



## The Third Act

### Order and Counter-Order

By [Ellen Waterston](#)

Decades ago, my father, a semanticist, published a book about dualism in Western culture titled *Order and Counter Order*. It is most definitely not what anyone would call light reading. I refer to it only because the title was invoked at my parents' 50th wedding anniversary. As was the tradition, friends and family gathered and shared clever doggerel celebrating and roasting the couple. My father told my mother that all the times he asked her to "shut the door" to the drafty back hallway he was really saying "Je t'adore." That kind of thing. It was my eldest brother who played on the title of my father's book, establishing that in my parents' relationship my scholarly father represented order and my mother, an artist, countered it, and/but the twain did meet, realizing a wonderful lifetime of love and companionship.

I don't know about you, but I like the idea of having everything in order whether my exit is precipitous or time-honored. No dirty underwear left on the floor, metaphorically speaking. Photos and Super-8 movies (remember those?) consolidated and converted to electronic files. Last Will and Testament current, organ donor information accessible, passwords available as needed, advance directive at the ready. Those I hold dear will know beyond the shadow of a

doubt that I cherish them. Loving and doting children and grandchildren all settled and secure. Yah, right. As they say about second marriages: "The triumph of hope over experience."

Wouldn't you agree that life is more Brownian movement than best-laid plans, more musical chairs than Johnny One (perfect) Note? Unforeseen situations arise and we race to find a seat, a safe harbor, to weather the challenge de jour with as much imagination, information and goodwill as possible. It's just part of the deal, part of being a human on this planet. I have come to see that counter order, those enormous or small interruptions, are a given, not an option and can't be controlled or denied out of existence. Order, as it turns out, means keeping your eye on the prize while accommodating its mischievous and sometimes destructive counterpart, counter order. Aren't both needed to make the pearl. Don't both keep us thinking, adapting, stretching?

At this stage of things, I feel more a spectator of life than under the illusion I can control the outcome of anything at all—like Alice in Wonderland who remarked, "curiouser and curiouser" about all that was taking place around her. Not that I came by this outlook willingly or gracefully. No. I have tried and tried to insist order on everything right along with the best of them. As they say, "How did that work for you?" Now I am intrigued to find out what will happen next, to see if putting my small oar in the water of life contributes in any way, shape or form to positive forward motion. It's a kind of proactive surrender, the acceptance of the things I cannot change and that won't go away while also remaining an exuberant participant in life.

Speaking of surrender, the idea of it recalls the notion of the beginner's mind or Shoshin in Zen Buddhism. An eagerness, a focus, a childlike, judgement-free willingness to try new things. What better time than in Act III? That idea of renting a flat in Paris, joining a choral group, sailing the Greek islands? If not now, when? All those beware, take care, don't dare voices should be shown the door. As Shunryu Suzuki said, "in the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's mind there are few." Two friends come to mind...one who took up cello later in life, participating in recitals along with the young students barely as tall as his cello bow was long. He dressed in a tuxedo, gave the recital his full attention, also giving the terrified-of-aging parents in the audience a model for just doing it...anyway. Another who moved to Joseph, Oregon, after breaking the glass ceiling as an executive in San Francisco. She bought a small farm and, on a whim, started raising goats which led to making goat cheese which resulted in a storefront and a booth at the farmer's market. What I notice is that the people over 65 who pull off this sort of thing first create an orderly and committed approach (the expert's mind) involving lots of planning, budgeting and scheduling while also building in elasticity and derring-do (the beginner's mind) to accommodate counter-order, bound to show up in unanticipated ways, good and bad. Ask my friend how many times her goats got out and the wonderful neighbors she met as a result. Time to move on opportunity or lose opportunity. Jeff Bezos has nothing on us. What is your personal equivalent of launching yourself into space?

*—Poet and author Ellen Waterston is a woman of a certain age who resides in Bend. "The Third Act" is a series of columns on ageing and ageism.*