

THE THIRD ACT: Time Travel Metaphor-mosis Part II

Author Ellen Waterston's latest column tackles aging and exercise... and when to say when

By [Ellen Waterston](#)

Thanks for hanging in there with me for a second column on this wacky theme of "Change your metaphor, change your life." It's just possible once we do, we're no longer under the spell of the borrowed story, of the temporal and cultural myths that boss us around. See you later, memory, beauty, gut, bone and muscle supplements! Adios too late, too old!



At some subconscious level, don't we know we are part of a bigger question, a bigger answer, a bigger narrative? Doesn't that explain why our dreams are filled with monsters and angels, and why we, in our dreams, find ourselves either stuck to the ground or flying free? These nighttime odysseys tap into a fundamental, ancient and eerily familiar aspect of ourselves ...cowardly lions, heartless tin men. Haven't we, in certain situations, needed some fairy dust, a magic lantern? And when it showed up, what form did it take? Could we ever have predicted? What in the world makes anyone think this amazing cycle suddenly stops?

Just for the fun of it, let's change out our belief that life occurs between the metaphors of birth and death and instead be on the lookout for configurations of experience and intersections of time that point a different way. Let's not succumb to the cultural message that time is running out. That there is a "real time" to be "in." Time itself is a metaphor. If we lose a day flying to China, where exactly does it go? Lost two years to COVID? What became of them? We had to give up our "metaphor" for what those years would look like, had to adapt, pivot, see the invitation in what took place instead, but no concrete thing was "lost."

[In each moment, we have all the time we need. tweet this](#)

Time travels. Time stands still. Time runs out. Time's up. Time's too short, too long. Time's a 'wastin'. A beloved rancher friend once shared his homegrown theory about time. He said when you're young, very young, "Time goes by real slow but the metabolism is hell bent. As you get older, time speeds up and the metabolism slows down considerable. At death's door," he continued, "the metabolism stops altogether, and yet time goes by so fast all your life's experiences flash before you in one single, fleeting moment." I can picture, as if it were yesterday, how he removed his sweat-stained cap, slicked down his gray hair with the hand missing a forefinger thanks to a run-in with the tractor, and, carefully repositioning the cap back on his head, and asked: "What do you make of that?"

Good question. I've been turning it over till the edges are worn smooth. Based on what he said, it would seem at some point the arcing ellipses of time and metabolism must intersect and when they do, should be in exquisite balance and harmony. Do you suppose this intersection is a single moment in our life? If so, it must be one of perfection. Orgasmic. How can we know when that single moment is? Or when we're in it? Or is it a particular quality within each moment? If I practice, can I stay at that intersection and experience everything that way? Could I experience my whole life in the moment the fly line dances out over the river before it hits the water? Before a baby takes in its first breath on the way to a life-affirming cry? The time between the coyote's laugh leaving its lips and when I hear it on the other side of the valley? Is it the moment just before we express our love—the expression of it waiting backstage anticipating its entry? Can we only recognize these instants in hindsight? Like salt thrown over the shoulder for good luck? Or can we live in the present and immediate knowledge of them eternally, by practicing, by nurturing an awareness that they are always happening around us, until it is the all and only of life? These are some of the questions I'd have liked to ask my rancher friend before he died.

In each moment, we have all the time we need. We can't count on how many moments that will be, but we can live honestly into each one as if it's our last, out from under bossy cultural metaphors, robustly and courageously claiming our own. Anwar Sadat, the President of Egypt from 1970 until 1981, reputedly said, "I will not die one minute before my time." Despite the risky policies he embraced, I'd always thought he meant he was in complete charge of when he'd die. I liked the idea. A lot. But when he was assassinated in 1981, I realized he'd meant he had no control of when his time would come but, at the same time, would not waste a minute worrying when that would be.

—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.