



Hallmark Moments

BY LESLIE W. BRAKSICK, PHD, MPH | 12 JUNE 2022

We recently sold our home of 24 years, a place more beautiful than I ever thought I would be privileged to live in. We affectionately called it “The Hilltop Resort” because it sat atop a steep hill—and because the property had more opportunities for fun and outdoor resort living than one could possibly fit in a summer. It was always filled with people, activities, and fun. It was the best. We raised our children there. They raised us there.

We hosted countless family reunions, retirement celebrations, Easter brunches, sleepovers, family Olympics, Leadership Retreats for high schoolers and Labor Day end-of-summer celebrations, not to mention Thanksgivings and Christmases. We played capture the flag, airsoft, and slept out in a homemade little garden house my husband built for his princess. We buried pets, gathered there as a family after the passing of my parents, had long cups of coffee on the patio, and even hosted a wedding last summer. There we cheered loudly for the Steelers, the Pens, and anything in black and gold.

It was the perfect vessel for the most amazing memories one could amass. It expanded to hold over a hundred people at a time—and yet it always felt cozy, informal, and comforting.

It also became too big for two people. Perhaps it was covid that amplified the size relative to the number of full-time occupants ... but at some point, we realized it was time to hand it over to a younger family who would use it fully, just as we had when our kids were younger. It felt gluttonous to have this beautiful property for just two people, a small dog, and occasional visitors.

Upon selling the home, it was pedal to the metal, clearing out 24 years of stuff at record speed. (We bought a much smaller, simpler home to move to—just a mile down the road—that we were excited to update and make our own.) Of course, this all coincided with my return to business travel and seven straight weekends of voyaging to weddings, graduations, and long-planned trips with friends.

We hired help; we had amazing friends who showed up to assist ... and all the while, I kept dreaming about this *Hallmark moment* I would have at the end, on the back patio ... one last time ... a glass of wine in hand, sitting on the top step that overlooked the gorgeous backyard ... where I

could reflect on our time there and all the joy that home and land provided our family. It would be my time to get that cry out—and feel gratitude in the deepest of places.

The weekend before our move, we were visiting dear friends in Birmingham, AL. My cell phone was buzzing as we sat in church Sunday morning. It was my son calling to share some tragic news. My closest cousin's fiancé, 52, had a massive heart attack. He was brain dead and not expected to survive. It hit me like a ton of bricks. My cousin had finally found true love and joy ... and Michael's heart was the biggest part of him. A sweet man who loved big. They had so many plans ... so much living left to do together. She never got to say good-bye to him. It all ended so soon, so tragically.

When I returned home to say farewell to the Hilltop, I was shocked to see how much of our stuff remained to be moved. Despite our tireless efforts before our weekend away, my husband and I labored until 3 am, taking out that “one last load.” Fortunately, we had the move-out cleaning done while we were gone, but there was always one more load we'd find buried in some drawer or cupboard. At 3:05 am, exhausted and unable to do another thing, I drove up the driveway with a car full of stuff I was sure we'd never use again, nor miss if left behind, as tears poured down my cheeks. This is how my 24 years at this beautiful place would end. Dusty, exhausted, and sad. I didn't have the capacity to take another step, nor stay awake another minute.

I awoke a few hours later to greet my workday, sore and still weary ... and it suddenly struck me: I had 24 years of Hallmark moments at that home! I was (and am) the most blessed person I know. No, I did not get that final “good-bye” and reflection I had dreamed of, scanning that beautiful backyard—just as my cousin did not get the years with her fiancé that they dreamed of.

I was reminded of quotes like “Seize the day” and “Be grateful for today” ... and somehow they didn't seem as trite as I often felt upon hearing them. They took on new meaning. My heart overflowed with gratitude for all that we lived and loved at the Hilltop. And per her character and through her tears, my cousin remarked during our many conversations how grateful she was to have had any time with a man as wonderful as Michael. Yes, it ended too soon. Unthinkably soon. Tragically soon. But that he was such a special part of her life and family for any time—was a gift.

My workdays are spent growing a company whose mission is to help others navigate career transitions and find their next season. More often than not, those end-of-career transitions come sooner than expected, sooner than desired. And they are hard. Clients struggle to imagine life on the other side without that primary affiliation. They cannot imagine an identity that does not attach to their current company, role/title, and daily routines. And often, due to the circumstances of their transition, they too are robbed of their “Hallmark moment” of how it will feel and be when they retire. Imagined grand farewells are muted by the realities of life ... and they must go forward, one foot before the other, trusting that with time, their memories will outweigh the gravity of the present circumstances.

And they do. They do in spades. Our lives are made of highs and lows—and there are *Hallmark moments* in both. We are made stronger each time we navigate the unwelcomed hard things—and all of that prepares us better for what is still to come. Our lives are so rich and fulfilled by the jobs

and careers we enjoy, by the business trips we take and friendships made during our careers. I am reminded of the motto of my son's college alma mater: "To think in such a place, I led such a life."

My takeaway (yet again ...) is the reminder to pause and experience the blessings of the moment, the gifts of freedom, the honor that comes from work, the love that comes from deep, meaningful relationships, the gift of having any of it—for any period of time. Those are our Hallmark moments.

Rarely are endings neat and tidy. Rarely are they as we hope they will be. But the endings don't define the journey—and they don't define our futures. They usher us into our next season: full of new joys and possibilities, new relationships, unexpected events, and *Hallmark moments, high and low*.

If there is one thing the recent tragedies in our country have served to remind us: we never know what tomorrow may bring. Giving thanks for today, and for any/all that we have, might be the most important thing we do in our day.

For more information about MyNextSeason, or the author, visit mynextseason.com or lesliebraksick.com.