



Meditations

ON A WOOD FLOOR

Old wooden floorboards have saved my sanity more than a few times. In the right light, they're practically a cloister walk.

BY CHARITY VOGEL

SOME PEOPLE FLIP on the TV or climb on the treadmill when they get stressed. Others go shopping, draw a bath or rip open a bag of Oreos.

But I've found a different means of escape, and it's about as plain and prosaic as a peanut butter sandwich. For me, relief from worry and care comes through the weathered wooden floors in my old Victorian house.

Knotty and scarred, worn smooth by the decades, these old heart pine floors have saved my sanity quite a few times. And I'm sure—as sure as I am of anything in this stress-driven world—that they'll do it again.

Take an example from the recent past. In February 2009, an airplane carrying 49 people crashed to the ground in a suburb near my home. It was a traumatic event and it stunned the community, not to mention the country.

As a journalist at the major metropolitan daily newspaper in our region, moments like these for me—and for my husband, who is also a reporter—aren't just tragedies. They are calls to relentless, deadline-driven work. The two of us spent days and nights in the newsroom after the crash, writing stories about the disaster. By the end of those grueling shifts, we were spent.

We came home, and my husband went off to fix a snack. (We had been living on newsroom pizza.) But instead of sinking onto the couch, I headed straight for the basement—and the Murphy Oil Soap.

Wiping the wood floors in my house that night soothed my spirit and calmed my mind. Instead of seeing images of the downed plane on an endless loop in my mind, I saw the grain in antique pine planks, darkened by more than a century of steady use, some parts worn smooth as a cloister walk, other parts roughened and shrunk with age.

Instead of the smell of jet fuel, I inhaled the lemon-and-honey smell of oil soap, homey and innocent. That night I realized again what I already knew: Wiping down these old wooden boards with warm soapy water is an act of health and cleanliness, of organization and structure. It is a way to reclaim order and to reassert control in a world where those qualities can be difficult to find.

Work and Prayer

But floor work is also, for me, much more than that. It can be, in its very best moments, akin to prayer.

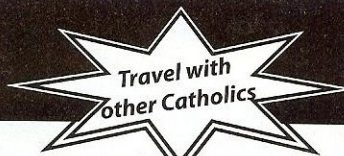
I mean that in the truest sense: as an act of devotion in which I am able, even for a short time, to block out the noise and stimulation of the outside world, and to shrink my gaze—and my thoughts—to the circle of pine planking within arm's reach.

I center myself while I wipe those floorboards. I focus my thoughts, and oftentimes a decision or two comes to me in that time of concentration as well. Great monastics have taught for centuries that work can be prayer; that, in fact, it *should* be if we want to live in the world in the proper manner. The closest I've ever come to understanding what they mean is when I'm bent over a bucket, rinsing out my rag for another swipe. *Ora et labora*. Work and pray. Pray and work.

That may be why, when the worst happens in my life, I get down on my knees and push my plastic bucket along the floor, following behind it with a flannel rag.

The steady motion of my right hand—in and out, over and over with the grain of the wood—soothes me, and reassures that wild, ungovernable part of my mind that always tends to jump to worst-case scenarios and stay there.

In and out, in and out. The night after the plane went down. The day my grandmother died. The



National Parks Tour

14 Days

Departs July 9, 2012

from **\$1348***

NATURAL WONDERS ... You'll visit landmarks in **EIGHT NATIONAL PARKS** including the spectacular **GRAND CANYON**, with an overnight stay; Redwood trees in **SEQUOIA** and **KINGS CANYON**; the rock needles at **ZION**; **BRYCE CANYON'S** sculpted cliff faces; **YOSEMITE'S** waterfalls; **ARCHES'** unique rocks shaped by wind, water, sun and frost; and **CANYONLANDS**, with enchanting vistas carved by the Colorado and Green rivers. You'll also visit Death Valley (weather permitting), CA; tour the Kennecott Copper Mine, Salt Lake City, Utah; Reno, Virginia City, Lake Tahoe, and Las Vegas, Nevada! Your YMT Chaplain/Priest is Father Frank Wittouck, SCJ. This is Fr. Wittouck's third trip as a YMT Chaplain. He was pastor of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in Houston and after 20 years he is now a retired army chaplain.

Romantic Rhine River Cruise

14 Days

Departs July 15, 2012

from **\$2398***

**Enjoy the YMT chartered, 4-star ship, the "TUI Allegra"!
Cruise from Frankfurt to Amsterdam... PLUS tour Germany!**

Start in Berlin, Germany for a 4-day tour including east and west Berlin; Checkpoint Charlie; Potsdam; Dresden; Weimar and Frankfurt. You'll tour the Rococo Castle (Sansoucci), drive the German Autobahn, and visit many historic sites. Your cruise includes the Rhine's highlights including Rudesheim, the Loreley passage to Cologne, Dusseldorf, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Nijmegen, and Bonn. Your tour will continue for two more days and nights visiting Heidelberg and Munich, with included sightseeing, before flying home from Munich. Your "brand new" ship the TUI Allegra, constructed in 2011, offers a state-of-the-art, experience! Price includes (very limited) outside Porthole. *Add \$300 per person for French Balcony.

Alaska Cruise

plus a YMT Pacific Northwest Vacation

15 Days

Departs July 16, 2012

from **\$2099***

Daily Mass aboard Holland America Line **ms Oosterdam**. Includes a seven-day deluxe cruise with Holland America Line and a seven-day Pacific Northwest vacation with YMT. Fly into Salt Lake City for one night; enjoy a city tour of the highlights before taking a scenic drive to Jackson Hole, WY. See Grand Teton National Park and spend two days in Yellowstone National Park before heading to Butte, MT. Travel through Montana's "Big Sky Country" and through northern Idaho; see Lake Coeur d' Alene; Spokane; Grand Coulee Dam; and Seattle, Washington. Next, travel by ship through a wondrous maze of forested-island and glacier-carved fjords, past charming coastal villages, migrating whales and calving glaciers to Tracey Arm; Juneau; Sitka; Ketchikan; and spectacular Victoria, BC on Vancouver Island! Spend one more night in Seattle, with an included city tour, then depart for home. Price includes the seven-day deluxe Alaska cruise, seven nights hotels, motor coach sightseeing, and baggage handling. Your YMT Chaplain/Priest is Fr. Walter Grabowski who is pastor of Immaculate Conception Roman Catholic Church in Eden, New York. This will be his 6th trip a your YMT Chaplain. *Plus \$299 tax, service, and gov't fees.

***Prices per person, double occupancy. Airfare is extra.**



For details, itinerary, reservations and letter from your chaplain with his phone number call 7 days a week:

1-800-736-7300

time I fought with my husband, panicked about a child's illness, worried about a job or my bank account.

In and out, in and out. All will be well. All is well.

Putting Things Into Perspective

I realize that some people would find this odd, that I find more solace alone, with a rag in hand, than in a crowd of people at the shopping mall, coffee-house or corner bar. I don't know how to explain it. I only know that I emerge from these sessions feeling secure and mindful, as I inhale with gratitude the soapy smell pervading my rooms.

Maybe it has something to do with time and history: In wiping these boards, I remind myself of how many people (most of them women) have done just this act in the past, in good times and bad, in sickness and in health, with worry and in joy.

There's nothing like living in an old house and noticing its details to remind you of how small just one person, and that person's problems, can be when compared to the whole of human history. But old houses comfort you, too, by making you realize how intimately connected you are to all those who have come before you, and will come after.

In and out, with the grain. In the end, I suppose, it comes down to this: You can't make the world do exactly what you want.

We all wish that weren't the case, but it is. Time passes. Mortality intrudes. Problems happen, and happen again.

But here's something else that's true: finding one small way—in your own house, in your own life—to come to terms with the unpredictability and sorrow that life invariably brings. That's something to remember, and to return to. Because, no matter how unconventional it may seem, you don't want to pass by any road that takes you to peace.

Even if it involves Murphy's and a piece of old flannel. **A**

Charity Vogel is a prize-winning journalist who holds a doctorate in English from the University of Buffalo. A native of Buffalo, she lives in a 19th-century Victorian with her husband, T.J., and two small daughters. She is currently at work on a book for Cornell University Press.