Guided Imagery – Life at Hillside Possibilities

Let’s begin.

It’s a bright summer day as you walk up the path to where you now live, a LTC home called Hillside Possibilities located on the main street of your town. You notice a group of people sitting in the sun - laughing and playing cards. As you walk closer to the main doors, you notice your neighbour Henry, nurse Barb, Rose and Susan who help you in the morning, and the newest member to Hillside, Charles. That must be his grand-daughter sitting by his side.

Under the awning of the gazebo, Martin is leading a tai chi class for 5 others. He’s wanted to do that since he moved in during the winter months and has been telling people about the benefits of tai chi for weeks. The weather is finally cooperating with him. A retired grade school teacher, Martin has been practicing tai chi for over 35 years so the movements just come naturally to him.

Walking up the path in front of you, you notice three people: a couple from the third floor and a neighbour from the condo across the street. They’re pulling wagons of cut flowers and early rhubarb from the garden beside the kitchen. The flowers will make their way to the tables in the dining room and personal living spaces of people who come by the solarium before lunch to purchase individual bouquets. The rhubarb will be delivered to the kitchen for desserts later in the week.

Claire and Marlin have been organizing the garden program at Hillside for the past 3 years, along with their children who now run the family greenhouses on the edge of town. Partnering with the not-for-profit café around the corner that sells accessible and affordable food to those with limited income, Hillside has arranged a barter system - community volunteers work alongside residents and help with tasks in the garden, like turning over the soil in the spring, getting the ground ready for seeding, and weekly weeding throughout the summer. In exchange, regular deliveries of fresh fruit and vegetables are made to the café.

Stepping through the doors of the home, you are hit with the smell of fresh baking. Members of the local Ukrainian church are busy baking cabbage rolls, potato and cheddar cheese perogies and assorted homemade baking for dinner tonight. You know that Mrs. Kozak is somewhere in the mix. A resident of Hillside for the past six months, Mrs. Kozak maintains close ties with her church and carpools with friends to the Orthodox Church in the north end of town each week. Always a popular event, sign-up for this themed dinner closed on Saturday - and with 20 community church-goers joining in, you know there will be dancing before the night is through.

A group of teenagers walk in behind you, giggling and head to the large multi-purpose room down the hall. They’re here to help plan tonight’s talent show. An annual fundraiser for accessible transit services, this year’s theme is ‘Young @ Heart.’

Walking toward the coffee shop you pause to take a whiff – ahhh, you love the smell of fresh brewed coffee. You smile at the group of three high school boys learning the fine art of chess from Mr. O’Brien. Week after week, this same group of three boys try every trick they know, but to your knowledge, they’ve never managed to beat the master.

On your right, you notice that the daily art class is already underway. You walk in to say hi to Grace, the artist-in-residence, who’s been organizing a project to design a historical mural for the new city hall. This week, everyone is sharing their memories of the town in the 1940s.

Looking over the group assembled, you smile fondly at Anne - an old neighbour of yours who has been experiencing noticeable memory loss for the past year. A lifelong amateur watercolour painter, when Grace asks everyone to paint the bouquets of tulips and daffodils she bought earlier that morning, Anne does just that. You watch as she dabs her brush into the paint, reaches past the blank canvas in front of her and instead, dots the petals of the daffodils with splashes of bright red paint. Watching the look of pure joy spread across her face, you lean over and whisper that her flowers are the most brilliant. A wide grin greets you when you add some yellow paint to the red tulips.

Behind you, you hear Paula, the executive director, talk about life at Hillside as she leads a couple on a tour of the home. As they pass by, she tells them of how the focus here is on living life to the fullest - and how decisions are made collectively, by residents, families and staff members at Residents’ Council and during the bi-weekly executive meetings open to all residents, family members, and staff.

You can hear Paula ask the couple about their hopes and dreams. You remember her asking you that question 2 years previous - what an odd question you thought. Little did you know that she would work to make them all happen - a life-long gardener, attending Canada Blooms last spring was heaven, and starting your monthly mystery book club, ‘Without a Clue’ has been a lot of fun. Who knew there were so many mystery fans among staff? And spending the day at the St. Lawrence Market in Toronto last fall with everyone was fantastic. Thinking back to the last dream you mentioned, you smile when you remember Paula’s initial reaction. “Germany, huh? Ok, let me work on that.” Your fingers are crossed, though - you know that around here, anything can happen.

The smell of paint hits you as you walk toward the elevator. The chapel is being re-painted. You haven’t been inside since Graham died last month. How you miss him and his laughter. He was the first person to introduce himself when you moved in. What a laugh you shared when he told you of that night’s Happy Hour. In true fashion, he offered to be your designated driver. In his memory, you now do your best to welcome newcomers to Hillside. His daughter is coming to the talent show tonight. She’s been invited to kick-off the night’s event with a video she and Graham made before he died - a Letterman’s top 10 reasons to live at Hillside. You remind yourself to get there early for a front row seat.

Exiting the elevator, you hear the off-key notes of the song: “*I want to be sedated”* by The Ramones, coming from the common room on your floor. As you walk into the room, you see that Fred’s got earphones on and is listening with Bernie to Bernie’s his new iPod he got for his 85th birthday from his grandchildren. You smile at the people surrounding them - Bernie’s wife and Jim, a new PSW, are both playing the air guitar and the grandchildren are laughing and snapping candids of their “cool” grandparents.

Walking along the hall, you notice the local university spring course has already started. It’s a class on music and dance from the 40s - half the students are university undergrads, and half are people living and working at Hillside. Mary, who has trouble expressing herself verbally, still remembers and comes alive when playing piano. She and her husband Robert, who plays harmonica, lead the group while the students and staff are creating beautiful dances with the residents, some who are dancing in their chairs, others who are standing and dancing. In a few weeks there will be a class on sexuality and aging and you make note of the date. There is a thing or two you wish to share with the students and it is always a lively discussion.

That reminds you to look in on Louise, a friend who’s been a part of the university spring courses for years. She had a fall last week and was in the hospital overnight. Two nurses are in her room, helping to get her ready for the day and are dancing to the music they hear through the halls. Louise, with her left arm in a cast is moving back and forth in rhythm to the music, laughing at the nurses.

You stop to talk with Beatrice and Jocelyn who are on their way to book accessible transit for next Monday. Beatrice has been volunteering with the school down the street for over 12 years. When she moved into Hillside, she invited Jocelyn to join her. They’ve now been volunteering with the school on the second Monday of every month for the past 4 years.

At the end of the hall, Frank and Henry sit, holding hands and sharing stories in a language of their own making. Frank must have told a joke as Henry laughs and gives Henry a warm hug. You envy their close relationship.

Walking into your room, you drop your day’s purchases on your bed and look around at the space you call home. You see pictures of friends and family, fresh flowers from the garden, yesterday’s newspaper, next month’s mystery selection, and a tattered old lazy-boy you brought from home. Chester saunters in, jumps on your bed and starts grooming himself on your new sweater. As you move to swat him off the sweater, you notice that the phone is flashing - there’s a message - Brandon must have called. He had his last final exam at university today and is planning on coming over for dinner. You’ve already mentioned this to Sarah - she’s made some special mystery dessert for the both of you. After dinner, you’ll both come back here to get ready for the talent show - you and Brandon have been practising your Sonny and Cher routine for the past two weeks.

Hearing laughter coming from the halls, you’re reminded of the unspoken hope you had two years ago, the only one you didn’t share with Paula - that Hillside would eventually come to feel like home. Looking around at your photos and cherished reminders of a life lived, and thinking fondly of the life you have made for yourself here - with wonderful friends, continued meaning in life and daily surprises, you take a deep breath - you’re home.