

Knapp: Aging in Place: Our houses and our dreams

By Guest Column/Marian L. Knapp

Wicked Local Newton

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Newton —

I have an intimate relationship with my house. This place, with its straight walls and boxy windows, supports and surrounds me with stability and comfort. It is small and sturdy — it suits me. I feel safe in this familiar house, knowing all the ins and outs of living here — the tucked-away spots where I can stay warm in the winter; how the sun shines through the back windows in the late afternoon; and the funny noise the pipes make when the washing machine is on spin cycle. I know what causes that sound and I know not to be afraid.

It has taken me many years to understand this house well and I take care of it so that it will continue to shelter me. My house is full of memories, shaped by my perceptions of what happened here — the countless family events, gatherings of friends and holiday celebrations. Objects clutter my space. Framed artwork on walls, photographs on tables, and old furniture that I inherited from people I love are all suffused with memories.

My house and the things that fill it up have become a complex entity. I have overlaid life-defining significance onto this structure and its contents. Some of this meaning reflects the phenomenon of the American Dream, which propelled people to strive for financial stability, educate children well, retreat from cities into suburbs and own a home of one's own — a symbol of independence and self-sufficiency. So many of us did this and so many have stayed. Today, one-half of Americans 65 years and older live in the suburbs. Dreams about our houses become personal as we superimpose reveries about the past, present and perhaps the future. In "The Poetics of Space," Gaston Bachelard says the "chief benefit" of a house is that it "shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in place."

I often wonder how long I should stay in this house. My thoughts bounce randomly from one extreme to another. Maybe I should move to a place where I don't have to worry about shoveling in winter. Maybe I should stay and make arrangements for people to come in to deal with all contingencies. Maybe I should just wait and not create stress for myself right now. After all, I am still self-reliant. In my many talks with older persons like myself, I find that I am not alone in these musings. All of us at this stage of our lives face these concerns and they can present momentous dilemmas about what to do.

Even if we think tentatively about different staying or leaving scenarios we are instantly confronted with daunting questions. If we want to move — where do we go? What situation will suit our needs and desired lifestyle?

How do we fit our accumulated stuff into a smaller space? How will we meet people we like and trust? How do we pay for it? If we give our things away, who will remember their meaning?

For those of us who decide to stay there are different questions. How can we find people to maintain our houses — inside and outside? How can we arrange to have space for a live-in to care for us? Can our houses earn money to help pay bills? For those of us who want to wait and see — to stay “as long as possible” — the main question is when will we know that it is time for a decision?

What must we consider in order to know when the end of “as long as possible” has arrived?

The decisions about whether we stay, move, or wait and see are as complicated as the lives we are accustomed to living. Just thinking about a potential decision makes us ponder what our houses mean to us and who we are as their inhabitants. It forces us to deal with the physical, social and emotional involvement we have with the places in which we live, and to look at what's ahead.

The questions can be endless and intimidating. Just framing them can stop further thought. For myself, I have found that when faced with difficult deliberations the best thing to do is start with the mundane act of gathering information. Much of the time we are fearful of tackling dilemmas because we don't know the choices available to us. We don't know how to begin. Getting informed is a way to begin. It can lead to a decision, a new way of thinking, or nothing. It is up to us to decide how to use that knowledge.

On April 29, the Department of Senior Services at 345 Walnut St. is holding an Independent Housing Fair from 1:30-5 p.m. Go. Get valuable information. Use it to think, plan and, perhaps, dream about your future.

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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