

**WTE Column of Dec. 18, 2014. Editor's headline: "It's all about the altitude" (conclusion)**

Eventually I did decide to have the Fort Collins records sent to the North Carolina surgeon. He called within days.

"This sheds new light on your condition. I cannot in good conscience operate on you."

A wave of defeat washed over me. "But that's impossible! You have no idea how miserable I am. I've staked all my hopes on this surgery."

"Perhaps you'd like to come in for tests," he offered by way of consolation. "We have all the latest equipment. We'll get to the bottom of this."

"Oh yes, please!" Surely his tests would convince him to proceed with surgery?

In my distress I'd clean forgotten, eight years earlier I had the heart problem assessed by a cardiologist in Nashville. "You won't need to worry about this till you're 88, if then," he assured me. "There's a bit of leakage because your valve doesn't close tightly, but it's minor. Lots of people walk around with a heart murmur like yours."

I flew to North Carolina and checked into a motel near the university where the famous man had his clinic. Next morning I walked over, the muggy September day reminding me of my Tennessee years. I felt good.

However, a day of testing revealed results similar to Fort Collins. I was stricken.

"Tomorrow I'll send you over to Pulmonary," the famous doc tried to soothe. "Maybe they'll find something."

They found my lungs worked like twin horses. I myself knew I was doing phenomenally well, running the treadmill at a good clip.

No doubt the famous doc considers me a con artist, I thought flying home. A hypochondriac who conjures up symptoms from thin air. Oddly, despite the glum assessment I felt fit and optimistic.

The respite was short-lived, alas. Within days I was back to fantasizing a hike into the snows of Vedauwoo, a bottle of brandy and a large dose of sleeping pills tucked into my coat, along with plastic bag and a sturdy string for good measure.

But I couldn't just opt out. I hadn't left Tennessee—and before Tennessee, California, and before California, West Germany—to freeze to death in Wyoming.

I called a son in California. "I need to get away from Cheyenne," I said. "May I come for a visit?"

Once there, my symptoms vanished as they had in NC. I returned to Cheyenne and confronted the internist. "What you told me isn't right. I have it on the authority of two separate specialists, valve replacement won't do a thing for me."

"Come to think of it," she said, "There were some odd blips in your tests."

"I'm fine in North Carolina. I'm fine in California. I feel rotten in Cheyenne. What's to be done?"

She shrugged.

Months passed. At a Halloween-cum-Christmas party at my son's neighbors in Buford, I spilled my tale to a man who, it happened, enjoyed mountain climbing.

"You need to do something about this," he said. "Go to the internet, find an altitude specialist. They're out there."

I found someone in Denver, Col. This physician also taught at university and, hence, held correspondingly few office hours. On the day of my appointment, a snowstorm raged through the region. I swapped vehicles with my son, leaving him with my Prius while I, determined not to miss my appointment, drove his three-quarter-ton truck all the way to Denver.

Within minutes of hearing my tale this man knew what ailed me. "Your blood's low on oxygen." To confirm his diagnosis he put me on a treadmill with a monitor around my neck. There it was, the evidence that had eluded me so long.

A supply company rented me an oxygen machine for night-time use. Soon I was back to normal, resuming exercise classes at the YMCA, loving my duties as foster grandparent, planting a vegetable garden, walking the dog. Caring for a grandchild became par for the course.

A year later I no longer needed the machine. My heart had adapted to having to work harder at altitude. You can't teach an old heart new tricks? It depends how motivated is the heart to learn new things.

"The trouble with newly-minted MDs," said the mountaineer when apprised of my recovery, "they've got no savvy, no common sense. No clue that altitude would be a problem for someone who's lived at sea level for sixty-odd years."

"You'd think the internist would've checked my oxygen readings."

"Did she even take oxygen readings?"

"Good point."

You must become the steward of your own health, I resolved. And the frustration and expense of securing a second opinion, a third opinion? Consider it preventive maintenance.

Amanda is twelve now. Earlier this year she and her parents moved to Texas, where my son accepted a teaching appointment at a school of veterinary medicine. Once again this ole heart is learning to adjust.