Dr. Buzz Aldrin [1] — American hero, fighter pilot, astronaut who walked on the moon, engineer, author, adventurer, explorer or, more appropriate, living legend — was medically evacuated from Antarctica during his recent visit to the South Pole.

He has ventured to the Titanic. Conquered air and space. The North Pole. He considers this South Pole excursion to be “the capstone of his personal exploration achievements” as his expressed purpose for the trip was to “experience conditions akin to Mars.”

At 86 years of age and when speaking about Buzz, this sounds about right. It’s like any other mere mortal — of which category I place myself — taking a difficult work out class or completing a half-marathon for the first time at any life stage. The bar he sets is simply on another level. It makes me feel better to think some people just have a gene for this form of self and universal quest — now, I just need to find the science to support this desired theory.

Hey, I am all for confirmation bias when it suits my argument. Ha!

I especially learned this a number of years ago when I had the privilege of sharing an evening dining with him at his table during a fundraising weekend in Vail, Colorado. The photo accompanying this article is from then. He — while in his seventies — was speed skiing earlier that day with and against younger former Olympians in the name of charity.

For many years, I volunteered for the Boomer Esiason Cystic Fibrosis (CF) Foundation [2] answering all of their online inquiries as a medical expert in a section entitled “Ask Dr. Wells.” It was an honor for me to participate in that special celebrity ski weekend in Vail that raised considerable funds to benefit Cystic Fibrosis. Having trained at a CF Center, this was very meaningful.

My dinner and time with Buzz that weekend represents a defining shift in how I approached a
personal phobia. I recall telling him that I would, literally, have had a heart attack on take off to the moon. How genuinely grateful I am to be alive each and every single time I land safely when I fly. And, that I believed I was built short to remain closer to the ground.

We spoke about fear and fearlessness. How both are replete with power, depending on its harnessing. Being a bit stubborn, I refused to permit this fear of flying to limit where I went, but it certainly served to dampen the experience significantly at that time. He referenced ways that I go through the world that, to me, are so effortless and energizing, but terrifying to others as they are outside their comfort zone.

Speaking with him, I took pause at the energy wasted in worry. He reflected in a way I could hear that often the greatest risk in life is not taking one at all. I can’t say that I love to fly as a result, but I am much better able to let go of the tension and not permit it to detract from the journey.

He is the embodiment of what it means to live life. A genuine force of nature with such strength of character. It was an interaction that left an indelible mark as he could not have been more gracious. He called my parents on the phone upon learning my dad was a history buff, for example. Additionally, he expressed his deep respect for female professionals and believed the sky was the limit. He really championed the notion encouraging me to reach for the stars.

I never thought that I would share something in common with such an icon; but, with Dr. Aldrin’s latest situation I now do. It may not be glamorous, but it’s something! I, too, have had altitude sickness.

And, when it happened to me —because it never had before despite a number of lifetime trips to those elevations—I was, let’s just say, a non-believer. On night one, my head was pounding intensely. Since doctors are quite possibly the worst patients, I was up all night suffering when the emergency room would have been a more responsible destination.

I desperately waited till the crack of dawn to seek out tylenol when the concierge at the front desk directed me to the spa. My denial that this was more than a typical headache led me seeking what generally does the trick. Irritable, feeling like my head was going to explode, I met a man behind the spa counter who was insisting I have altitude sickness and pleaded with me to give me some oxygen.

Of course, as I am clearly battling a bit of oxygen deprivation, I respond, “umm, I am a doctor” and was likely not entirely pleasant.

That’s the thing when your brain is craving oxygen, you aren’t necessarily your sweet self. I felt myself being argumentative, and it seemed foreign to me. After this wonderful man begged me to try some oxygen, I acquiesced and clarified this was for him, not me. Yes, altitude sickness apparently made me much less mature. Not sure that is listed in most medical journals as a common symptom.

After about ten minutes of supplemental oxygen, the profound dissipation of the headache was uncanny.

Anyone can endure altitude sickness at any age or point regardless of travel history— but, there
are certainly factors that place some at higher risk. There are ways to combat and minimize its occurrence which I will discuss shortly.

Buzz Aldrin said, “I started to feel a bit short of breath so the staff decided to check my vitals. After some examination they noticed congestion in my lungs and that my oxygen levels were low which indicated symptoms of altitude sickness.” He departed on the next flight, “Once I was at sea level I began to feel much better. My visit was cut short and I had to leave after a couple hours. I really enjoyed my short time in Antarctica and seeing what life could be like on Mars.”

So, in his case, it appears he was a bit more sensible by properly and immediately being evaluated medically once symptoms arose. That is extremely important in these conditions.

Read the conclusion of this piece, Fly Me to the Moon, But Hold the Altitude Sickness [3], where I delve extensively into high altitude illnesses, prevention and treatment.