

Hands and Knees

There is a particular posture that rarely appears in heroic portraits. You won't find statues of leaders, conquerors, or industrial magnates posed on hands and knees. Power, in our visual language, stands upright. It towers. It looks down.

Yet much of life, the maintenance of it, the quiet keeping of it, happens close to the ground. I am often there in the garden. Hands in the soil. Knees damp. Pulling out what does not belong, or at least what I have decided does not belong. Small green invaders that appear overnight, threading themselves between deliberate plantings, taking advantage of space and sunlight with no regard for my design. Weeding is repetitive, unglamorous work. The results are subtle. Few admire the absence of weeds; they admire the flowers. And yet the garden depends on that hidden labour.

It is hard not to notice the metaphor pressing in from the edges. To be on hands and knees can signal many things. Historically, it has often meant subservience, the posture of the defeated, the enslaved, the obedient. Those who wielded power stood; those who bore its weight bent. Entire classes of people lived lives of physical maintenance that allowed others the freedom to appear dignified, clean, and elevated above the mess of necessity. We still inherit that visual grammar. "On your knees" is not an expression of empowerment. It suggests control, hierarchy, diminished status.

But context changes meaning.

When I kneel in the garden, it is not because someone has forced me down. It is a choice, an act of care rather than submission. I am not being reduced; I am tending. The posture is the same; the significance is different. What looks like humility is, in fact, stewardship. This distinction matters. Much of the world runs on work that is both essential and overlooked: cleaning, repairing, caregiving, maintaining infrastructure, tending land, managing the small but constant corrections that prevent disorder from taking over. These tasks rarely bring prestige, yet without them, systems collapse quickly. Gardens overrun. Buildings decay. Relationships fray. Institutions drift.



Power often sits far from the ground. Maintenance lives there. There is, of course, another uncomfortable parallel in the garden. To weed is to decide which lives count and which do not. A plant thriving in the “wrong” place becomes a problem. Its vigour is redefined as intrusion. Its success as nuisance. We talk of “invasives” and “unwanted growth” in language not entirely unlike the metaphors humans have historically used for one another when defining who belongs and who does not. That recognition introduces a note of caution.

Order can be care, but it can also be control. The difference lies in motive and humility. A gardener attentive to the ecosystem understands that not all spontaneous growth is an enemy; some may enrich the soil, attract pollinators, stabilise edges. A gardener obsessed with perfection may strip the system of resilience in pursuit of uniformity.

Perhaps the posture of hands and knees contains a quiet lesson here. It lowers the eye level. It brings one closer to the complexity of the ground. From above, the

garden can be reduced to pattern and symmetry. From below, you see roots entangled, insects at work, soil structure, the slow processes that make growth possible. Kneeling can reduce arrogance. It forces attention.

Historically, many of the people who lived close to the ground, farmers, labourers, caretakers, possessed forms of knowledge that elites overlooked. Practical understanding of cycles, limits, and consequences came from proximity, not abstraction. To be near the earth was not simply to be low in status; it was to be close to reality. Seen this way, the posture that once symbolised subjugation can also symbolise connection.

There is dignity in chosen care. In tending rather than dominating. In accepting that disorder is constant and that keeping systems functional requires ongoing, uncelebrated effort. The garden never stays “done.” Weeds return. Growth spills beyond boundaries. Maintenance is not a one-off triumph but a continuing relationship. This can be frustrating if we are attached to visible achievement. It is more sustainable if we accept process over finality.

Perhaps this is where a positive turn lies. We cannot all stand tall in the spotlight of recognition, nor should we need to. A functioning society, like a healthy garden, depends on those willing to work at ground level, sometimes literally, often metaphorically. Choosing to kneel in service of care rather than power reframes humility as strength. Hands and knees do not have to mean submission. They can mean attention. Responsibility. Participation in the quiet labour that allows beauty, stability, and life to flourish above.

Not all important work is done standing up.