

Knapp: Aging in Place: Should I Stay or Should I Go?

By Guest column/Marian L. Knapp

Wicked Local Newton

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Newton —

Like so many people my age I wonder whether I should stay in my house or go someplace else. It has taken me years of investigation and deliberation trying to understand this complex, thorny issue. In my learning journey I visited rentals, condominiums, and “continuing care” communities. Each place had advantages and disadvantages ranging from convenient or isolated location, abundance or dearth of options, and beautiful or dull surroundings. These forays helped me understand my choices and define a list of things to consider when, and if, I decide to leave my house.

Most of my journey was not through visits, though, but in my mind. Sitting in my living room, driving my car, shopping, or walking in Cold Spring Park, I would think about staying or going. I pondered my house’s positive and negative qualities. Still, after all my efforts, I continued not to know the best way to think about it. “Why is this so difficult?” I wondered. One reason may be grounded in the American Dream, which instilled us with notions of home ownership, independence, and control - now embedded in how we define the very essence of who we are. But there must be other reasons. Knowing that my title for this article was the same as a 1980’s song by the “The Clash”, I printed out the lyrics for “Should I Stay or Should I Go” not really thinking that it would give me any clues. I am not, and never was into “punk rock” yet, some lines popped out. “If I go there will be trouble, an’ if I stay it will be double”. There it was – our immobilizing quandary! Indecision, the song suggests, traps us – holding us back from the rest of our lives. If we stay, our situation may be comfortingly familiar but detrimental to our well-being. If we leave, we could be liberated but experience frightening losses. “This indecision’s bugging me. If you don’t want me, set me free,” the song continues. Our houses, unlike conscious, manipulative beings can’t make decisions to release us from their clingy embraces. But we do have the power to consider what our houses offer us and challenge their characteristics if they are not meeting our needs. We are in control – not our houses.

People I talk to about staying or leaving fall into three categories: determined to die in their own beds; willing to move; or waiting. I fall into two categories - not opposed to moving but waiting. In the meantime, I am taking some action. My house is a small ranch. The washer and dryer, a small, make-shift bathroom, and my office - with computer, printers, files, and books - are in the finished basement. The main living floor has two small bedrooms, one 1950’s pink and gray bathroom, and narrow doorways. For years, I had been thinking what I could do to age in my house safely and comfortably. I made up fantasy drawings and concrete graph-paper plans. My biggest problem was deciding if I should make renovations or sell. The house was in a great location, in a friendly neighborhood, near the T, and within walking distance of my village. It had good bones with not much maintenance. The negatives were lack of room flexibility, stairs, and fading appearance. Finally, I chose to work on the things I could fix, only needing to

decide how much to do and timing. I knew what I wanted (all those fantasies and plans) and took to heart what my dearest friend says “If not now, when?”

This is what I’ve done so far: painted the exterior; enclosed an underused porch; put in another main-floor bathroom with a washer/dryer hook-up; and widened some doors. I will work on other things over time. I did the renovations based on many “ifs”. If I have a walker or a wheel chair I need to get through doorways. If I can’t carry my wash-load up and down steep stairs I should have a laundry on the main floor. If I don’t want to work in my basement office, I can move it upstairs. If I need people to live in, there is a bedroom for them and privacy for me. The work cost me more money than I expected. I rationalized the expenditure by saying it: will help me age in a known place; may be cheaper to have a live-in caregiver rather than going to a facility; and will make the house more sellable, especially to an elder who wants to live in a cozy, little house.

Everyone’s situation is different and each needs to decide what is best for her or him. But, what we all need to do is some mulling and planning. Having done this work, I feel a little less stuck. It has been a creative adventure. I recommend it. If you are thinking about renovations Lynn Feinman at the Newton Department of Senior Services (617 796-1660) has a list of contractors who can help you with specific tasks such as handyman chores, electrical, and plumbing. Good luck!!

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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