



The Third Act

Possible Futures

By [Ellen Waterston](#)

Kate Bowler in her book "No Cure for Being Human" says, "Everybody pretends you die only once. But that's not true. You can die a thousand possible futures in the course of a ... life."

I so get that, don't you? As we live, who hasn't had to die to the loss of loved ones, or a marriage, a change or loss of a job, the community of workplace friends when we retire, the loss of riches, elusive goals, of mobility, of limb or presumed longevity, as Bowler had to do when she learned she had a terminal disease?

As I write this column I am again not venturing outside because of smoke. I am "dying" to my notion of the forests as they once were, of the bright, crisp, clear days of late summer and early fall in central Oregon. Of all the possible futures, which will take their places?

Have you ever grabbed your binoculars and headed to the Summer Lake Wildlife Area? It's an important stop for waterfowl along the Pacific Flyway. That these wetlands are healthy is partially thanks to the work of an unsung hero: freshwater mussels. Dropping water levels this

summer stranded dozens of the tiny, efficient filter feeders on the banks of the Refuge waterways where they cooked inside their shells during the recent heatwave. Cliff swallows were another casualty. Looking like giant barnacles nestled under the brow of ditch banks and rimrocks, cliff swallows' mud pellet nests turned into kilns during the prolonged fever of heat, mummifying the feathered inhabitants inside their compact cocoons.

With all due respect to Foxy Woxy, Henny Penny and acorns, I hope we can finally agree the sky really *is* falling. The planet has been tapping on our shoulders for decades and we have, for the most part, ignored its bidding. Now it's delivering well-placed right hooks to our thick noggins. Things are going environmentally haywire...never mind socially, politically and culturally. There are days I feel stopped dead in my tracks by the grief I feel for the all of it, from mussels and swallows to all human and nonhuman suffering everywhere. Do I have to die to a temperate future? Has what we chose to do versus what we neglected to do created this present? What better possible future can we align with?

[It doesn't have to be a faraway thing. It can be right here. It doesn't have to be a huge thing. It could just be a hug thing. Most importantly, it doesn't have to be a tomorrow or seasonal thing, it can be now. tweet this](#)

Grieving is an expression of love. I know this. It is the heartfelt tribute to what has been lost and is important, necessary, healthy. But I have come to realize grief is a rest stop, not a stopping place. It is a pause before renewed commitment and action. And though adapting to actions and roads not taken is necessary, adapting is not the same as acceptance. We adapt to this new season of smoke, to wearing masks, to the presence of tent villages in our community. We adapt to the constant rat-a-tat-tat of bad news. But that doesn't mean we accept the cause of these calamities. We can fall asleep in the hammock of grief, of acceptance...or jump back into the human race.

Then what? To get my bearings, I first tell myself to keep my lights on low beam. Driving down this rough section of Life Street along with all of you, I remind myself not to look too far down the road. Focus on what's in front of me, on the "think globally, act locally" mantra.

And what does "doing" look like? It doesn't have to be a faraway thing. It can be right here. It doesn't have to be a huge thing. It could just be a hug thing. Most importantly it doesn't have to be a tomorrow or seasonal thing, it can be now. "Every day is a gift...that's why they call it the present, y'all!" I heard that drawled by a comedian on an ad for a television sitcom. I can't remember which one. Maybe Ted Lasso? But I love the sentiment!

Instead of waiting for the holidays, choose a need in this present moment. Instead of waiting until December to pick the name of a family off the gaily decorated giving trees placed around town by the service clubs, seize the present moment to give. Pick a local cause and wrap up it up in a donation or volunteer commitment. Let's not die to the brightest possible future, the one in which we take care of the planet and each other.

"Every day the fate of the world, the needs of the future and the unfolding of nature...are up for grabs in each of us. Every day," says James Hollis in "Prisms." If each if us does what we can to

stanch the bleeding, metaphorical swallow by swallow, mussel by mussel, we will, as Adrienne Rich said, "perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world."