

Knapp: Aging in Place: The A List and The B List

By Guest Column/Marian L. Knapp

Wicked Local Newton

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Making decisions is a mixed bag for me. Sometimes it's easy because it is so clear what the right action should be, such as painting my peeling house, having my chimney relined, or traveling to Oregon to meet my nephew's fiancée so I could get to know her before their wedding day. These choices were straightforward and uncomplicated because they involved basic, important elements of ordinary living – having a pleasant dwelling place, being safe from noxious fumes, and deepening family ties. Harder decisions come when I haven't acknowledged that there are choices to be made.

About a year and a half ago, and a few days after I had been in the hospital for a minor health issue, my aunt Sylvia (who is, herself, aging in place) came to check on me. She is the last remaining relative of my parents' generation and is full of wisdom, and good common sense. She drove herself to my house. We sat across from each other in my quiet living room and she asked how I was doing. I told her I was fine, taking it a little easy, and that all of me would be back to normal very soon – the rote response from someone who views herself as consummately independent. Then, with strong, almost chilling clarity she said simply, "Marian, you do so many things. Really, you must think about what you could give up in order to take some pressure off yourself! You have to make an A List and a B List."

I remember feeling a little stunned, being brought to sharp attention with no forewarning. "Why is she saying this to me?" I thought. "I am managing everything very well, Thank You - my work, children, grandchildren, community, friends, social life, writing. What's the big deal, I can do it all. Nothing I was doing had anything to do with this small health incident." I remember thanking her figuring that I would probably ignore what she had said to me, believing I needed no advice. But that is not what happened.

Maybe it was because of my respect for her or that a tiny part of me knew there could be some truth in her comments, but I took her words seriously. Looking back, I think that what really made me listen to Sylvia was the courage she showed in confronting the issue and challenging me directly - no hedging, no subtle hints, just straight observations. She did this in a matter-of-fact, no-nonsense, and, above all, caring way with not a lot of emotional overlay. Her firm prodding made me stop and evaluate.

For several days, I thought about the A List and the B List notion, and concluded that it might have merit. There were so many things that I did routinely without stopping to think about either their worth to my existence or their potential for producing stress. What was I holding on to that I could let go gently? Initially, I put everything on the A List for one reason or another. Then I tried to imagine each item and whether or not I felt any anxiety when I carried them out. Sure enough, one thing popped up – my involvement with a choral group.

I love to sing, always have. Growing up, it was something we all did in my family and each time I sang as an adult it brought back lovely memories of my mother and father harmonizing to “Moonlight and Roses” in the kitchen. I thought about how it would feel not singing with the chorus that I had been involved with almost from its inception. Surprisingly, I felt relief at the idea of not having to rush to get to practice after my once-a-week day with my grandchildren (The A List). Yes, I realized I would miss the singing but not the tension produced by just trying to get there. So, I stopped and that has seemed quite all right. Someday, maybe, I’ll go back but only if I can find something to replace it on the B List.

This episode gives me some powerful and positive lessons: an A List and a B List can help me be objective and lower apprehension when decisions present themselves; being direct and caring provides a way to talk to the people I love about the challenges they may need to think about now and in the future; and, most importantly, this way of thinking helps me be in control of my own aging in place journey, at least for now.

Making an A List and B List may take some time but it is worth the effort because it helps clarify the things that are most important in our lives. Like everything else, it is hard to get started but it gets easier as you move through it, especially if you can find a wise friend who can challenge you with kindness. Let me know what you think at [**marianlknapp@gmail.com**](mailto:marianlknapp@gmail.com).

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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