

WTE Column of Dec. 17, 2014. Editor's headline: "It all began with a test" (first part of two)

I had lived in Cheyenne for eighteen months when I was hit by something that, for lack of understanding, I attributed to extreme onset of Decrepit Old Age. When I dragged myself out of bed in the morning, all I wanted to do was crawl back in. I had retired in Tennessee, moved here, and bought a home near an elementary school to help care for my granddaughter. Now everything came crashing down around me.

Amanda started kindergarten when we began the arrangement. Her parents dropped her off at 7:30 AM, usually in her pajamas. I fed her breakfast, got her ready, walked her to school. In the afternoon I walked her back to my home. These days I was impatient for her parents to pick her up so I could sit and brood over my miserable fate. I felt so rotten, I wanted to die.

"Well, if all I can do is sit, I might as well sit and listen to a child read," I said to myself and signed up for a Foster Grandparent program. As part of training and preparation, volunteers are required to submit a certificate of health. At conclusion of my checkup, the PA called my attention to a problem. "Your EKG shows abnormal activity," she said. "You need to check this out with an internist."

The internist ordered a series of tests. "You have a leaking valve that needs replacing," she said, and sent me to the heart surgeon.

"I do surgery the old fashioned way," said the specialist. "But a buddy of mine from back Harvard medical school uses a minimally invasive procedure."

"Sounds promising. Tell me more."

"It's still surgery, mind you, and surgery entails risk, particularly heart surgery. But my colleague is world-renowned; you'd be in good hands. He practices in North Carolina."

I opted for the NC surgeon and had the Cheyenne office forward my records. Soon the famous man telephoned in person.

"You're a good candidate for this procedure; your records suggest you're in fine health," he said. Noting my accent, he asked, "Where are you from in Germany?"

"I was born in Leipzig, in what was then East Germany." I wanted to add that, on my dad's release from Soviet POW camp, we escaped to West Germany. The thought was cut short by my interlocutor.

"How interesting," he said. "I learned this procedure ten years ago in Leipzig. Still return to Leipzig University two or three weeks every year."

We'd hit it off, but when it turned out his first available surgery date was three months hence, I resolved to find someone closer to home who might accommodate me at an earlier time. To be on the safe side, I had his assistant lodge me into their calendar.

I located a surgeon in Fort Collins, Colorado, who was trained in the same procedure, and scheduled an early-morning appointment. Amanda was on summer vacation, so my son and she accompanied me.

This physician explained that the minimally invasive procedure requires two surgeons, one to monitor the progress on computer, the other to work on the patient.

"Unfortunately, my partner left unexpectedly. I can still serve you, though, through the conventional method." He'd scheduled his own tests.

The test results, however, troubled him and he demanded an MRI. We thought we'd be there for a couple of hours; instead, it was the end of the day before he called us into his office once more.

"I don't know how my Cheyenne colleagues arrived at their conclusions," he said. "Our tests tell me, valve replacement is not warranted in your case."

"But I feel miserable bad," I objected. Having fasted all day, I was close to passing out.

"Heart surgery isn't going to change that."

"Actually, I already have a surgery date in North Carolina," I said. "I hoped you'd get me in sooner."

He was not pleased. "You should ask my assistant to forward our test results to that office."

"That won't be necessary. He has my Cheyenne records."

"He needs to look at these. I urge you to forward them."

On the way home I grouched about the unsettling change. "This guy doesn't want to work on me because his partner took off. I need to get well. I'm not going to send his records to NC."

"You need to rethink this," said my son. Then he dropped me off and went home with his daughter. I was so sick, I threw up after eating a bite.