

THE THIRD ACT

A COLUMN ON AGEISM AND AGEING

BY ELLEN WATERSTON

WHAT'S IN YOUR
STORY TODAY?



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Metaphor-mosis Part I

By [Ellen Waterston](#)

I've been writing Third Act columns for a year?! Tempus really does fugit. By way of throwing myself a party, in this column and the next I'm going to re-noodle themes I've been chasing down over the past 12 months and, for that matter, forever.

During the first half of life, according to author James Hollis, we are, appropriately, concerned with the external: what does the world ask of me as professional, partner, parent? In the second half, the focus changes, becomes an inside job: What question do I answer with my life?

Actually, regardless of your age, I'm persuaded the sooner you start the second half of life the better, as I think it asks the more important question. However, most avoid it like the plague, associating it with disease, decrepitude, and, dare I say, death.

On the occasion of my 65th (speaking of time flying...that would be a decade ago) I got a free lifetime United States Forest Service Park permit. When he handed it to me the young man in his crisp uniform and Smokey the Bear hat smiled and said: "The pass will never expire." But here's

the thing. That Forest Service guy failed to take into account one important fact. It's not just the lifetime pass that never expires. Neither do I. I'm not talking ashes to ashes. I'm talking riddles, rhizomes, metaphors. As a writer I live in the land of metaphor. My motto? Metaphor-mosis. Change your metaphor, change your life.

I have come to see my life, all of our lives, as part of a linked narrative, like the 80,000-year-old Pando colony of poplars rhizome-ing their way to eternity. I'm but one, small daisy in a long, infinite daisy chain. At this age I'm amazed by how little I understand of life and it's precisely that not knowing that, on a good day, excites me now.

Sure. Most days I thrash around thinking it's my story. I am its author so why isn't it turning out the way I want? But on good days I see that the real deal is to be on the lookout for the archetypal signs and mileposts that tell me where I am in the story I was dispatched here to tell, not one someone else or some institution tells me to live or my ego leads me to believe I'm authoring. This is a stretch, I know.

How did I arrive at this perspective? If I look at my life so far: New England, New York City, world travels, the ranching West, and now, after a few personal and professional non sequiturs, here I am in this high desert town thinking about metaphor-mosis and life never-ending? You can't make this stuff up. I can't either. So who is?

Hollis says each of us is a crucial part of a great unfolding. Something is living us more than we are living it. We don't create ourselves, we happen to ourselves. We don't make our story, our story makes us. The world, as Muriel Ruykhauser said, is not made of atoms, but of stories. I say we can't see the pattern that is our life or the pattern of the whole, but must, on faith, believe it exists and fulfill our obligation to complete, as elegantly as possible, our small square of the cosmic quilt.

As W.H. Auden wrote: "We are lived by powers we pretend to understand." Or Robert Frost: "The afternoon knows what the morning never suspected." As I have made my way through "my" life, over and over again I have been confronted with challenges that demanded this Ms. Potato leave the couch of false comforts, false perceptions, false metaphors and venture into uncharted territory. And now, as a woman of a certain age, that uncharted territory includes having the courage to look out across the inscrutable vastness of this narrative I'm part of.

Regardless of age, at some point all of us feel despairing, unworthy. One reason might be that when things really do or really don't work out (they're the same thing, by the way, they both bring us to our knees either in gratitude or supplication) we take all the credit or all the blame. Another reason is that we haven't caught on to the fact that a story is living through us and that we must make every effort to be in service to that telling. We forget that the source of the wound becomes the source of the divine, however you define divine, and that the grit and grime of hardship is just the beginning. It's the beginning of an alchemical process that creates the base matter that ultimately becomes your personal gold, your unique contribution to the mono-myth: the hero's and heroine's journey. What's in your story today?

We don't make our story, our story makes us.