

# Walk In My Boots

THE JOY OF  
CONNECTING

Bonnie Ross-Parker



## Walk In My Boots

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Connection.

It is a word that I cannot separate from who I am, what I feel, or what I believe. It is a part of my heart, my soul, and my life. It is something that I wake up each day striving for — a connection with others, a connection to the world, a connection with myself.

It's a vital part of everything I do and everything I seek.

“But Bonnie,” say those who know me. “It comes so naturally to you. With everything going on in my life, I could never find the joy of connecting that you find every day.”

I believe you can. I believe that you already have the ability to connect. With the ability to connect, you have the ability to live a fuller, more successful, more joyous life. All you have to do is take a journey on the road to connecting, as I have.

The Joy of Connecting is really about valuing yourself and shifting your consciousness to share yourself with others. Each time you give someone a compliment or encouragement, or show you value them, you are saying “I recognize you — I connect with you. You are important.”

It's really easy to go the extra mile when you are happy and connected with yourself. It's joyful to want others to feel good about themselves. In the uncertain world of today, we need to belong more than ever.

We need to connect.

Many people live in a sad place right now. People everywhere are hurting. Connection offers a feeling of belonging.

It's really simple. You can brighten someone's day just by saying, “Hello.” You can acknowledge someone through your smile. Just bring who you are to wherever you are and connect

in some way.

None of us can escape the harried and uncertain circumstances we live in. We are more aware than ever before of the fragility of life and the impact of the threat of terrorism. We can remain isolated, disconnected, and frightened of the unknown, or we can create connections and relationships that strengthen, support, honor, love, and enrich us. The choice is ours to make. We are all connected as part of the human family. Why not live the connection!

It's not difficult. It's not stressful. It's not even physical. The journey to connect can start today for you as it started for me so many years ago.

### **Why Did I Write This Book?**

If you are holding this book in your hands, there is a good chance you have attended one of my Joy of Connecting® locations, know somebody who has, or heard about somebody who has. Perhaps you have been doing some connecting yourself or would like to do more.

Seeing the hundreds of people I meet each year, I have observed that a lot of people go about their daily tasks on automatic pilot. They really don't take the time to consider or recognize or even focus on how their behavior, both verbal and non-verbal, affects other people. So I decided to write a book that represents a journey to get individuals — particularly women — to think about the impact they can have on their community by offering their gifts and talents to others. Perhaps with this book, I can even facilitate a caring attitude and be a conduit for a more loving world.

The book is designed to create a story in which the reader looks at her own specialness and brings who she is to her connections. As with all ways of connecting, this brings value to

both the receiver and the giver.

The book's concept — Walk In My Boots — is an invitation to walk beside me and be inspired by the stories and ideas shared here. I see this book as a journey, a pathway to expanded awareness about one's self, how we can relate to each other more effectively, and how we can increase the joy that comes from honoring and growing our relationships.

This book is made up of 10 sections, each addressing a way of connecting. Every section begins with a story from my life, followed by ideas, stories, essays, and sometimes poetry that link to the section's topic. I hope that by reading these pieces, you will be warmed, touched, inspired, and challenged to make connecting a way of life.

## **People Want to Connect**

I think today there is so much that distances us from each other. We are a society of individuals who are so busy, so stressed, so overloaded, and so fragile, we don't make the time to connect.

Yet I believe as people, we want to connect — need to connect. We need to feel part of, not apart from each other. We go about our daily tasks and struggle to balance home life and work. If only we could recognize the joy that we can experience by taking even small moments of time to connect — a quick exchange, a handwritten note acknowledging someone who serves you, a compliment, or a conversation during waiting time.

These are all avenues for connecting. Both parties benefit, and it sets “connecting” in motion! We can enrich each other even in small, seemingly insignificant ways. It takes willingness to do so. It means being conscious and conscientious. It means taking the lead. It means feeling positive about your-

self and wanting to share that “positivity.”

Connections create joy. So let’s be inspired by the joy we can experience together.

### **Why the Title** *Walk in My Boots?*

I collect cowboy boots. The concept of *Walk in My Boots* is similar to the saying “walk in my shoes.” It represents a shared venture.

Walking is energetic. It’s invigorating. When we walk, we connect with our bodies and the environment. For me, walking takes me out of the routine and brings me into natural daylight — beauty, sounds, aromas. By journeying together, we enrich our understandings, try something new, and get in step with each other. By walking together, we can exchange our ideas enroute. *The Joy of Connecting* is the writer and reader connecting by sharing experiences.

“Connecting” is my life passion. I feel most alive when I am connecting. It doesn’t matter where I am — inviting a conversation in the dentist’s office, waiting in line at the post office or check-out counter, or chatting with a server at a restaurant. People fascinate me. I derive tremendous joy in finding out more about someone, in evoking a smile, in expressing appreciation. I experience a natural magical high when I engage someone in a conversation.

Connecting is my way of bringing a smile, letting someone feel noticed and valued, offering friendship, and lightening up what otherwise might be a mundane experience. (After all, who likes waiting in line?)

For example, I habitually thank people who support me by using words they’re not expecting. Instead of saying “Thank you,” which we usually express automatically and without thought, I like to say, “I appreciate you.” Same message —

different words heard in a way that lingers with the recipient. And it usually evokes a “Thank you” back! To me, telling others I appreciate them is a real connection.

Many individuals enhance and assist us, yet we rarely take the time to express appreciation for their contribution. Perhaps it’s because we don’t feel as good about ourselves as we should. That can happen when people don’t connect with each other.

Here’s the vicious cycle. First, people don’t show appreciation to each other. Then the people who should be appreciated don’t feel that they are, and therefore do not feel good about themselves. When they don’t feel good about themselves, they don’t tell others how much they appreciate what they do. End result: it’s easy to take one another for granted.

The answer? I believe when people feel good about themselves, it’s natural to want others to feel good about themselves as well. The joy of connecting brings value to each party involved. While it takes little effort to appreciate others, the dividends are huge. You have better relationships. You have better and more caring friends. You feel more productive and more a part of something bigger than yourself. Hey! Even your love life will be better!

I truly think individuals would do more for themselves and others if they thought people really appreciated them. So let’s do more to acknowledge others. All it takes is a slight shift in behavior to expand who we are and encourage others to do the same.

It’s my singular mission to spread good cheer wherever I go. I want to create a ripple effect that travels around the world.

## **The Days I Walked**

This book joyously shares my tale of walking in the Avon 3-Day Walk in Georgia to eliminate breast cancer. For three days in October 2001, I put myself on the line — physically, mentally, and spiritually — with 3,000 other participants. We walked to honor all the women who have had, or one day will have, breast cancer.

I walked for two friends who were then dealing with breast cancer — Deb Haggerty and Marcia Steele. The knowledge that I was walking for them — connecting with them — gave me the strength and the push to do what I needed to do. Deb and Marcia's spirits carried me along through the physical (training) and the mental (believing in myself and the cause) aspects. My connection with them helped me commit to and work toward honoring my commitment throughout the fund raising required.

What a wonderful thing it was to share the experience of the walk with all of the other participants. How wonderful to know that by doing this, I was not only helping Deb and Marcia, but also contributing to the greater cause — raising awareness and helping women globally — contributing to the global heart.

This is what connection does. In the end, "I did it." I prepared. I crossed the finish line. I did what I set out to do. The connections were all there.

In a way it was a singular accomplishment, though I walked for 60 miles with 3,000 others. I had to do everything possible on my own to complete what I set out to do.

Other people were looking to me to see if I would carry out my responsibility. They had put their faith, confidence and money in me. In return, I was there for them. I was

prepared. I connected with myself on all levels first, and then brought my whole self to the journey.

We walked as individuals. We shared the experience. We supported and encouraged each other along the way. It was a journey of connection from the beginning until the end.

As a collective community, we make a huge impact. But like any community, we serve best when we bring our best forward. The Avon Walk represented our best individual efforts as a collective voice. Peace, awareness, determination, healing. We can't do individually what we can do collectively. That is the lesson!

### **Connecting Even Though the World Stands in Our Way**

I taught 6th grade for 12 years. Although I haven't been in the classroom for decades, I recently began thinking about my classroom setting and how the world got in the way.

During the first several years of my teaching career, I created a relaxed environment. I loved my students. I loved teaching. My students could count on me to talk with, to be hugged, and to be encouraged. My school district was lower/middle class and families having two-income earners in the household was the norm. Single parenting was also common. Over time, however, certain restrictions were placed on all of us. We were told to never be alone in a classroom with a student. There was to be no physical contact between teacher and student, no matter how young. For someone who is both spontaneous and affectionate, this mandate was difficult to adhere to. My students needed affection. Our success together was in part due to the hugs of support that I delivered and they knew they could count on. Verbal connection remained, however, the physical hugs, tousling of hair, quick shoulder squeezes had to stop. All of a sudden, the easygoing atmo-



sphere was replaced by distance and disconnection. I felt restricted. It just wasn't the same.

It's frightening to think that due to a few incidents of physical abuse, every classroom teacher became suspect and confined. I suddenly felt on guard, making certain I didn't do or say anything that could be misunderstood or misinterpreted. Preparing each day for the classroom was coupled with caution. Every teacher had to be very careful in all areas of behavior. Consequently, we all lost out.

The way I view it, teachers have a large influence on the children they teach. To have to exhibit behavior that is distanced and guarded, especially during a child's younger years, sends a wrong message! Children not only need to feel good about themselves, they also need to appreciate adults and each other.

One of the lessons our schools are supposed to teach is how to exhibit appropriate behavior. Yet affection has been deemed inappropriate. I felt depleted. The effort each day to create lesson plans for over 125 students, showing care and concern for each child, and having to hold back the emotional side of our relationships became very stressful. I left the teaching profession eventually.

### **Reconnecting with Life**

I often wonder how many people feel disconnected in life. We hear examples of it all the time. Perhaps it's been years since we've talked with a particular family member, a former college friend, or a previous neighbor or business colleague. We (myself included) get so caught up in the routines of life that we let time and distance separate us from those with whom we were once lovingly connected.

I suspect this is indicative of most busy, stressed, and

overloaded individuals. The nuclear family, as we once experienced it, is a dinosaur. People often move away from the community in which they were raised. Healthy grandparents are living on their own and older parents have retired in communities far from their loved ones. Despite the plethora of books and websites offering to put us in touch with past friends, classmates, neighbors, colleagues, or just past experiences, so many of us feel alone.

While I recognize that our circumstances change, sending out a communication at holiday time, for birthdays, or for no occasion at all is better than disconnecting altogether. Instead of focusing on how much we've become disconnected, let's begin addressing ways to connect again.

Often, to become connected, we have to rely on new contacts in unfamiliar surroundings. In new settings, it becomes more crucial for us to find ways to connect. If being disconnected is becoming the "acceptable norm," I'm committed to bringing us back to inclusion, caring, support and interdependence. We've become a technological society. Within that society, we need to become a more connected community.

This book speaks to the value of connections and encourages you to take steps to re-connect with others you've known in the past. Its rewards can be enormous.

## Connecting Womanhood: The Avon Walk

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Deb Haggerty touched my heart. An incredible, vibrant woman from Orlando, Florida, we connected through my husband, Phil. Deb and Phil are both active in the National Speakers Association.

One day I heard her story about her challenge with breast cancer.

When breast cancer came to Deb, it wasn't a surprise. She had always expected it because it ran in her family. Though she was not surprised, she did become angry — angry that so many women get it, angry that the treatment, in some cases, is so invasive. She was 51 years old — in the prime of her life — ten years younger than her mother was when she got cancer.

What do you do when you've just passed 50 and you're faced with a disease that could mean an untimely death at worst, and permanent effects to your body at best? Where do you find courage?

Deb found it through connecting.

Rather than feeling sorry for herself, she demanded to become active in her own care and survival. She asked herself, "OK, so what can I do about this?" She surfed the Internet and soaked up all the information she could. She educated herself on taking control of her own body and her own life. She refused to let it stop her business; she refused to cover her head with a wig or scarves. She felt people needed to see other people dealing with this disease. The only time she made an exception was for her daughter's wedding. She treated herself to a wig.

At the same time I heard another friend, Marcia Steele, had also been diagnosed with breast cancer. So many women, so much pain.

Their stories inspired me. They made me aware through their connections with me. Now I would do my part for them.

I decided that I would honor both Deb and Marcia by walking the Avon 3-Day Walk in October 2001. The Walk would cover 60 miles from Lake Lanier (north of Atlanta) to Piedmont Park in Atlanta. I had seven months to train.

### **Finding Courage by Connecting**

Connecting with others elicits courage. The Chinese philosopher Lao-Tzu said, “To love someone deeply gives you strength. Being loved by someone deeply gives you courage.”

I certainly didn’t know if I could walk 60 miles. I had never trained for anything like this. I had always stayed in pretty good shape, but this was different. This was a commitment to something else. This was a commitment to other people — people in pain and people in need.

I know I couldn’t have done something so outside my everyday life without a compelling reason. Through it all, one thought kept me going. If the courage and strength of these women could keep them going through life, surely I could develop the strength and courage to walk 60 miles to support them.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that the same way walkers were helping people like Deb and Marcia, others would be there for me. We don’t have to go it alone! Support is available for whatever challenge we meet because people want to help. They’ll always be there if we just look for them.

I chose to help Deb with her healing. At first, she couldn't believe a near-total stranger would do that for her. She helped me push forward and encouraged me to stretch where I had never stretched before. We connected because we cared.

The training began. At first, the going was tough. I had to get used to walking long distances alone. As a lifetime connector, the solitude of walking by myself was hard! I began to walk with a tape player or CD player attached to my clothing. As I increased the time and distance I walked, motivational music helped significantly. I worked up to walking three to four hours a day. As I hit my stride, I found myself reaching the 10-mile mark, the 15-mile mark and, eventually, the 20-mile mark. I wore out three pairs of walking shoes!

To keep on track with my training, I walked in the rain. Some days, I came home chilled from the cold or exhausted from the heat. Some days, I took Epsom® salts baths to soothe my tired legs and feet. By the end of the summer, I was walking for five hours, soaking in a tub for one hour, and sleeping for two more. Walking had almost become a full-time job!

I'm certain friends and family thought I was crazy to spend so much time committing to this challenge. Yet, they still supported me both financially and by asking me how I was holding up!

### **Keeping the Connections in My Heart**

At times, dealing with the solitude of training alone became more difficult than almost anything I'd ever done. Day after day, mile after mile, took sheer determination — not only to do what I said I'd do, but also to be an example of what's possible when one stays focused. I knew when I did it for myself, I was doing it for others. The task lightened as I began to feel pride instead of fatigue. My body got stronger;

I lost weight and felt terrific.

Still, despite walking by myself on this journey, my connection with Deb, Marcia, and my purpose assured me that I was never completely alone. That's the secret of connecting.

Through the seven months of training, I kept the spirits of Deb and Marcia in my heart and their faces in my mind. Their determination in confronting cancer kept me pushing forward. How small were my concerns about my tired legs and my stamina compared to what Deb and Marcia had to think about each night? How did they cope as they wondered what was waiting for them the next day?

Every day, I affirmed my success. I listened to motivational songs. I visualized the finish line. I prayed for continued good health, not only during the Walk, but after it as well. I prayed for these two friends. Mostly, I prayed that I would cherish this experience and remember it for how it shaped me as a person.

### **The Walk Begins**

I was ready. It was almost time to leave for Lake Lanier. Deb and I talked the day before. I was thrilled to remind her of her specialness and told her that, throughout the Walk, I would be thinking of her and admiring her courage. She assured me that I'd be fine. As her words entered my heart, I knew I'd made the right decision. I am certain if tables were turned, Deb would be as supportive of me.

The Walk connected me with a grand community of people who care enough to do whatever it takes to make possible what seems impossible. We walked for those who were battling the disease. We walked for those surviving it. We walked for those who had lost the battle. We walked for their loved ones. We walked to show an observant community our

solidarity. We walked because we could. We walked because it was the right thing to do. We walked for whatever reasons our hearts demanded of us. And yes, we walked for the world! We knew that walking in our collective “boots” was the path to connecting our global hearts. Of that, I am certain.

As incredible as the preparation had been, nothing could equal the overwhelming emotion of the event itself. Walking side-by-side with the survivors, their friends and loved ones, connecting as sisters with purpose, we spoke freely, cried openly, shared stories, exchanged supplies, encouraged and assisted one another. We had a sense of accomplishment as individuals and as one huge, tired, elated family.

We traveled three consecutive days, from one community to the next, during the heat of the summer. The campsite each evening brightly displayed lights and blue tents against the dark night sky, welcoming 3,000 walkers who dragged themselves in, feeling exhausted and elated. The organizers set up music, food, medical tents, and entertainment. What a feeling to know we were all in this together — connecting with millions of women worldwide so that they would know they're not alone in their struggle. It was worthwhile to know that each and every step each walker made would bring in \$40 for cancer education and treatment!

### **The Finish Line**

I recall nearing the end. About one mile from the finish line under the arched sign that read “Welcome to Piedmont Park,” I thought I saw my daughter and her family. Could it be? Sure enough, there they were — Liz, Ron, and Eli — waiting for me! When I fell into their hugs, I held on tightly and the tears flowed, celebrating a moment I'll never forget. My dear loves were there for me. I remember thinking how grateful I am to

have children in my life who love and honor me. I knew that if I ever had the kind of health challenges some of our walkers faced, my children would remain by my side.

We stepped through the remaining distance together, sometimes holding hands, always smiling, sharing the joy. Not only were we a family connected, we were now connected in this experience as well. It left an indelible impression.

As we crossed the finish line, we saw and heard a sea of faces, clapping hands, loud cheering, happy music, and lots of emotion. Outstretched hands touched us. To be such an integral part of thousands of people whose journeys were forever linked to my own, my heart was touched as never before. As it pumped out of my chest, my spirit connected with the universal spirit. I know now that my contribution — yours, ours — is important to the universal plan. The \$8,250 my supporters and I raised contributed to the whole Atlanta fund of \$4.4 million!

The closing ceremony for the Walk honored the survivors (those beautiful women in pink shirts and hats) and honored the crew and volunteers who gave unselfishly of their time and expertise, my husband, Phil, among them. When we filed into huge Piedmont Park, there was a sea of cheering well wishers holding balloons, flowers, signs, and kids on shoulders. We all connected for a common cause — to forever eradicate the pain and suffering caused by breast cancer. We were one global family.

### **After the Walk**

My daughter threw a party to celebrate my accomplishment. My husband made up tee-shirts that displayed on one side “The Bonnie Ross-Parker Support Team,” and on the other “What I Did For Love.” Marcia came to the party,



along with other wonderful people who had supported me along the way.

As the months went on, Deb and Marcia miraculously recovered and today are doing well. Like Deb, Marcia was helped by her connections. Friends made a pact to make sure she was never without help for doctor visits, chemotherapy appointments, shopping and more. Marcia's team took care of details and took care of her.

When the doctors told Marcia she was “clean,” she was asked what she'd learned from this experience. Marcia, whose work and lifestyle before the cancer had been “driven,” pondered the question. Then she said, “I've learned that the most important thing in the world is having friends — people who will love you and care for you and take care of you, no matter what. I don't know what I would have done without all of the people who were there for me.”

Connections.

Deb was also thrilled when I told her that I had completed the Walk. The funny thing was that I had decided to walk in her honor even before I'd met her in person. Getting together with her just before the 3-Day Walk was truly an emotional experience. I finally met the woman I'd admired from a distance. She met the mystery woman who'd been walking and walking and walking to support her healing.

We hugged and cried and felt an immediate bond between two spirits. I knew when I looked into her eyes and “saw” her heart that I had made the right decision. Walking 60 miles to help another heal was a small contribution compared to the one Deb was making in my life.

I carried thoughts of Deb with me throughout my training and throughout the 3Day. Our relationship endures be-

cause we'll always be part of each other's journey. Our friendship will continue to have meaning and significance.

### **A Way of Being**

Connection is a way of being. We first connect with our own hearts by honoring our individuality, sharing our talents, and caring about others. Only then can we begin the process of offering help and hope to those outside ourselves. Only then can we connect with our community.

When we connect with our community, the ripple effect overflows into the world. We become an integral part of a universal family by offering our unique contributions and connecting to the unique contributions of the six billion souls who inhabit this earth. Caring creates a powerful connection and belief. Our connections will one day produce a cure.