

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

May 6, 2014 at 6:00am

Do what you can, where you are, with what you have

by Catharine A. Henningsen

Soul Seeing

I saw it when I was in college and not once since. It was one of those cheesy, '60s, laminated, straight-out-of-the-retreat-house-gift-shop signs, but it worked for me. It said: "Do what you can, where you are, with what you have." Simple. No homily necessary to explain it. The kind of phrase that grows on you and becomes a touchstone of sorts. The kind of phrase with enough gravitas to weigh other things against, like whether or not the holiest thing is to go become a missionary halfway around the world. Take another look at that sign. Maybe holiness begins on the spot where you're standing.

The maxim fit well with another of those phrases, drummed into me nearly from infancy by the members of the Society of the Sacred Heart who educated me: Be present. Do not be where you just came from. Do not be where you are going next. Show up and be here while you're here. That too, possesses the kind of gravitas you could weigh the world against.

And so it happened that I was down in my basement not long ago, on one of these newly minted "arctic vortex" mornings, glaring at 6 inches of standing water and the mess I needed to clean up, thanks to a broken sump pump. I was not a happy camper. But then there was a knock on the basement door and in walked Andy the plumber, back to work for the third straight day on the sump pump and other related problems.

Right away, I could see that there was something wrong. Andy was a nice looking guy in his early 40s, but this morning his face looked like a rumpled shirt. "You look exhausted," I said. "Are you all right?"

"We have a sick kid," he said, and I could tell from the way he said it that he wasn't talking about a simple case of flu.

I went upstairs and returned with coffee and over the course of a long morning's work, his story unfolded.

I learned that their son had been critically ill in Children's Hospital for months and that he and his wife never left him alone. The hospital is easily 50 minutes' drive each way, they have another six children at home, and both he and his wife work two jobs. Even at that, Andy told me, "We're going to lose the house and one of the cars." Which is how he came to be working in my basement looking like a rumpled shirt.

"I've got about 45 minutes in me," he told me as we worked. What the poor guy meant was sleep. It's the kind of story that makes me embarrassed to call myself an American. How is it possible in this "First World" country of ours for people this hard-working, and with so much already on their plate, to fall through the cracks? But we all know that it's happening around us every single day.

It wasn't a problem I could solve, much as I wanted to, but here's a thing God knows about me: She knows I write business books and that I know about mortgage work outs. He knows I know some people who know some people who know the rest of what Andy needs right now. And God knew to put Andy smack dab in the middle of my path at this precise moment on his immensely difficult journey.

I went upstairs and came back and handed Andy some names and phone numbers and explained what they were: the HARP program for mortgage loan modification, a consumer credit service that could negotiate better interest rates on their other debts, some Web addresses for crowd-funding that might help with the medical bills. Five minutes. But maybe, just maybe, they could help Andy and his family find a way to keep their house or their car.

After he'd left for the day, I headed back downstairs to survey what remained to be done, surprised to find that Andy had moved everything out of the standing water to the perimeters of the room, giving me a great head start. The next morning, when he came back to finish up, he looked a lot better rested. He greeted me with a smile as I opened the door and said, "Thank you. That was good information. It looks like we're going to be able to save both the house and the car."

"No problem," I said and, of course, it wasn't. The plain fact of it is that what God asks of us is simple. Be there. Show up. Open yourself. It's often struck me that God is an incredibly elegant manager of talent that way. All she ever needs from us is to be present and to "Do what we can, where we are, with what we have."

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[Catharine A. Henningsen is an author and journalist. She lives in Branford, Conn.]

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