moved to help.

Tony Coleman
Washington, D.C.

We were on our way back from a visit to the rural villages of northern Myanmar. My head was full of tragic politics, my stomach of rice and fish and three large bottles of water. I loosened my seatbelt a bit, trying to take the pressure off my bladder. Outside the rain beat against the car. Flooded rice paddies stretched on either side of us. We bounced down dirt roads, going faster even than I, a native New Yorker, would have dared go on such a highway, sending up splashing waves on either side of us as if our van was a motorboat cutting through a raging brown river.

Much to my relief, our driver pulled over in the next village. Three of us hopped out of the van into the torrent and crossed to a public restroom—a thin building with a row of holes in a porcelain floor. A Burmese friend paid the attendant, who pointed me in one direction and the men in the other. I was stepping through the door into the restroom when I heard the attendant say something sharp. I saw shoes lined up outside the entrance.

I was momentarily frozen, seized by a sudden revulsion. Take off my shoes? I was about to squat down and pee in a hole into which thousands and thousands of women had already emptied themselves, inevitably splattering urine and feces and blood wide of the intended target. Take off my shoes? The attendant said whatever she had said a second time. I turned toward her, pleading with my eyes. Looking at me one second longer, she waved me on, muttering under her breath. Her face conveyed annoyance and exasperation, and I understood her perfectly. But relief was all I felt as I walked through the door with a blessed half inch of rubber separating my feet from the bathroom floor.

Walking out a minute later, I saw the muddy footprints my flip-flops had left on the porcelain, the thick and crusting filth that memorialized my presence in that place. I thought of the worker who would later kneel to scrub them. I thought of the barefooted, full-bladdered women, some carrying children, who would until then have to sidestep the prints and press along the wall to avoid them as they sought the basest of all human relief, and who would likely feel what I hadn't deigned to think of at the time: the disrespect, the arrogance, the tragic, defiling ignorance of the feet that had made those prints. As I left the bathroom, I was unwilling to meet the attendant's eyes. In spite of my sandals, my feet were filthy. And not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.

Deanna Briody
Ambridge, Pennsylvania

Mark's feet hung over the edge of the mattress. For six weeks my husband of 30 years had been on this bed. The nasogastric tube pushed into his stomach through his nose pulled a darkened, lime-green bile from his belly. One IV dripped nutrients into his veins because his stomach no longer functioned. Another dripped medication to calm his pain. Cords pushed antibiotics into his blood, attempting to

kill the unknown and exotic infections taking over his intestines.

White sheets wrapped around his body. A sterile sea of rigid cleanliness surrounded the island-like bed. A continuous whir of life-giving devices disrupted the quiet. I wanted to touch him, and I longed for his touch, his nearness, his warmth. But tubes, machines, and railings held me at bay. Mark's bones, hollowed into honeycomb by multiple myeloma, screamed a silent caution against my desire to embrace him. It hurt him too much to be touched.

Mark was also too exhausted to speak. Cancer had attacked his body with the intensity of a speeding train. The five-month ordeal left him overwhelmed. He seemed to hide within an internal shell, seldom reaching beyond the hospital bed. I looked for some way to feel the love we shared and say good-bye. How could we connect when talking was too hard, touching too painful, and presence not quite enough?

Navigating my way to the foot of the bed, I softly placed my hands on his toes, gently touching them, studying Mark's face and body for a response. He opened his eyes. With a tiny upward turn of his mouth and a simple nod, he gave his approval. I held one foot, then the other, caressing the old calluses grown soft, stroking the skin pulled over once-strong muscles. The toes wiggled in acknowledgment, speaking in a language of their own. I thought I heard them say, "I miss you too." His size 12, basketball-loving, hook shot–trained, golf-putting, resting-on-the-desk-to-think feet became the harbor for our connection.

Relating in this way became the nightly ritual. As each day moved into night, the room darkened with only the glow of a single lamp. Mark's breath eased. I would take a bottle of scented lotion, pour a few drops into my palm, and rub my hands together to warm the soothing balm. With the words, "I love you," I carefully embraced his feet.

After Mark died, I took the bottle of lotion one last time, poured the liquid into my shaking hands, and caressed his lifeless body beginning with the soles of his feet. Then legs. Arms. Hands. Face. In this final and sacred anointing, I whispered, "I love you."

Elaine Olson
Bettendorf, Iowa