

## **Circling around my feet**

In recent years I have become more aware of my feet, of course they have always been at the extremities of my body, kind of world-ends, but now I feel them pressing against the uppers of my shoes. These vital supports take me wherever I wish to walk and transmit my weight to the ground acting the part of gravitational go-betweens. The feet are a long way down from where my consciousness lies, indeed my height is expressed as six-times them, they are indeed distant sights. Sitting on the armchair staring at them they present themselves like sailing ships on the bodily horizon. Bending my stiff back to reach these parts is a real effort, a close examination of them is almost impossible but they never let me forget their presence. Cutting toenails is a little like rock climbing for a slip with the clippers can lead to disaster by digging into the flesh instead of ridding of nails. Darwin is never far away from explaining anything for toenails developed to protect the tips of toes when running through the bush or desert. Those with strong toenails were more likely to survive.

Being so far from the heart pumping the blood against the force of gravity is the challenge that an aging constitution has to cope with. This distance from the heart is critical as the soles of the feet gradually lose sensitivity indeed transmit balance. Bodily grit, dead blood cells, excess fluid, abandoned hopes all accumulate down in the padded soles. Putting up the feet after a strenuous day expecting the heart to somehow cleanse all the debris is a forlorn desire. Walking can feel like skimming on ice.

I have put up with sore feet for years from tight shoes, not that they have been under-sized, then on a visit to Bath to see an exhibition I decided to take drastic action. After looking at the Bruegel-s I dived into the first shoe shop where on purpose I bought oversized shoes, which were totally loose around my feet, indeed rattled. The soles were made of a flexible plastic material. It was, feet-wise, a Eureka moment in my life. The pain was gone. My life changed, sore feet were something that happened in my previous existence I thought.

All was well but after a while my feet felt swollen, curious this was for on removing the shoes and socks they looked normal. Medical advice indicated that the nerves far down were sending back up false messages having become rather elderly, a bit of foot-Alzheimer's. Fortunately the muscles in my legs still have the strength to propel me along so the feet just have to put up with all the walking and exercises. Perhaps shoes have been detrimental to what evolution has given us, the sensitivity in our feet telling us much about our environment have now been isolated as we walk in tight clogs. In the savannahs the ground covered in grass was soft but once men ventured to harder climes the feet had to be wrapped in protective cloth or leather to protect from cold and sharp stones. In the process though something has been lost, this is my explanation.

A further discomfort feet-wise is that they feel cold. This is so real that at night I have to wear socks, no matter that they are under the warm cover of a duvet in a well-heated room, they just feel cold. They are far down but will not leave me in peace as I try to go to sleep, socks they must have. Not very romantic in a marital bed.

The foot has great symbolic meaning with numerous metaphors. To start with *Get cold feet*, *Drag one's feet*, *Off on the right foot*, *Off on the wrong foot*, *Dancing with two left feet*. Then, *Stand on your own two feet*, *Hold one's feet to the fire*, *Shoot oneself in the foot*, *Get back on your feet*. They all have origins in the distant past but still make a point in our modern world. This prodded me to consult the Oxford Dictionary (of umpteenth heavy volumes) published in 1989. The foot is defined as '*The lowest part of the body beyond the ankle joint*', this is followed by literary examples. Not much regard for the Spaniards in Ford's Handbook, 1845, about Spain: *No Spaniard ...ever took a regular walk on his two feet – a walk for the sake of mere health*. The one I like most is by John Ruskin's *Stone of Venice* where he said '*A foot has two offices, to bear up and to hold firm*'. No mention though of walking from this fit Englishman! In the Dictionary there are not less than thirty-five definitions for foot and over fifty where foot and another word are joined to create a new meaning, for example footboard, footrest, etc. One of the last in the list is *footsie* for amorous play under a table.

All of this illustrates that though feet may be far from the brain but they are still central to our existence for what can function without foundations. And that just about concludes this idle wondering about my extremities.

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