Columns
Social Justice



A view of the stoop outside the author's kitchen (Julie Vieira)



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The grace of the stoop instills new way to listen and think

I'm new in the neighborhood and have been slowly settling into my space. The chaos inside has abated, somewhat, with everything more or less in the approximate area it belongs. Pots and pans in the kitchen. Books in the study. Socks in the living room. OK — maybe not everything.

I have found solace from the chaos by sitting on the stoop just outside my kitchen. I never thought traffic and kids hooting and hollering would be my idea of respite, but it turns out that the neighborhood life suits me. I have unintentionally met a lot of passersby. I say unintentionally because I am rather shy and my social aptitude is questionable at best. But just as we have the "grace of office," I believe there is such a thing as the "grace of the stoop."

What exactly does this mean? "In religious circles," writes Jesuit Fr. Karel San Juan, president of Ateneo de Davao University in the Philippines, "the phrase 'grace of office' is often invoked in the context of a superior or leader—or someone in authority—and how this person is endowed by a certain 'grace' by virtue of (their) position."

Sitting on the stoop has a weird effect on me, hence, the "grace of the stoop." I find the stoop bypasses my normal shyness and introversion and compels me to engage — willingly! — with the folks around me. People stop and talk with me. Cyclists nod their silent greetings. Squirrels wander over, looking for handouts. I've met Danny, who picks up odd jobs like mowing lawns and shoveling snow around the neighborhood. Then there's Sharon, who passes by on her way to the grocery store searching for empty bottles and cans to redeem. Buddy the gray-muzzled bulldog sometimes comes to the fence with his deep-throated "bork." I think he means his bark to sound more menacing, but really, he would let any potential trespasser pass for a treat or pat on the head.

I'm here for it. All of it. I suddenly become Ms. Social. I chat with people, comment on the weather and discuss the possibility of the Detroit Lions being Super Bowl contenders this year.

Somehow, I am endowed with a certain "grace" by virtue of my position on the stoop. Were I to veer off the stoop even a centimeter toward the garden or driveway, I am certain that said grace would vanish.

The grace of the stoop is not all sunshine and puppies. I've seen a few angry scuffles and heard more curse words than I care to remember. The other day I heard loud shouting. It sounded like a fight was about to break out. But to my surprise, I discovered it was just one person yelling. He was tall and lean, and his eyes were focused on some distant point in front of him. "It is foolish to be on the side of the Democrats," he yelled. Oh, dear, I thought, here's a political warrior disgruntled from the recent elections. He continued yelling. "It is foolish to be on the side of the Republicans." This is odd, I thought, especially in our decidedly red county. As he passed by, he yelled, "We have no direction, We must have a direction to survive."

I watched him continue to walk down the block as I pondered in my heart what this could mean. Even after he was well out of sight, his proclamations still hung in the air. Were these the rantings of a fool or the inspiration of a prophet? If we consulted our Scripture tradition, we'd know it's likely both. How often the so-called fool is the vessel for proclaiming the Word of God!

From my stoop, I thought about the political atmosphere of our country, the wars in Gaza and in Ukraine, and the instinctive need we seem to have to take sides, even when we don't have any skin in the game.

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What would it look like if we heeded the sidewalk prophet's declaration? Could we sidestep the question of whose side to take and instead focus on what direction we want to work toward? What kind of direction would truly allow for survival, that is, the continuance of life? This is not to minimize the importance of particular sides, but rather to reframe the issue around the values themselves, not positions.

This reframing means tapping into our deeply embedded values and longings. For example, in the constitution of the United States, we might name these values as "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." In Catholic social teaching, we have a number of values to help guide us in finding a direction, "human dignity, solidarity, and subsidiarity" among others. "Taking a side" is not listed among those.

On the stoop, I have the luxury of reflecting on these things, but it becomes more difficult "off stoop" when I am working. How can I do that, for example, with a colleague whose synagogue was the target of antisemitism because of the war in Gaza? Or with a refugee family whose meager possessions, including the shoes on their feet, were taken from them by border patrol?

I'm still pondering the words of the sidewalk prophet. They challenge me when I gravitate toward side-taking — including unabashedly taking my own side. They encourage me to go deeper and to tap into my values as a way to shape my perspectives and responses. If I believe in human dignity, for example — and I do — then I have to allow that to inform me in all that I do and am.

What San Juan says about the grace of office may also be true about the grace of the stoop. "The 'grace of office' refers to both the radical need for grace and the belief that grace abounds in the office," he writes. "It also refers to faith in the capacity of the office-holder—the leader—to transcend or to overcome one's self toward the directives of God and the Spirit."

May we each have graced moments on whatever stoop we choose — to listen to the sidewalk prophets, to ponder the things of life and to remember who we are and what we stand for.

As for me on that day, I stood up from the stoop a bit different than when I had sat down. What didn't change was my love of the stoop and the many graces it has afforded me. But enough about graces. It's time to walk the bag of empty cans to the sidewalk and leave them for the next time my neighbor Sharon passes by.