



The Third Act

Playing the Fool

By [Ellen Waterston](#)

An article in the Jan. 18, 2021, issue of *The New Yorker* addresses one woman's serious pursuit of painting starting in her 60s. Stepping down from an accomplished career as a professor of history at Princeton, and as the author of seven books and the recipient of countless honors, Nell Painter decided to pursue a BFA from Rutgers, followed by an MFA from The Rhode Island School of Design, pursuing both with the same rigor she had approached all else in her life. In her memoir, "Old in Art School: A Memoir of Starting Over," she describes the shock of discovering that suddenly her race (she was Black) took a back seat to the fact that she was old as the provocation of prejudice. Because of her age she wasn't taken seriously by her instructors and was of no interest to younger fellow students.

"It wasn't that I stopped being my individual self or stopped being Black or stopped being female, but that old, now linked to my sex, obscured everything else beyond old lady."

Let's look at this differently. With all the hostile name-calling and taunts associated with current important debates and protests about racial equality, immigration, politics and the environment,

guess what "name" neutralizes, zaps them all, and, therefore, might just pave the way for productive conversation? Old.

Back to Painter. How many of us shy away from trying something new after age 60, and why is that? We have drunk the cultural Kool-Aid, that's why. Ageism messaging at work. Athletes are considered over the hill by age 30. Middle-aged executives don't dare make a longed-for career change out of fear of age discrimination. Painter experienced firsthand the cultural bias that starting something new later in life is seen as foolish.

But playing the fool is a good thing. True, the Latin origin of the word, *follis*, cites bellows and windbag—a bit off-putting. But wind is also associated with inspire, to breathe out, to convey a truth or idea. Expanding on that interpretation, the notion of the wise fool first emerged in the 1300s followed by William Shakespeare taking up the fool's cause in the 1500s, elevating the role of the court jester from entertainer to truth-teller and scripting many wise fools into his plays. In his "Guide to Shakespeare," Isaac Asimov sums it up. "The great secret of the successful fool is that he is no fool at all."

In tarot card games starting in the 15th century (before they were pre-empted for fortune telling) the fool was the most valuable card. When tarot decks were subsequently used for divination, the fool came to represent new beginnings, faith in the future and beginner's luck. Given that every day is a new beginning, it figures we all have the same shot at luck each morning, right? In this sense, playing the fool would mean trying new things, staying curious despite the years already invested in the pit- and prat- falls of life, no matter the age. Enter the wise, old fool.

Margaret Talbot, the author of *The New Yorker* article, suggests that parents (or grandparents, for that matter) who wait patiently in a studio or front hall for their child or grandchild to finish ballet or kick boxing lessons are sending the message that learning new things is reserved for the young. But it doesn't have to be so. Talbot references current studies of what has been dubbed "crystallized intelligence" that show that cognitive skills don't all peak at once, some even improving as we age.

"Societal pressure on young adults to specialize and succeed... is as wrongheaded and oppressive on the one end of life as patronizing attitudes toward the old are on the other," writes Talbot. She encourages us to remember learning to do something new (skill, not fact) "when you didn't really care what your performance of it said about your place in the world, when you didn't know what you didn't know." In short, be foolish.

I rail against this culture's tendency to bundle all that us elders have been, are, hope to be, into one convenient, expedient, dismissive category: old. Like some sort of wireless societal bundling offer for ancients. But if you have managed to follow my (non) logic, the most powerful card in the deck, it turns out, is the elder fool because the moniker "old" upstages and trumps all other limiting and insulting labels. So let's play the card we've been dealt. Here's to the sage fool! The hardy and hearty old fool! The bold but wise buffoon! By playing the elder card, I wager we can eclipse the destructive name-calling plaguing society today and shift the conversation to a solution-oriented one. Just imagine that! The deck is stacked in favor of us wise old fools.

