



## The Third Act

### Old Doesn't Mean Addled

**They never saw their age as a limitation. But what about the rest of us?**

By [Ellen Waterston](#)

Waiting in the lobby, your name is called. A nurse shows you to the examination room. Annual checkup. "How's it going, young man? How are you doing today, young lady?" What is it about those greetings that rub the wrong way? Patronizing? Saccharine? A thinly veiled sympathy card in acknowledgement of this disease called ageing? The reduction of the older individual to a generic? Imagine greeting President Joe Biden, Dolores Huerta, Harry Belafonte, Nancy Pelosi, Willie Nelson or Jane Fonda in this manner? (See [SLATE](#) magazine's December 2020 issue for "The [Most Influential 80-Plus-Year-Olds in America](#).") Do they command more respect because they are a celebrity? Yes. But they also never saw their age as a limitation. What about the rest of us?

Nowadays, when I meet total strangers hiking to Green Lakes or Broken Top, they'll say "Good job!" "Way to go!" "You're an inspiration!" It feels odd. I mean I, like them, am just a hiker out for a hike. I am a hiker who feels part of something bigger when I get into the mountains. I have long since eschewed my heart rate monitor. I have grown out of that phase of hyper-athleticism, ways of reducing experiences in nature to something to measure, a means to an end, instead of an opportunity to be in and of the natural world, to realize my relative status in the scheme of things. Are these passersby urging me to not give up the fight? And if I fight hard enough, do they think I have a chance of winning? If they cheer loud enough, do they think they'll ward off the Grim Reaper?

A friend recently reported that when she asked the dermatologist about the changes in pigmentation on the back of her hands she was told in a "There, there..." tone that those spots were evidence of "sage-ing." Please, tell us like it is. Tell us in language that respects our intelligence. Ageing is not to be avoided. It just is. When presented with my U.S. Forest Serve

Lifetime Access pass, the Forest Service employee, dressed in uniform and wearing a Smoky the Bear hat, handed me the pass and said wryly, "The *pass* will never expire." Let's hear it for straight talk spiced with humor! How refreshing!

Make no mistake, Bend has an amazing medical community, can legitimately claim some of the greatest practitioners and specialists anywhere. Many of us bionic boomers are sporting artificial limbs of one sort or another, are stented, shunted, pacemaker-ed, A-, B-, C- and D-fibbed thanks to the regional health care providers. To a person, the staff in central Oregon's medical community is dedicated, efficient and hardworking. I use these examples only to point out what is perhaps an inadvertent participation in ageism (and not limited to the world of health care). Maybe the sheer numbers of clients require generic salutations. Maybe it takes up too much time, is too much of an emotional drain on doctors and staff to engage more personally. Maybe the pressure to keep up on records, to meet the unofficial quota of patients needed, precludes more personal interactions. Maybe keeping the patient at arms-length, so to speak, is needed so doctors can focus on the process not the person, on the detective work that identifying an ailment requires as opposed to indulging the pop medicine that the patient has found online on WebMD.

[Do they command more respect because they are a celebrity? Yes. But they also never saw their age as a limitation. What about the rest of us? tweet this](#)

Back to the annual checkup. That you know your name and have a heartbeat has been confirmed. Now the real fun begins. The nurse announces he is going to state three words and will ask you to repeat them further into the exam. Pop quiz panic syndrome sets in. You beg to recite Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" instead. What about the last 20 presidents? All state capitols? The three words are unrelated in sound, meaning, association. Stadium, vinegar, highway. Comb, artichoke, hem. Calculator, twine, dye. You surreptitiously write them on your palm. You know if you don't succeed your chart notes will indicate early signs of failing memory.

But take heart. There's much about memory function we don't know. With all respect to "[Blursday](#)," brain farts and impossible three-word quizzes, consider "The Doorway Effect." In studies conducted in 2011 at the University of Notre Dame it was observed that walking through doorways makes us forget things. You get up from your desk to go to the garage where your extra reams of paper are stored. Two doors later you can't remember why you came to the garage. The study concluded some forms of memory are optimized to keep information at-the-ready until their shelf life expires. Turns out changing rooms and walking through doors signaled the brain it was OK to purge those memories. If the shoe fits, wear it! I plan on it.

—[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.