

One common symptom connected to heart valve transplants and little side acts like strokes is whether ol' Gramps or Granny undergoes a personality change from the traumatic event. A patient needs about a year of recovery to tell the results; however, to evaluate the changes, the family on the sidelines may need twice that amount of time or longer to recover from hospital waiting rooms and circling parking lots in front of hospitals.

My case rocks on to nine months, at the time of this writing, since installing the bovine heart valve. After this much time, there are misdiagnosed issues. Foremost example is the shortness of breath that shows up in every doctor examination; at my age bracket, I couldn't be expected to pass a stress test to enter art school.

Doctors miss that a father of eight grown children and probably twice that many dozen grandchildren holds his breath so often to keep from giving advice that his windpipes need as much air space as a manatee in a deep dive. His old chest inflates and deflates under such incredible pressure that it's no wonder his heart thumps and murmurs like being inside of a deep-sea diving rig after the slightest workout.

Perhaps this example might make it easier to understand. Over Christmas, a 50 year-old son calls to report he won't be coming to the ranch after the holidays, because he is going hiking and mountain climbing out west with his son's Boy Scout troop.

"Oh, so you are, little cowboy," you think. Yes, after training on fruit cakes and egg nog the past 10 days, how about a seven-mile hike up to say, 7000 feet to prove the old ticker works as strong as a First Class Scout or maybe up to Eagle rank for that altitude.

(Clever, eh? - link Eagle rank to higher altitude.)

The son goes on to recall that the last time he camped out in the Big Bend in high school, he ranged so tough that he rode in the back of Pinky Frietag's old school bus all the way, seated on a bedroll tied with a trap chain.

No appreciable spread in time, you think, between high school and age 50. A few bumps, perhaps, but law schools and law cases will keep you in top shape. And for shape, how about the grip on the telephone to keep from shouting, "Boy, have you lost your mind? Old as you are, you need to take it slow going up and down the shallow banks of the Colorado River."

Suppression of a smug feeling when you do some grandstanding in a field you have been working in for 40

years can end up being just as tedious as withholding advice. Like this one: an older son e-mails a deal he is working on buying ranch lands. In the title examination, you discover a misrepresentation by the seller – a big discrepancy in the percentage reserved in the royalty. The perfect size coup, one not so big as to wreck the deal, but just right to embellish with a royalty story set in the Titusville Pennsylvania strike in 1859 on every mere mention of the occasion.

Dry towels feel that good after coming in from a horseback ride on a wet winter day, and having an old girlfriend's smile at the post office sets off the same glow. But the test however, is to keep from saying, "Uh-huh, if you'd listen to your ol' Dad ..."

One symptom difficult to face is whether you have changed. What did the time under anesthesia contribute to confusing your phone number with your shirt size? What caused you to lose your temper over Christmas noise after spending the last 30 in a house bugling with company? Does medical research show the absolute necessity to recount the effect of oxygen being cut off in the brain? And the whopper of all: Did Mother continuing to say "Why not go outside and play, little boy" even after you were married still haunt you?

You may know how to handle those little dreadnaughts at 3 p.m.; but at 3 a.m., entangled in bed clothes, they are unsolvable scenes. Questions that torment the sleep and change wild dreams into nightmares.

Maybe the family does pray that after all these years the old devil will think about something besides a pasture, a rain, or an old cow. They may hope perhaps he might broaden his view farther than the 09 Divide; or they might have a holiday at the ranch without him leaving the table to go pull a heifer's calf.

As it is today, I'd have to cast eight ballots to have my vote start to count if they all voted out here. However, it's doubtful if their expectations are very high for an old herder. But long as he isn't compared to other professions, he might hold up his end.