

Exegesis

This fable was originally written by Jeanne Ellin, the responses are written by Helen Manchester and Tot Foster. Jeanne is a co-researcher on a research project called 'Connecting through Culture as we Age: digital innovation for healthy ageing'. The project set out to explore how and why we take part in arts and culture as we get older. Our aim was to improve the quality of life of older adults, particularly those that are disabled, or racially or socio-economically minoritized. We worked alongside older adult co-researchers, creative and community project partners to co-design new arts and cultural experiences to support wellbeing and social connection in later life. Our interest was in disrupting ageist imaginaries of older adults as frail, in need of care, digitally illiterate or as a burden on society. This piece was written 2 and a half years into the project. Jeanne had been recruited as one of 20 co-researchers at the beginning of the project and had worked with the research team closely. Firstly, one to one with Helen (who is also the project lead), but also with Tot who is a researcher on the project and with Stuart who was a computer science researcher working on the team.

Jeanne came to England when she was 8 years old after living her early life in India. When she first came to England she was not permitted to go out other than errands and school so someone went to the library for her. She didn't know topics or authors so she asked for fairy tales and myths. She began with Norse and Greek myths and many years later moved towards Indian myths. Jeanne used myth and fairy tale in her work as a therapist finding it helped people to reframe their concerns, often providing distance, safety and clarity. Jeanne now finds that using myth in her writing helps her to clarify and understand issues. She therefore did this with her experience with on the project and with digital culture. This helped her to explore the experience in a different way.

Jeanne is not well enough at the moment to leave her home very much so our meetings and conversations always took place there - a small social housing flat located on the outskirts of the city. Jeanne was not comfortable with digital technologies when we first met and Tot and Stuart provided her with one to one support to enable her to participate in the project, almost always virtually. Jeanne has found learning to use digital technologies has opened up new worlds and new possibilities for her.

On one occasion when Helen visited Jeanne she produced a green bag filled with artefacts that evoked Venice to her- including xxxx. Jeanne explained that she intended to have a 'Venetian week' – using the bag and its contents, as well as cooking herself Italian food, listening to Venetian music and radio- all from the comfort of her own flat. The idea was kept alive throughout the project and brought into the design workshops held with artists, creative technologists and others 18 months into the project. A prototyping team formed around the idea to produce what became known as 'Tabletop Travels'. The prototype has received additional funding to develop the idea further.

This piece is a reflection on our different perceptions of how our relationships developed through our encounters with each other and how these encounters quickly moved away from more traditional approaches to research relations and towards friendship.

Jeanne's fable

The lady of the mountain set a quest.

She is tall, slender with a heart that seeks to lead others to wisdom. Sunlight silvers her hair. Knowledge is the treasure of her kingdom, Eagerly sought, carefully collected, freely gifted. About her court she employs a wise woman with a loving heart and a zest for travel. A juggler magician. His skill is in the bridging of worlds.

One day wandering among the works of wisdom and wonder in her library she makes a discovery. All the voices of the books are alike. She says there must be other textures of living. Shades of experience I cannot imagine. How can I know what I do not know? What I cannot even picture or have words for?

She searches for the voices of seekers and searchers. Listens for the unconsidered words of the different. Expressing the lives of the old, the poor, those of odd or unusual shape, UN-chancy accents, rough edged tones of those milled only by experience.

Faraway in a small dark space an old woman sits alone. With no one to see the patterns she creates. No one to hear her songs. She became diminished, silent, invisible. How can I bring light and joy into my life she wonders. I have no portal no window. How much I wish to learn and share light and joy with others. How I miss being able to help.

The old woman's voice is heard. The Queen sends her wise woman to teach the skills that will enable strong silver threads to be spun. Threads to make bridges of the imagination to open the world again. She teaches so patiently seeing each mistake as a gaining of skill. Much as a child learning to walk, each fall builds strength and skill. Time and patience enables the old woman. Now she begins to travel alone in this new realm.

The old woman finds herself circling within a high hedged maze. Lest she become discouraged the Queen sends her Juggler who is also a magician and a fearless explorer. He is of a joyful zestful spirit and imparts his knowledge so gently that it seems a natural skill remembered. With kindness and humour these emissaries teach the old woman.

She gains confidence. Fearless and joyful begins to shape something unthought of before. A thing of magic to transforms the life of others in small dark spaces. Giving light and joy as she was given.

Delighted the Queen declares another quest to discover the way to protect and nourish the delicate dream as it wakens into its own life.

It is hard at first for the old woman to release her thought child to let it free to be guided and cared for by others. Set it free to grow and change and become itself just as a flesh and blood child would.

She sees the wonderful becoming embodied. Far from the small cobweb fine idea she spun in the narrow dark space. Sees what might be wings....

Helen's response

The lady of the mountain sighed. She noticed her hair is fading to grey and her mind less quick than before. As an autumn chill settled in the air she felt the cold creep into her bones. She was troubled by the world around her where creativity and passion were seen to be the preserve of the young.

She sought to understand those who had gone before her into older age, to know their lives in order to prepare herself for her own older age.

Her first foray into this world turned up a wonderful jewel, a woman who had been forgotten but shone so bright she lit up the dark room in which she dwelled. The jewel lady choose to wear colors from her homeland, to cut her hair short and change its color chameleon like, depending on her mood. The woman wrote fine poetry and told stories about the rich life she has lived. She chose to disrupt the tales told by others that fail to recognize women and amplify the voices of those who have lived hard lives. She sought to continue to learn and grow and contribute to the world but others made this hard. They denied her light, food suitable for her stomach and care that enabled reciprocity. As if she had nothing left to give.

The lady of the mountain couldn't imagine how the jewel woman could be so positive, unable to get out beyond the 4 walls of her small dwelling, forgotten about and with few visitors or other folk to touch and love. But the woman found joy and love and passion and delight in that small space. She introduced the lady of the mountain to the depth of brightness to be found by attending to small things, to find significance in the tales that are not told and to notice the beauty in slow changes in nature and the place around her.

One day the jewel woman shared an idea that would enable others like her to experience brightness, for sparkling jewels to be sent out to others who had been forgotten. The lady of the mountain loved the idea and sought out others who would too, others with the imagination and resources to develop and run with the idea, to bring the jewel lady's gems to others to enjoy as they age.

Tot's response

The wise woman was not wise when she arrived at the door of the old woman; unknowing what she would find within and within herself. With trepidation she expected to see a mirror of her own future, foxed and cloudy. Yet, when she entered she felt not the cold of partial silvered darkness, but the bright orange, red and yellow lights of a fire and broth cooking and ready for all who come and sit to share their stories. As her eyes grew accustomed to the light she saw into the corners of the room, and the riches of an exploring mind were revealed; treasure boxes lay open with a stream of questions alive inside, The not-yet-wise woman saw that there were other ways of journeying her own mind, without the constant movement from place to place; she saw that it is possible that beyond the mirror she will be able to find the refreshment she craves by

nurturing the present with new ways to roam. This was the start of the wisdom that followed the presence of the old woman; as one world shrinks another expands.