

Shoes on, shoes off: What's your call?

It's about free will and a deep resistance to toeing the line.

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One night not too long ago, I attended a gathering at a friend's house with my mother and daughter to hear an accomplished young musician perform. For the record, the evening was mild and dry, and the driveway, paved. It was too early for Christmas lights and velvet shoe bags. Even though there were no white carpets in sight, I wiped my shoes on the mat. Honest.

We were among the first to arrive. I watched as the other guests entered and slipped off their shoes in the front foyer, turning our host's elegant entryway into a shoe bazaar. I looked around: we were the only three people in the room with our shoes on. Our host wore bare feet. The concert pianist pumped the pedals in black ankle socks.

On the drive home, I wondered if my companions had noticed we were a visible minority in the shoe department. Both had, and neither were ruffled; they were, though, a little defensive.

"I don't feel dressed without my shoes!"

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"Yuck! My outfit would have looked lame."

I agreed, but I still felt uncomfortable. It's a curious experience standing out in a crowd when you don't really set out to. I felt almost sheepish that night, as though I were about to be scolded. Worse, I could smell the sour whiff of judgment in the room.

After a little research on shoe etiquette, I discovered that shoe removal is *de rigueur* in most Canadian homes, and, according to anecdotal evidence, nowhere more than in Calgary, where I live. What probably started as a way to keep the lid on muck and slush has become not only part of the culture, but a badge of national behaviour.

(Not surprisingly, the same kind of shoe etiquette does not exist in the United States. There they go again, those Americans, stomping all over the world's pristine white carpets.)

Where did my own, apparently un-Canadian shoe etiquette come from? Perhaps it's the American DNA that runs thick in my ancestral blood (which means it's my mother's fault. These things usually are). Growing up in Calgary, I clearly missed the lesson on shoe removal that almost every other child in the city was getting. I did not miss out, however, on that shot of Calgary non-conformity that reinforced a genetic predisposition to asserting myself.

In elementary school, I first realized my family had a different attitude about shoes. Arriving at a friend's house to play, I stepped into her back hallway crowded with footwear. I watched my friend slip off her runners, and of course, I did the same. Following the crowd is a sure-fire way to make friends when you're in Grade 1. In my six-year-old brain, the shoe thing seemed to be connected to the way other people's houses smelled different from ours -- unusual food aromas in the kitchen or an unfamiliar kind of air freshener in the bathroom.

Before I got married, one of the many getting-to-know-you conversations I had with my future in-laws was about shoe etiquette, mine and theirs. They were firmly in the shoes-off camp. At the time, this seemed like a steep mountain for us all to climb. After the first few years of marriage, when we were busy sanding down each other's annoying habits, my husband became a shoes-on convert.

Now, 20 years later, my position on shoes has softened. Although I still urge my guests to leave their shoes on, I have been known to holler "Take your shoes off!" at my children. I'm reluctant to clean my house any more than I absolutely have to.

When I visit someone's home, I question my natural inclination before waltzing in: What will it be this time -- shoes on or off? I check that my soles are dry, and glance at the condition of my host's floor (wearing socks or bare feet in a grubby house is not agreeable). Then I assess my desire to fit in or stand

tall. Depends on the day, and whether my socks are respectable.

I appreciate that shoes-off people believe they're protecting their homes from filth and plague. But if my shoes are clean, what's the problem? Aren't floors meant to be walked on?

When I wear my shoes in someone's home, it's about more than not wanting to ruin the overall effect of my outfit. It's about free will and a deep resistance to toeing the line. It's a statement: I'm an individual and, as my daughter used to say, no one is the boss of me.

Enough with the furtive looks of disapproval from those of you shuffling meekly in your socks! Why not pause before rushing to judgment? Those of us wearing shoe leather in your living room are neither boors nor aliens. We are simply marching to our own drummers.

With any luck, we won't leave our footprints on your floor.

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