Culture



(Unsplash/Benjamin Lehman)



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A few months after my last remaining grandparent passed away at the age of 98, my extended family and I traveled back to Western Massachusetts on a humid summer day to clear out my Papa's home. In the midst of our grief, none of us were looking forward to the emotionally and logistically difficult process of parsing through belongings in the house that he and my grandmother had lived in since 1952.

But throughout the hard and sweaty manual work, gem after gem revealed itself: a sturdy wooden rocking chair that had been a hallmark of family holiday gatherings, sets of charming glassware adorned with hand-painted apples and strawberries, a folding step stool that multiple generations of children and grandchildren had used to reach kitchen counters.

Each knickknack, piece of furniture or wall adornment told a story and, with laughter and tears, we relived the memories while deciding what to keep and what to let go.

Around the same time as the Great House Clear Out, my husband and I were beginning the search for our first home. The intersection of these life events had quite an effect on my television habits, as my interest in both real estate and comfortable, thoughtfully designed spaces began to grow. In other words, I was watching a lot of HGTV.

HGTV often catches flak — much of it warranted — for encouraging unrealistic renovation expectations, spotlighting improbable budgets or perpetuating gender stereotypes. But one thing I've always appreciated about the network is how its hosts seek to honor the past. Whether it's giving a century-old floor a new life, integrating family heirlooms into a design or sourcing funky fixtures from flea markets, I'm grateful for the thoughtful look back while moving forward.

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So when a recent promo for the show "Barnwood Builders" included the line, "We have one foot in the past, and one foot in the future," it felt relevant to how I try to live: in smaller ways like sourcing previously-loved things for my home to larger ways around my faith and what it means to be a Catholic steeped in ritual and tradition. Watching HGTV reminded me that honoring the past is important to me on every level.

Remembering friends and family through heirlooms

Erin and Ben Napier, the small-town Mississippi couple and co-hosts of "Home Town," weave family memories into homes in some of the most creative ways I've seen. The pair has created a floor from the wood of a client's grandfather's old barn, and designed a "record room" for a musician to display vinyls passed down to her over the years.

Similarly, Jenny and Dave Marrs of "Fixer to Fabulous" incorporate personal elements into their designs, whether it's framing family memorabilia like newspaper clippings and land surveys, or surprising a high school football coach by integrating upcycled seating from the old stadium into his living room.



Jenny and Dave Marrs of "Fixer to Fabulous" (HGTV)

While cleaning out my grandparents' home, I was inspired to take a few things that reminded me of time spent at their house: a pair of crystal door knobs that took my dad and me (OK, mostly my dad) nearly an hour to remove from the parlor doors,

and an intricate copper baking tin that now hangs as art in my kitchen.

Every time I see these items, I think about my time spent with my grandparents, and feel thankful that their memories can hold space in my home.

Thoughtfully (and reasonably) furnishing a home

Like so many, I've begrudgingly spent hundreds of dollars on cheap, "assembly required" particle-board furniture that fits the trend of the moment but falls apart a few years later, contributing to what Pope Francis has called "throwaway culture." I've always appreciated that HGTV's Hilary Farr, the straight-talking host of "Love It or List It" and "Tough Love" encourages her clients to give old, solid furniture new life through paint, reupholstery and other creative refreshes.

This spirit of reuse inspired me to take on the DIY project of refinishing an old dresser that a good friend had parted ways with. It was satisfying work and I'm happy to have cool, functional, reimagined storage in our bedroom as a result.

While working on the interior design of a home, many HGTV designers will turn to flea markets, antique shops and architectural salvage (something I didn't know existed until my deep dive into renovation programming) to find unique pieces for their designs. I remember looking on in awe as Alison Victoria of "Windy City Rehab" found a massive pier mirror salvaged from an old Chicago bar (imagine what that thing has seen!) and made it the anchor of a living room design.



Alison Victoria of "Windy City Rehab" (HGTV)

Through Facebook Marketplace, I've managed to find a set of comfortable upholstered barstools that fit perfectly into our kitchen, a grand buffet mirror that retails for hundreds (I paid $50), and a textured wood-and-rattan bench for a mere $20 from a neighbor hosting a moving sale. I love to think of the life these items lived before I acquired them.

Drawing inspiration from the communion of saints

You may have noticed that HGTV shows often end with a party. There's a big "reveal," with hosts walking homeowners through their freshly renovated spaces, delighting in their clients' surprise and awe. As the credits roll, we see the family enjoying their home by welcoming their relatives or friends, and filling their newly refreshed space with the community that has shaped them.

Is the sweet scene made-for-TV? Sure, but as I watch in the home my husband and I have owned for two years now, I can't help but think of the people who had

previously filled this space — the relatives who celebrated Thanksgivings and Christmases, welcomed babies, mourned losses — and the friends, family and frequent visitors who fill our home with warmth and community today.

It reminds me of the communion of saints, the family bond that we experience as believers in Christ, encompassing both those who have passed away and those who live today on earth. My favorite saints and holy figures are in that group, along with my grandmother and grandfather and all our beloved dead who might not be canonized but were something of saints to us.

I like to think of them smiling as my husband, daughter and I engage in the ongoing work of making our own home a sacred space with every creaky floorboard, remembering to keep one foot in the past and one in the future.

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