

A corner of the city: Caring for one place

by [Lydie Raschka](#) in the [August 11, 2009](#) issue

When we moved to New York, my husband, Chris, picked a corner of the city to own. The Soldiers and Sailors Monument, which commemorates those who died in the American Civil War, is a templelike structure surrounded by formal paved terraces. It's also a hangout for vagrants and skateboarding teens. Broken bottles, crack vials and newspapers routinely settle into its nooks and crannies.

Chris liked the monument's grand scale and its stunning views across the Hudson River. He'd sit on a stone wall and read or sketch. Every now and then he would leave the house with our broom and sweep up debris at the monument. He performed this civic act quietly and unnoticed. I was impressed. It would not have occurred to me to take ownership of public space.

A few years later we chose another corner of the city: Trinity Lutheran Church on the Upper West Side. The church was built by German immigrants, and it has grand old bones, with its vaulted ceiling and soaring arched windows. But the nails are rusted on the slate steeple tiles, and water trickles down through the tower and rots the window frames, causing cracks in the walls. In the basement an old stage is a dumping ground for file cabinets, chairs, warped bulletin boards, books, crayons, paints, easels and more. Every year the stage is cleaned and much of the rubbish goes in the dumpster, but it's soon cluttered again. For me the stage represents the futility of some of our congregational efforts: the child who refuses to do homework in our after-school program in spite of our best efforts, or the young person in our homeless shelter who does not take the steps necessary to move into independent housing.

Recently we had our semiannual clean-up day. Our treasurer, Joy, waxed the floor while council member Dan secured loose pews so children won't get hurt when they gather for songs at our summer day camp. Jennifer polished the wooden seats; Brad vacuumed the corners and edges of the sanctuary—a job that took hours.

Downstairs in the kitchen Pastor Heidi was up to her wrists in creamy, corrosive metal cleanser. With a toothbrush she polished the brass candlesticks that now sit shining on the altar. I mopped the sanctuary floor and worried about larger, structural problems—the widening rat holes in the back garden and the water-damaged walls.

When I think about these problems, I wonder why Chris and I chose this particular building. Why did we choose this church, for that matter, and why this religious denomination? Why organized religion at all? In part, my choices can be traced to my Norwegian Lutheran family, which instilled church caretaking habits in me. My parents' and grandparents' church doubts and struggles fuel mine—a realization that mocks or comforts me, depending on my mood.

Yet when I look around at what we have accomplished here at Trinity, I am amazed. Three years ago, with no resources to spare, we opened our doors year-round to ten lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender 18- to 24-year-olds. Shelter is one thing we have in abundance. Getting to know these resilient young people has caused me to examine the nooks and crannies of my soul and to try and root out preconceptions and unconscious, hidden biases that I find there.

Why do we make the choices we make? Perhaps Chris became a caretaker of the monument, a public space, because his family collects trash when they hike in the woods. Any time they go outdoors they come home with a plastic bag filled with crumpled chip bags, spent bullet casings, crushed beer cans and more. At first it seemed foolish to tackle the whole outdoors and to carry the extra weight home—but soon I eagerly embraced the ritual. These little acts of faith can be habit forming,

Our choice of a church home is similar: while we can't predict the outcome of our actions, we act—not blindly, but in good faith. If we tend one corner responsibly, we may find that it has become the place we want to be because we have helped make it so. Perhaps it's the tending, and not the choosing, that's most important.

A four-year-old girl demonstrated careful tending when she came to church clean-up day with her father. He put a rag in her hand and she began to polish the altar. She worked on it for a very long time for someone so young, and was so intent on her task that she barely looked up. When she was finished she had polished one tiny spot—about one-sixteenth of the whole—but that one small section of the altar gleamed.