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

# Questions & Answers

***What is the core message of Walk in My Shoes?***

Kindness matters. Compassion is a superpower. 35 storytellers show us that kindness matters. Prominent leaders demonstrate that compassion is a superpower. With courage, gratitude, and an open heart, we can truly walk in another’s shoes and make this world a better place. We can follow the path of empathy and compassion to help create a healthier society and save this planet.

I wrote *Walk in My Shoes* to share the message that we cannot delegate kindness to “the other.” As humankind, we need to take on our share and lift up family members, neighbors, and those who are different (race, color, language, sexual orientation). Thus, it is vital that we emphasize the “kind” in humankind in order to see the needs and suffering of others, to help us feel better about ourselves and about the other person, to access joy and counteract a portion of our daily stress, and to acknowledge someone else’s pain and contribute to their well-being.

***Why did I choose to self-publish?***

My message was vital and the timing, despite and because of the COVID-19 pandemic, was dire. Traditional publishing avenues, including my former publisher, were shut down. The risk to self-publish diminished with my passion and urgency to make a difference. With an extraordinary team including editor, book designer, and printer, our effort to produce this book became a unified mission: together, we Walked the Walk.

***Where did you get the idea for Walk?***

In my pen-and-ink drawing class at the Boston Fine Arts Museum, after experimenting with different objects, I gravitated toward illustrating shoes. Their variety compelled me, their meaning seemed universal, and yet, so often we ignore that which we depend upon. “I’m tired of how we are divided in our country,” I said to my art teacher Maureen Albano. “We have been ignoring and bullying one another for too long. I’m going to write a book about empathy, *Walk in My Shoes,* and illustrate the book with my drawings.”

***How did you go about writing Walk?***

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. For example: a writer, an engineer, a former retail executive, a flight attendant, and an activist 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 such as Maya Angelou, Andrew Cuomo, Rachael Maddow, Nelson Mandela, and RBG who have helped us bring this quality to our larger organizations, institutions, and culture.

***Where did you find your interview subjects?***

The initial core of Walk storytellers came from my personal and professional life, those who consistently expressed concern and kindness toward others. The *Walk* interview pool expanded, as many of these folks volunteered the names of their friends and associates. They knew the profile I sought, based on their conversation with me and my two primary interview questions:

What does it feel like to walk in your favorite shoes?

When and how have you walked in the shoes of another?

Walk storytellers evolved into a diverse group, demonstrating their ability to overcome their fears, put their own problems aside, and reach out to others.

***What is the gestalt of your book?***

*Walk in My Shoes* is magical and substantial, beautifully illustrated by the author, and carries a powerful message. Gorgeous typography and printing are visible throughout.

The individual stories are timeless, heartfelt, and inspiring. The writing is a clear and compelling read, putting the reader in a reflective place for peaceful and refreshing thinking.

People who touch this book will want to pick it up again and again and recommend the book to a growing chorus of everyday “walkers.”

***What did you learn from 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.

We must own, too, our personal fears that feed our societal unrest and feed our disrespect toward others. I interviewed ordinary people who set aside their fears, 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.

I learned as well, as we feel more grateful and summon our courage to be kind, we will tilt the scale toward gentleness and joy, feel more connected, and more of us can begin to thrive.

***What do you most hope that readers will learn?***

My hope is that the stories in this book and the leadership examples will inspire you to customize your shoes so they “fit” your values and personality. The more you can be your natural, comfortable self, the more you will be able to show your care for others and contribute to a peaceful world.

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.

Walking in another’s shoes is a daily work in progress. Listen, be patient, and you will find that you are considering another person’s point of view—you are now *walking in their shoes*.”

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