

## The Summer of Going Barefoot

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When I was very small, and I was very small indeed, and light on tiny feet, I found some great, thick, heavy leather boots, with soles like Frisbees, and I put them on. I often had to carry heavy things, you see, or so they seemed to me. I didn't like to feel that I was sinking down into the ground, or into wet sand at the waterside, or sliding on the ice or falling through the snow.

A summer breeze would blow and tousle leaves on maple trees, then make its way to me, not stopping to say "By your leave," but arcing almost imperceptibly to lift and sweep away the heavy things. Then I'd sit down, right where I was, unlace the heavy boots, take off my socks, and chase the wind. The load was my responsibility, you see, or so it seemed to me. But who can catch the wind? Not I. There was no cause for worry, I soon realized, and I stopped hurrying and felt how free I was and loved the feeling of the sand, like gentle hands massaging me. I lay down in a grassy place and felt the ground resist and then embrace me, or, perhaps, the other way around. I could have stayed for hours and watched as clouds like giant puffballs skidded through the sky and seabirds rose and looked below for prey, then dove into the ocean. Slowly, steadily, the gentle sun caressed me on its progress to the far side of the earth. I might have slept awhile, for all too soon the sun was low, the grass was cold.

The years flew by. I hadn't worn my boots or even thought about them till the day I felt the weight again. It only ached a bit at first, but it grew heavy with alarming speed. I needed boots without delay, so I gave everything I had away to buy a pair and slip them on. The load became so big I couldn't see where it began or ended. Winters chilled my bones without relief, and summer heat bore down, and I was sure it was the earth itself that I was carrying. My soles were almost bare by now, and I had lost myself.

One summer day a little bright-eyed bird was perched upon the sand, and she, and she alone, seemed sympathetic, so together we trudged on a bit, until I almost tripped upon a man; he sat so still, and so serene, it seemed that he might give me some advice, so tired was I and so dispirited. He smiled and stretched his hands to me; I thought that he would take the weight, but he just tipped it till it fell and rolled into the bay and out to sea and disappeared. "Now give your boots to me," he said, but they'd become a part of me, extensions of my feet—so I believed. "Just try," he said, and I untied them easily and peeled them off. "Now fly," he said. My little bird and I ran barefoot down the beach, and laughed to feel the sand and see the sun again. We turned and waved to him, and then we flew away.



*I am a happy person, and God has given me happiness, but I am guilty about it—as if being happy were not quite allowed, as if everybody didn't have it within reach somehow or other—and as if I had to justify God Himself by being zealous for something I do not and cannot have....* Thomas Merton, from his journals (IV; January 1961)



Thomas Merton, 1915-1968, Trappist monk of the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemane, Kentucky; theologian, poet, author, and social activist