

I rarely permit myself to indulge in a glance backward. Life is what it is, no sense bemoaning what's lost; besides, the "good old days" weren't all that good to begin with. Today, however, I'll permit myself a wistful return to the time in California when I owned a horse named Star Jasmine, when my family celebrated gift-giving at Christmas, when a continuum of life with hubby Darold seemed set in the future as much as in the present.

We had built a lovely home on a small hobby ranch, a house Darold designed himself, with a glass-enclosed hot tub that might find the two of us on a Saturday night sipping sauterne, gazing out on a star-spangled canopy, and enjoying the breeze through open windows. We might listen to a favorite piece of music, for Darold did not care for intimate conversation, or we might just enjoy the moment and each other's company in silence. Sometimes we'd converse on an intellectual level on topics from politics to religion to parenting practices, though these talks got dicey when they turned personal. Music could soothe the frayed nerves, get us thinking and talking of something else: the harsh realities in the life of a Beethoven, the unanswered yearning of a Chopin, the achingly lovely melodies composed by a Mozart in the midst of despair.

I no longer purchase bottles of wine. My budget won't permit it, not to mention, no one resides with me who could share them. One habit from the past I clung to after I moved from milder climes to Wyoming's harsh environment was the enjoyment of hot pool. Having long made it a rule to abide by regular exercise, on retirement I joined a couple of fitness groups at Cheyenne's YMCA. Following the hour-long workout, I'd slip into a swimsuit, shower, and take a few laps. Before the swimming (usually, afterwards as well) I'd step into the hot pool. Since the exercise rooms are kept nippy and my blood pressure, which tends to low, exacerbates the chill, I was glad to get warm before my round of laps. Afterwards, sauna or hot tub constituted a reward to myself for having braved yet another workout routine.

Hot pool and sauna have become no-nos. A discovery while two grandchildren resided with me for a few summer weeks mandates it. They accompanied me to the Y, where they played basketball or read a book while I worked out. To limit the time for their sake, I skipped the swimming and hot pool. That summer I noticed a change for the better in my health profile.

About eighteen months into my Cheyenne sojourn, I had developed health problems that nearly ended in heart surgery. Always I explained my symptoms as "feeling rotten after about an hour of exercise." I did not think to mention hot tub or sauna. There seemed no reason. None of the experts ever asked for details about the activities that gave rise to my troubles. Instead, heart-problem diagnoses lay readily at hand.

Years ago I was alerted to the existence of a heart murmur. Back then the cardiologist assured me that it was nothing to worry about; lots of people have the condition and live with it. Two years ago, however, doctors became convinced that the murmur was at the heart (pun intended) of what ailed me, and that I needed surgery to fix it. Lucky for me, eventually "oxygen desaturation" was identified, which I could correct via using a concentrator at night.

I no longer need to use the machine. Substituting the hot-tub indulgence with gardening and walking outdoors has eliminated the reasons for its use. I think that living at altitude after a lifetime of sea-level residence, Germany to California to Tennessee, intensified the murmur. I still live with it, but I have learned to take precautions. Altitude-related insomnia continues to haunt me, but there's nothing to be done about it. I manage with nighttime reading and writing.

As we age, we learn to let go of things we once took for granted, sauterne to sex to simple companionship. To carry on without falling into self-pity means to substitute activities we can continue to enjoy. Playing classical guitar, strolling in Wyoming's spectacular sunrise or sunset, settling on a challenging read that sends me to the internet to learn more, last

not least, writing for readers who value my input and whose comments I cherish: these are things by which I take pleasure in life, if not to its fullest, then at a “good-enough” level.