

# Knapp: Aging in place: Getting from here to there

By Guest Column/MAarian L. Knapp

Wicked Local Newton

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Newton —

Lately, I have been thinking about how I get from one place to another. Those who plan systems for moving people around call it transportation. I, however, as an individual aging-in-place, don't think "big" about "transportation;" I think "small" about how I can get from here to there. Usually, I go places with some specific goal in mind and, if I really planned it, I could probably get a lot of what I need by walking. I live .36 miles from a CVS where I can buy shampoo; .50 miles from the village where I can get a loaf of bread; and about 1.5 miles to the library where I can pick up a book, but I drive almost everywhere because it is easy, fast, and what I have become accustomed to as a resident of suburbia.

Underlying all of these getting-around musings are two profound issues. The first revolves around the complexity of my life. The second (and related to the first) is about what will happen in the future if I cannot walk much or drive. I do like to think about, and thoroughly delight in my life's complexity, with its lush composition of family, friends, community and culture. I don't like to think about not driving. Driving is the thing that keeps me connected to the multiple, rich pieces of my being. It is a cornerstone for maintaining freedom to create the milieu that best fits who I am and want to be. Thoughts about not driving create dread at the potential loss of connections to those pieces but, more importantly, the independence simply to be myself.

I can only speculate about this challenge because I am lucky to be able to walk to the T (.33 miles) or drive to a museum. To really understand what happens to someone whose walking has become limited and who has been forced to stop driving, I talked to my dear, very long-time friend Susan, who I knew would be candid about what happened to her. "The realization that I had lost the body that I knew came gradually," she said. "For the first few months after the surgery, it didn't matter that I had to rely on other people. But, after a while, I began to have that helpless feeling that I was stuck in a cage and the way out had been taken away from me."

Susan's husband was very willing to drive her places, but she was loath to rely on him and others for simple things like picking up fruit, or getting a haircut. "I always considered myself an independent person. I could get in my car and do what I wanted — it was part of who I was. I was defined by my job, my good health, my physical activity. My independence was part of my strength. That is all gone. I slowly understood that the woman I used to be was not the person I am now. I am beginning to accept it, to live with it, but it feels rotten. Every morning I wake up thinking that it will be the way it was before, but it doesn't happen," she said.

When Susan and I have dinner together after a movie, I still see the same person who is extraordinarily observant, has an astute sense of humor, and is passionate about societal issues. It doesn't matter how I

experience being with her, it is how she feels about herself. “Yes,” she said, “the basic person is still there, but those vital, defining peripheries of my life are getting smaller or disappearing. When you get older and have lost physical strength, you become dependent on others. You get used to it over time, but a part of my life has ended.”

We suburbanites are particularly prone to this thorny aspect of aging in place. Ironically, we have set ourselves up to face a cruel dilemma. We moved to the suburbs to be away from the noisy city, raise our kids in a secure environment, strive for upward mobility, and live in privacy within the walls of our separate homes. These elements are the underpinnings of the American — Dream notions of self-sufficiency and independence. Paradoxically, losing independence at an older age collides — sometimes abruptly — with our lifelong, in-grained perceptions of who we are as individuals and as a culture.

I do not have an answer to this dilemma, but getting older and losing physical capabilities will likely happen to most of us, albeit at different times in our aging process. A little anticipatory research might be a good thing to do. We can talk to friends, contact our church or synagogue to see what is available, and call the Department of Senior Services (617-796-1660). They can all help us begin to figure out how to get from here to there.

*Marian L. Knapp, a 40-year Newton resident and caregiver of many elders, received her Ph.D. at age 70 after completing her dissertation on “Aging in Place in Suburbia.” She is a facilitator for community groups wishing to address and improve health and social issues at the local level. She is a commissioner on the Newton Council on Aging.*

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