

## **Aging in Place: Have you Prepared Yourself?**

**By Marian Knapp**

In early September of 2003 my mother had a stroke. She was already in a compromised condition, being 95 years old and wheelchair bound. She didn't look that frail. She was round and pink, but already past the time that she wanted to live. She was just waiting. Intellectually, I knew that she probably had only a little while longer but emotionally, unlike her, I wasn't ready.

In the days before the weekend when I was due to go to New Hampshire for my classes I was distracted and worried by what was going on. I wasn't even sure if I should leave but the nursing home assured me that it was unlikely that something dire would happen over the next few days. I knew my mom was well taken care of and with some nagging disquiet and guilt I decided to make the drive. Also, I had committed to hosting two women from the Lakota tribe in South Dakota who were to begin the graduate program where I had already completed one year of study. They were to stay at my house the night before and travel back and forth with me. When they arrived, I explained what was going on. They listened with great attention, expressed concern and understanding, but they did not say, "I hope she gets better," or "I hope things turn out all right." They asked, "Have you prepared yourself?" I was disconcerted by the question, never having been asked it before. In those few words they expressed a profound acceptance of what was ahead. There was no denying the inevitable outcome. Their probing question clearly and starkly laid the situation in front of me. My mom's future was her death and my future was to figure out how to face it.

I believe, now, that this potent question allowed me to begin the process of letting go. Up until then I had been holding on, doing everything that I could within reason (and within her wishes) to keep her alive and with me. I couldn't see that trying to sustain her life was less about her desires than my need to have her around. The question of preparing myself came at a critical moment. It forced me to recognize the obvious, which up until then, I had chosen to ignore. My mom was at the end of her life and I had to accept that. My job then became two-fold: be with her calmly until she died, and create a stepping-off point for moving my own life forward without her. This transition in thinking and acting didn't happen suddenly or dramatically. It occurred slowly over weeks as I gradually released her until she died a short time later.

From time to time over the nine years since then I have considered this idea of preparing myself. I have found it useful to think about it related to many aspects of my life. I can ask: Have I prepared myself by making my wishes known to my children? Have I prepared myself for a decision to stay in my house or a move? Have I prepared myself for my financial needs? Have I prepared myself by having important papers in order? Have I prepared myself to accept dependence if I can't take care of myself anymore?

There is the risk of becoming obsessed with a list of all of the possible scenarios – something which feels less than healthy to me. Certainly there is no way to prepare for

untoward events but it feels quite positive to identify the key areas that could become problematic for me and perhaps place a burden on my kids. It offers a certain peace. By doing some thoughtful preparing I can take some time-consuming and guilt-filled guesswork out of my and my children's decision-making. I am not only preparing myself but I am preparing for them.

Along with all of the rational, commonsense explanations for asking this question there is something more profound. I, like so many of us, don't want to think about what may happen. I don't want to think about losing my independence and control. I don't want to face so many, many things. And, hopefully I won't have to. But the idea of preparing myself creates a new perspective. It gives me permission to think about my life in a different way, one based on reality and not on fear of the unknown – a fear that can trap me and my family in a false sense of permanence. It is freeing, enlightening. It is a more reflective way of dealing with thorny issues. Most importantly, it gives me the power to deny the denial and it allows me to exert my independence as a competent older adult.

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