

Breaking Up is Hard to Do

It's been a lifetime since I sang along on the car radio to Neil Sedaka's song, *Breaking Up Is Hard to Do*. Now, like that song, I'm "a golden oldie." And I'm preparing to break up, not with a teen lover, but with the life I fashioned out of whole cloth when my husband died just after I'd retired. Suddenly I was alone, bereaved, rambling around in a strangely silent suburban house instead of commuting to a bustling D.C. workplace or traveling the country to meet clients.

My children and their families? Embraced in occasional, too-brief visits requiring advance planning and airline tickets. Connected to me in phone calls and texts; absent from my daily life.

Slowly and tentatively, I emerged from the inertia of bereavement into the uncharted territory of retirement and set about tackling two daunting, impossible-to-rush tasks: developing close friendships and a place in groups with shared interests. Eventually I succeeded. And life was good. *Is* good. Not complete, because my children and grandchildren are plane rides away. But good.

Now I'm leaving my light-filled, lovingly furnished house and the close friends I cherish. What could woo me away from this life I've made?

My son Jake and Anna, his warm, vibrant wife, want me to share their property in Los Angeles. I'll move into their Craftsman cottage – they're building a house next door.

Imagine. No more FaceTime calls announcing, "Grandma, look! I lost a tooth!" Soon I'll be there to share their daily lives and applaud the children's "firsts."

Since Jake and Anna welcomed one, then another baby, I've stayed with them on extended visits and traveled as well, continuing a tradition that Jake and I began long ago. Starting in his childhood we traveled together often – driving from Texas to the Rocky Mountains; riding horses at a dude ranch, touring the nation's capital, and visiting Philadelphia's historic sites. Later, as a young adult, he'd call to say, "I'm going to New York, want to meet there?" Or I'd travel with him after work trips to California. Jake's fun-loving and resourceful. We're both easygoing and open to new experiences. Our times together? A joy.

Our travels continued with Anna, then with the children. After our visits, like slipping into a cozy bathrobe, I'd slip into the comfort of my home, resume my routine, then reconnect with friends, happy with the life I'd made for myself.

So why would I consider, much less pick up stakes and plunge into the daunting process of downsizing? Why leave the friends with whom I've shared my life and groups who share my interests? Because I've entered my eighth decade, when proximity to family - the missing ingredient in my life - trumps all. And - just between us chickens - there's a lot of white space on my calendar. Some days I go to the store or run errands just to get out of the house.

Years ago I read Necessary Losses by Judith Viorst. My takeaway? We have to let go of attachments and expectations in order to grow. Yes. Over time I've let go of my at-home-mom life to resume my career; let go of my children as they left the nest and suffered "necessary losses" again when my career ended, and months later, my husband died. Now, it's time to let go of my home and community. Do I want to leave? No! Do I have the oomph required to make a new life for myself? I'm going to try. This time I'll be with family while new friendships and activities percolate into what I hope will be a hearty, invigorating brew.

Now I'm in the throes of leaving close friends, good neighbors, and a houseful of long-loved furnishings, art, and memorabilia. As I walk from room to room, images of loved ones greet me from the refrigerator door; windowsills, tabletops and dressers; and photo arrays on my bedroom wall. Those photos, those images, are coming with me. But what about the albums I've been leafing through with crumbly, black paper holding black and white photos that transport me back in time? Images of my parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles as versions of themselves I never knew: women clad in flapper dresses, men in knickers and sweater vests.

I'm grateful to be working with a "move organizer," a profession spawned by our mobile society. She advised me to take my family photos with me. I asked, "What about the albums?"

"Take them, too, if you want them."

If I *want them*? What's the alternative? Toss these tangible traces of lives that dot the branches of my family tree? Yes, I want them. Somehow I'll find space for them in my new home. Hey - I'm leaving much more than I'm taking when it comes to furniture, artwork, clothing, books, and housewares. Steeling myself to part with belongings passed down to me or acquired with hubby, carried from one home to another. After I move an estate sale will be held; my long-prized possessions will find new homes. They won't miss me. Hope I can say the same.

As my moving date nears, my enthusiasm for the move is waning. And the queasy feeling at the pit of my stomach is sharpening. Now I'm not just sorting through a lifetime of possessions, I'm signing a contract to sell my house and another to sell everything that's left in it after the moving van departs. It feels like I'm on a conveyor belt, that – like the classic Lucy and Ethel candy factory scene – is speeding up, faster than I can process each step along the way.

After twenty years at this address, how can I pull myself away from the place I've called home? I worked so hard to make this life for myself – dragging myself to meetings, classes and more for years before reaping the rewards of close friends and engaging, convivial pursuits.

Starting over now? Recovering from *these* necessary but painful losses? Daunting.

“This time you'll be with family,” Jake reminds me.

Yes. Soon the arduous, heart-tugging leave-taking will end, and I'll begin to craft my next chapter. My beloved son and his upbeat, kindhearted wife will embrace, encourage and anchor me. And, , their tiny tots will live next door to Grandma.

All good, right? I know. Can you keep a secret? I'm scared.