



## **The Third Act**

# **BTW, We're Not Going to Get Out of This Alive**

**Introducing "The Third Act: On Aging and Ageism," a new column by local author Ellen Waterston**

By [\*Ellen Waterston\*](#)

Unless you're in your late 60s it's likely this concept hasn't registered, excepting for those, and may God bless them, who've prematurely stared down death. But look at the oblivious rest of us go!

Then here comes act three characterized by a palpable, albeit subtle, sea change. Suddenly we get it at a cellular level: there are fewer tomorrows than yesterdays. Suddenly the list of what we can do athletically, physically grows shorter or, at the least, risk and benefit are considered more thoughtfully. Do I climb up a ladder and clean the leaves from my gutters again this year? Suddenly we get goofy over what we used to miss in our haste—an osprey diving for a fish, the

smile of a baby in a passing stroller, time spent with family and friends. It used to be that money, honey, and accrued vacation time was all that was required to go on a trip, to get the ski boat and camping gear out of the garage. Now the organizing principle, the litmus, the most valuable and ephemeral currency are the days you estimate you have left on the planet at your present level of activity and mental acuity. If I have maybe 10, possibly 15 more years at my current rate of speed, how do I want to spend them? What do I want to accomplish...not prove...but accomplish, pay forward, give back? Who do I want to spend time with? And what about *que sera, sera*? What about *Om*?

Achieving this balance is hard work. Rub your head and pat your stomach. Fearlessly embrace the known outcome and/but stay Zen, or, as cowboys are fond of saying, keep a deep seat and a loose rein. This culture has a field day reminding older folks they are on the way out, taking up space. Birthday cards and late-night comedians make money on our organ recitals, our atrophy.

"He's so old that when he orders a three-minute egg, they ask for the money up front." "You've reached the wonder years...wonder where your glasses are, wonder what day it is."

[Fewer tomorrows. It's a cold draft. It takes energy to not get maudlin, churlish, what's-the-point-ish, regretful, hanging out in the memories of yesterdays, the attics of the past tweet this](#)

Fewer tomorrows. It's a cold draft. It takes energy to not get maudlin, churlish, what's-the-point-ish, regretful, hanging out in the memories of yesterdays, the attics of the past. It takes focus to keep our sense of humor, stay on purpose. The pervasive cultural messaging brainwashes fogies into thinking they are passé, are in urgent need of the latest drugs for ailments they never knew existed, and, given the gruesome side effects, require the courage of a red-eyed lion to try. Oldies are targeted for a new and improved take on sidelining, on ghettoization, in the form of age-restricted and gated communities. An 80-year-old friend of mine moved out of an assisted living facility, got a condo of her own.

"They promised resort living," she said. "For me it was last resort living."

The third act. That it is culturally devalued is a shame. The missed opportunity that older members of a community can be to their communities is a wasted resource. The third is an act of import not only to the actors but also younger audiences. According to author James Hollis, during the second half of life the focus changes from the external—what does the world ask of me as professional, partner, parent? —to an inside job: What question do I answer with my life?

I interrupt this broadcast to thank COVID. True that. The young have gotten older in wisdom as a result of the pandemic. COVID has leveled the ageism playing field some. With younger generations forced to go inside, literally and figuratively, forced to get off the treadmill, to quiet, to "be" more than "do," they have tasted the experience of being older, make that "wise-der." Days fold in on themselves. Simple things matter more. The youngers now have a fresh appreciation of what was taken for granted before COVID.

Meanwhile, don't underestimate the over-the-hill gang. Remember, this age group is made up of card-carrying members of the '60s and '70s. They write their own ticket, are still hard charging

on behalf of their communities, still claiming their place as entrepreneurs, artists and thought leaders, still engaged in environmental, cultural, political and social service initiatives. From cuddling preemies at local hospitals, to planting trees in burn areas, to feeding the homeless. Geezer jocks hit the slopes, coach high school teams. Members of Bend's Vocal Seniority make good trouble. These oldsters are taking country singer Toby Keith's refrain seriously: "Don't let the old man (or woman) in." The patina of their lives reflects their hard-won understanding that, while it's not over until it's over, it's over before you know it. They bring what matters to the table, so set yourself a place. Everyone will benefit.

*[Poet and author Ellen Waterston](#) is a woman of a certain age who resides in Bend. This is the first of a series of columns on aging and ageism.*