# *Walk in My Shoes: The Path to Empathy and Compassion*by Cliff Hakim

# Book Excerpt 2: Introduction

Introduction
*Opening Our Hearts*

Often it seems the world has gone deaf to the needs of others.

Today we have a divided country, with millions of people locked into opposing and seemingly unbendable views. Each day we wonder: Can we really make a difference? Can we find a way to talk about our problems, from racial injustice to climate change, from healthcare to an economic system that leaves too many behind? Can we reduce power struggles at work, the bullying on social media, the violence in our communities and schools? Is there a way to get out of our addictive trance with our devices, and rediscover the value of our face-to-face relationships?

Dissociation is now our default button, and we live in an increasingly dehumanized world. Even the simplest things can wear us down. Think of the times you reach out to a colleague or a neighbor and end up feeling marginalized, hurt, or flat-out ignored. Those frustrating moments when someone cuts you off in traffic, jumps the line, or in some way berates you for being in their way. Those missed moments of connection—the longed-for “thank you” after doing your best to help a work partner or a spouse. Too often kindness goes unrewarded, and politeness seems obsolete, like an old-fashioned skill we rarely use.

One reason we treat one another so terribly is that we are regularly bombarded with a stream of information that activates our “fight-or-flight” response, highjacks our emotional brain, and leaves us in a state of overload. It’s easy to feel anxious, angry, or disgusted when we turn on the TV, or read a headline or a hostile Tweet. On social media we are exposed to blatant lies or twisted versions of the news. Whether it’s the threat of a viral pandemic, violence, or political unrest, we worry constantly about our physical safety. And below our ordinary consciousness is a low-grade hum of fear. As former Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick said, “We have come to whisper kindness and to shout anger.” These are the conditions of an uncivil climate.

Americans are genuinely distressed these days, and I have written this book not to blame or disparage anyone, but to find a way to soothe our nerves, and to help us believe in ourselves and in our own basic goodness. Our country has made significant strides in bringing to light injustices and caring for people who are oppressed, allocating resources to aid children and abused women, and helping the homeless and the poor. We have also made advances in allowing women, and all Americans, to choose to marry the person they love. Yet we are still daunted by the escalation in climate change, police violence, and discrimination toward minorities and newcomers. We must own, too, our personal fears that feed our societal unrest and feed our disrespect toward others.

As I worked on this book, I wondered, Why have we retreated from our neighbors, putting up psychological and physical walls? Are people aware that they are choosing isolation over community? How many opportunities are we missing to nurture real connection? The best way to answer this was to go out and search for individuals who had learned how to walk in other people’s shoes.

I interviewed ordinary people who are proof that we do still care for one another and have the will to make things better, that empathy and compassion are the glue of American society, and that kindness is a pillar of strength. Then I explored the importance of compassionate leadership—people who could help us bring this quality to our larger organizations and institutions.

My interview subjects all had one thing in common: They understood that truly acknowledging and receiving each other requires consciousness and courage. It is no small thing to set aside your fears and open your heart to others, to act as though another person’s life is as valuable and precious as your own.

Here you’ll meet people from different walks of life who have learned the values of walking in another’s shoes—who believe small acts of kindness can help us pull together and counteract the stress of daily life. Yes, cumulative strife can penetrate the heart, and indifference can sear the soul. But we have a remedy at hand. If we each perform one simple act of kindness every day, that will amount to 365 compassionate acts per year. Air, water, and food are vital to life. Yet we also need to add empathy and compassion as essentials. In this way, we can create an environment where everyone can feel more alive. As we feel more grateful and more connected, we can begin to thrive.

Here you’ll find thirty-three inspirational talks with people who embody the values of empathy and compassion in the midst of daily life. You’ll meet teachers, artists, activists, and designers who make the world a better place. And you’ll learn that we can heal ourselves, one story at a time.

As we talked, I asked each of my subjects about their favorite shoes and their own way of walking in the world. Because I am an artist, I drew each pair in pen and ink and decided to include them with the text of each interview.

Shoes are an amazing metaphor. They provide a base of support and comfort, stability, and a sense of lightheartedness and grace that allow us to reach out to others. As each person showed me their favorite pair, we engaged in a wonderfully intimate dialogue about how we learn to care for ourselves and then extend that caring to others.

As you read their stories, ask yourself these questions: Do I feel comfortable and confident in my own shoes? How can I step into another’s, imagining what their daily walk is like for them?

Cultural renewal starts from this kind of dialogue. So I am asking you to do your part—to become more aware of others and of the wide spectrum of human feelings, from pain to pleasure. Then summon your compassion and your courage to act, taking one step to tilt the scale toward gentleness and joy.

In the days ahead, try to make a tangible offering. Give someone a genuine smile, hug, or handshake. Make eye contact with a homeless person. Find a way to acknowledge your shared humanity and personal dignity. Express your appreciation to those who work in restaurants or at grocery counters and who bring your mail or packages. Take the time to thank the friends, mentors, and family members who have helped you on your life journey.

My ninety-six-year-old father finds joy in walking, even though he’s in a good deal of pain. With cancer spreading throughout his body, he pushes himself to cover two miles every other day. This walk is a triumph of sorts, and it contributes to his quality of life. He greets his walking buddies with a bright “Good morning!” and is grateful for their companionship. Their attention cheers him, feeding his hope he can keep going for another day.

We need to support one another on these journeys. And remember, as Ram Dass says, “We’re all just walking each other home.”

One of my subjects, shoemaker Francis Waplinger, believes that we must meet each other with an open mind; “The key to understanding others and treating them better is to humble yourself. Be curious. Set your ego aside and give people the benefit of the doubt. You could be wrong about how you judged that person. Openness is key.”

Heidi McKenna urges us to stop and notice the people in our community. “As I was driving, I saw a man with a withered face, and he looked cold. So I stopped and gave him five dollars, saying, Please get something hot to drink.” These small acts of kindness take little time and effort. Mostly they require thoughtfulness—that you set aside your own problems, needs, and preoccupations for a moment and extend yourself.

The ninety-year-old founder of Abby’s House, Annette Rafferty, provides shelter for survivors of domestic violence in Worcester, Massachusetts. “There’s so much hate circulating it makes me dizzy,” she said. “It’s time to think about restoring love and civility.” Thanks to Annette, low-income women and children no longer have to choose between living in unsafe conditions and homelessness.

What is your reward for taking the time to acknowledge the needs and suffering of others? You will feel better about yourself and about the other person. You will access joy and counteract a portion of your own daily stress. You will relieve someone else’s pain and contribute to their well-being. You might even bolster someone’s will to live.

“Sometimes our light goes out but is blown again into flame by an encounter with another human being,” said the humanitarian Albert Schweitzer. “Each of us owes the deepest thanks to those who have rekindled this inner light.” We cannot afford to take one another for granted. On a collective level, kindheartedness contributes to a more civil community and a more peaceful world. When we treat another well, even in the smallest way, frustration and bitterness melt away in that moment and a healing takes place, one that leaves us more connected to ourselves and to the larger world.

Cynics say that ever since the Romans, we have treated each other badly. But where gladiators once fought in the Greco-Roman amphitheater along the Bay of Naxos in Taormina, Sicily, I have listened to the French National Orchestra play, replacing cries of torment with moments of unassailable beauty. That is what we can achieve when we move from coldness to kinship.

While writing this book, I realized we are far more alike than we realize. Learning to walk *with* others requires that you suspend your judgment and acknowledge someone else’s state of mind. If you notice a friend’s hunched shoulders, a colleague’s watery eyes, pay attention. Sometimes all you have to do is listen, and their story will pour forth. Receive it graciously, for when you give your full attention to another, you get something in return—the realization of your common humanity. At this moment, you have literally walked in another person’s shoes.

I witnessed an exchange like this in the grocery line not long ago. As I placed my items on the conveyor belt, the cashier was telling a customer how she overcame cancer. “I set goals that meant a lot to me. One was to help my son get through high school. Another was to help my daughter arrange her wedding and watch her walk down the aisle. I made it. Now I am here talking with you.” The customer responded, “Thank you so much for your encouragement. I’m facing a similar challenge.”

I didn’t mind the extra time I spent in line. While standing there, I had observed the cashier’s tender eyes. When she apologized for the delay, I said, “No need. Your story was a gift.” I now write down these moments of kindness I encounter every day, and I invite you to do the same.

In this book, you’ll meet individuals from all walks of life, including fellow artists and writers, an engineer, a graduate student, a psychologist, an actor, a dancer, a flight attendant, a retail executive, the founder of a women’s and children’s shelter, and other activists. Our storytellers range in age from early twenties to mid-nineties, and all have generously shared their most intimate thoughts:

“Through attending AA meetings, I learned to appreciate what others go through in their lives.”

“I have bipolar illness, and that’s a big reason why I have compassion for others.”

“In a world with so many wars and a compromised environment, my goal is to help people become more deliberate about the way they live.”

“I taught my children compassion and empathy through caring for pets. I would also give voice to the animal’s needs, ‘I’m hungry, please feed me.’”

“I have to be careful in the empathy department. I want to fix it all,

everything. I need to remind myself to find my little spaces, and just do what I can.”

“To use our voice and words compassionately, we must be able to imagine what it feels like to be threatened, stepped on, hurt.”

As Atticus Finch said in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view.”