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The Many Steps to Coming Home

Moving back to my old place meant climbing three flights of stairs. Did I still have the stamina?

posted by [John Stark](#), September 5, 2013 [More by this author](#)



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When I was younger, I bought a third-floor walk-up condo in Boston. That was 16 years ago. The wooden three-unit building was constructed in 1885 by German and Irish laborers. It's heavy like a ship. The stairs, located inside the building, are made of oak. They had never gotten the better of me over my years of living there. I'd easily bound up and down them all day long, often carrying bags of groceries.

If I took the back stairs, it was four flights up and down.

Three years ago I left Boston to take a job in Minneapolis. My life went from vertical to horizontal. The Midwest, unlike the East

Coast, is flat. I rented a house in the suburbs with a yard. No more walking my dog. I'd just open the back door to let her out in the mornings. My driveway was next to my kitchen door. All I had to do was take the groceries out of my car trunk and carry them a few feet to my kitchen counter.

Last spring I made a decision to move back to my Boston condo, which I had rented out. I could work from anywhere with telecommuting. I missed my old neighborhood.

It all seemed like a good idea, except for one thing: the stairs.

I wasn't so spry anymore. I was now eligible for Medicare. Could I really handle three to four flights again? "You need to seriously think about this," my Minnesota friends told me. They were especially concerned about my dog, as was I. At 13 her age was showing. She couldn't walk far without panting. Her hips had weakened, and her long legs had become wobbly. She could no longer jump into the backseat of my car without a boost from me.

Still, I made the decision to return. I'd have to chance the stairs for both of us.

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I've been living in Boston for two weeks now and have already made a million trips up and down the three flights. Moving has not been without challenges, to say the least. But my biggest worry — the stairs — has proved to be the best welcome home gift of all.

I'd always taken them for granted. But I realize now why I never felt out of breath going up and down them — and why I still don't.

They ground me in ways that I'm just starting to appreciate. They're a sturdy, calming buffer between me and the outside world. I love the feel of the old wood on the newel posts and

railings when I grasp them. Like water over rock, generations of hands have smoothed and polished their dark surfaces. The stairwell is square, and the treads are spiraled. As I hurry up and down them, I grab the newel posts to help me with the turns.

When I put on a pair of pants last week, I was surprised at how loose they were. I haven't been going to the gym or dieting. According to a [study by the University of New Mexico](#), walking up three flights of stairs burns 15 calories. Using the stairs burns twice as many calories as walking.

Before I moved back to Boston, I bought a sling for my dog on an Internet pet site. It wraps around her hindquarters. The device has a handle that allows me to hoist her back legs so that she can get up and down the steps without slipping. I used it on her for a week. But now she doesn't need it. She has acquired enough strength to maneuver the stairs on her own. The other day she even jumped into the backseat of my car unassisted.

I couldn't sleep last night from the anxiety of moving. So I called my friend Kathy, who in times of crisis is my newel post. I've known her for 30 years.

"Just take it one step at a time," she told me in a calm, reassuring manner.

She didn't mean the stairs, though. They're the easy part.

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