

Knapp: Continuum and transitions

By Marian Knapp

Wicked Local Newton

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When I talk to people about where they want to live as they get older, many say “I want to stay in my house for as long as possible. I am not ready for a nursing home.” This comment intrigues me, perplexes me, and makes me sad.

It intrigues me because it reflects our reluctance to acknowledge the long process that is ahead for most of us between right now and some undefined pin-point of time in the future. It is as if one day we are healthy, competent, and functional, and, then on another day, without warning it's nursing-home time. There seems to be a mental leap over perhaps a few decades of living to an imagined precipitous landing in an unhappy end-of-the-line place. Yes, the time may come when we are not able to manage on our own but what really happens between now and then?

I have been an observer and a participant in the process of aging. I cared for many loved ones whose lives came to natural ends in nursing homes. These were vibrant, self-sufficient, life-loving individuals who I never thought would be unable to take care of themselves. Yet, they became disabled and dependent. It was so, so hard for all of us. But, it wasn't an all-of-a-sudden thing. It happened over a span of many years during which they lived in houses, moved to new apartments, or independent living facilities, and looked for ways to redefine themselves. It was only after several transitions and at quite advanced ages that a nursing home became the only option.

The comment “not ready for a nursing home” perplexes me. Experiences with my elders who made it into their 90's before they became incapacitated reflect the path for the majority of us. Only a small percent (4.5) of people 65+ are in nursing homes. In fact, the percent is declining with the biggest drop among those 85 and older (18.2 percent in 2000 compared to 24.5 percent in 1990). Perhaps we only hear the “bad” stories but our perception that the only choice after a house is a nursing home doesn't reflect reality. The vast majority of us seniors are in the community in various types of living situations.

Sadness enters in for me when I think about people who may be living in fear when there are so many options and so much living to do between now and the end of “as long as possible.” Perhaps holding on to our houses when they become too difficult to maintain may prevent us from exploring ways of reinventing our lives. Maybe the question should not be “How can I stay in my house?” but a series of questions such as “How do I want to live my life in the years between now and then?” “Does trying to maintain my house lead to more stress than I want to deal with?” “If I move from my house, will it free up some physical and emotional energy to be used in creative discovery?”

In my regular musings (which I try to do objectively and without fear) I imagine my life as a continuum to be navigated over the next 10, 15, or 25 years. Instead of thinking “no nursing home,” I have decided to put my energy into envisioning a list of potential next steps and roughly the points at which I might think about reevaluating. For example, I can stay in my house for 5 – 7 years, find ways to know my neighbors and community better, and locate people to help with routine maintenance.

After that, I could sell my house and rent an apartment, or buy a condominium nearby and stay another 5 – 7 years. No worries about shoveling and I'd be freed up to investigate new avenues that I didn't have time to do because of house responsibilities.

Or, I might consider an independent living or a "continuing care" community where there are things to do and interesting people to meet but probably not until age 85 or so. Some of these places have affiliated assisted living and nursing homes, which can provide an easier transition, if necessary. Personally, I'm not afraid of a nursing home (assuming it's a good one). The idea of having people around me 24 hours a day whose job it is to take care of me, when I can't, is quite comforting.

I know that moves are stressful but making at least one in the next few years might help me figure out what to keep and what to get rid of so my kids don't have to deal with the unnecessary stuff I have accumulated.

So, there are options to ponder as we go through this journey and it is up to each one of us to decide what's best. As you think about these things, go to the Housing Fair at the Newton Senior Center, on March 30, 2011 where there will be lots of people to provide information about alternatives. But don't think house vs. nursing home. Think continuum and creative transitions. E-mail me at marianknapp@gmail.com.

Marian L. Knapp, a 40-year Newton resident and care-giver 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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