

# A LONG WALK IN NEW SHOES

An Oration

by  
Harvey C. Jacobs



**Wetmore Declamation Bureau**

**Box 2695  
Sioux City, IA 51106**

**[www.wetmoredeclamation.com](http://www.wetmoredeclamation.com)  
Email: [speeches@wetmoredeclamation.com](mailto:speeches@wetmoredeclamation.com)**

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Harvey C. Jacobs  
Journalist, Lecturer

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If you ever make a trip through Asia, you will not want to be wearing new shoes. Although you will probably fly much of those vast, limitless distances, you will want to conserve your strength by wearing your most comfortable apparel. The sun is hot--it was one hundred and eight degrees almost every day I was in India, and it can get much hotter; the humidity is almost as high, with searing winds sometimes choking off your breath; perspiration soaks through your clothes and your whole body seems to melt like a hot candle.

But I tried to wear new shoes during most of my trip--and I have been trying to wear them ever since I returned. The shoes to which I refer are the kind you speak about when you say, "Now if I were in your shoes, I would--" or maybe you say it like this: "I'd hate to be in his shoes."

No, my new shoes aren't leather or suede or snakeskin--they're made of things less tangible, yet nonetheless real. You might call them shoes of understanding, created from conscience and compassion, laced with perspective, and designed with a little knowledge--not much, just a small amount of knowledge, and based on respect and love. I repeat the elements from which they are made: conscience, compassion, knowledge, respect, and love--for these elements will help all of us get into the shoes of others who need and want our understanding.

Whenever you return from overseas you are invariably confronted by a score of breathless inquirers who begin their questions with: "What do they think of us? Do they all hate us, as the newspapers say?"

I haven't much patience with that question; I have answered it on several occasions with another one: What do you think of them? And what do you know about them? And could you walk in their shoes without feeling envious or covetous--even antagonistic? I shall interject quickly that I saw no evidence anywhere of antagonism. Envy? Yes. Awe? Yes. Admiration? Yes. But never an example of antagonism or hostility....

As Norman Cousins put it in an editorial: "Americans who come to Southeast Asia fortify themselves with all sorts of pharmaceutical armor. Their little vials are like prancing medieval steeds; they carry their owners into battle against all sorts of marauding bacteria. One disease, however, the intrepid little pills cannot conquer. The disease goes by the name of compassion fatigue, or conscience sickness. When it strikes, it produces a violent retching of the spirit with an accompanying severe upset of the moral equilibrium. At first the eyelids stretch wide open, then they narrow in a desperate effort to seek cover from an abiding reality. There is no prescription except to tell the victim to lower his gaze, then bundle him gently and send him home."

No, there is no prescription which will immunize you against this conscience sickness. If you have an ounce of compassion in you, however; if you have any love in your heart for your fellow humans; if you believe that every one of these hungry souls has been created by the same God who created you--if you believe this, you can put on some new shoes which may carry you through. By one giant leap you can try--hard as it may seem--to walk in their shoes, if only for a few days....

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