

OLLI Notebook

Published periodically, providing news, information and feature stories
about the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Temple University

No. 24 December 2017

A Person of Interest: Eleanor Gesensway Receives 2017 Preservation Achievement Award

by Carol Wood

“You’ve got to stick with it!” Eleanor Gesensway was given this advice by the historical architect for the Independence National Historical Park early in her preservation



At the awards ceremony on June 7, 2017: Gene LeFevre and Jonathan Sutton of Growth Properties; John Connors of Brickstone; and Eleanor Gesensway.

“career,” and she took it to heart. Her persistence has led to a series of successes for historic preservation in Philadelphia. In June of this past summer, Ellie was recognized by the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia at their gala awards ceremony at Vie, an events space on North Broad. It was a recognition of what Ellie accomplished

thirty years ago—the preservation of the Lit Brothers Building through her ad hoc organization, “Let Lits Live Coalition.” Ellie said: “Of course, it was personally exciting to be remembered and applauded as the founder and chairman of the coalition, but it is especially rewarding to know that 30 years later this landmark building not only still stands, reminding us of our city’s past, but lives and thrives into the 21st century.”

The Lit Brothers Building, an iconic structure of the 19th and early 20th Centuries, went through many ups

and downs from 1977 when the department store went bankrupt until 1986 when the ultimate developers, Growth Properties, found an anchor for the building. The leasing of two-thirds of the space allowed the preservation project to go forward. Ellie started the process in 1981 by inviting six people to her historic home on Spruce Street to discuss the planned demolition. Even though the building had been listed on the National Trust’s registry, the site was about to become a parking lot. One week later, Ellie’s coalition held a rally at the Lit’s site, which included members of the Victorian Society trimming la-

dies hats—a service the Lit Brothers had performed for free—as well as attendees writing their ideas and sentiments for the building on butcher paper canvases on the Lit’s windows.

In 1984, Growth Properties, a real estate development firm became interested in the property, but required a

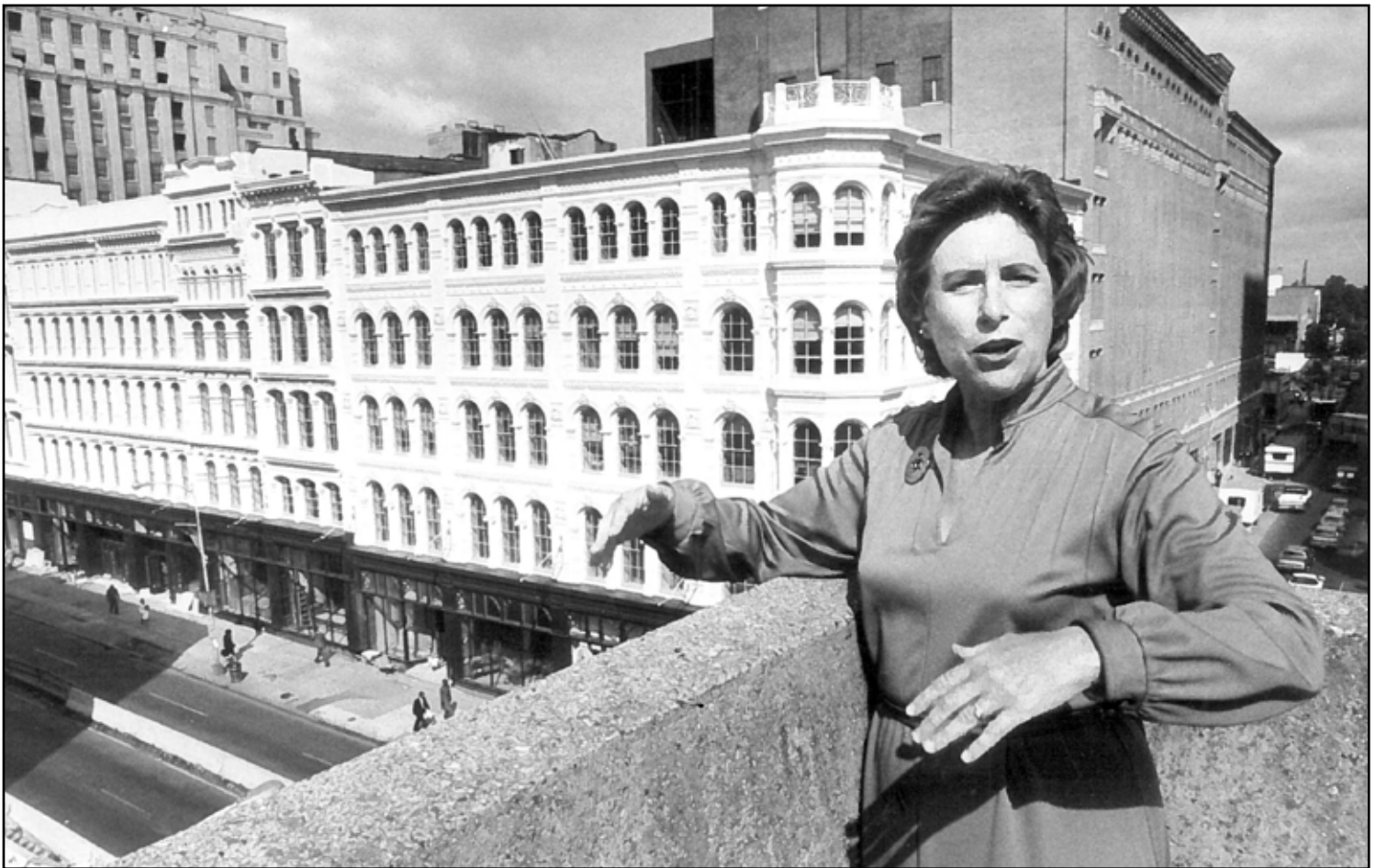
major tenant to get additional financing for a renovation project. The next year Edward (Ned) Montgomery, Chairman of Mellon Bank East, stepped in as a “white knight” to lease 475,000 square feet for its data processing operations. Mellon renamed the building Mellon Independence Center and signed a 25 year lease. Importantly, the ground floor and concourse remained intact with retail shops and offices, and the Victorian façade was preserved as the architectural gem that it is. The original Lit Brothers millinery shop on the corner had grown to a block-long building. The early cast iron façade was blended with the building materials of later additions and unified by the cream color, the Italianate arches, balancing corner buildings, and other devices. The story of the growing building really shows the history of commercial architecture over a period of time.

During the 1980’s Ellie was very prominent in the preservation movement in Philadelphia. She received support from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and KYW. In 1985, Ellie started the Committee for the New Preservation

Ordinance because she was frustrated with the Philadelphia Historical Commission’s efforts. Demonstrating her tough persistence, she visited every councilperson in City Hall asking for support. Former Mayor John Street, then a councilman, shared her views and concerns, supported her cause, and helped to pass the new law protecting our historical treasures.

Thus, the Lit Brothers Building was saved. In 1985, Ellie was named “Preservationist of the Year” by the Philadelphia Historic Preservation Corporation. Other preservation awards followed and Ellie was invited to join the Boards of various historical, preservation, and architectural foundations and committees. She was also a popular speaker inside and outside of Philadelphia on the topic of preserving our past.

At the awards ceremony last June, Paul Steinke of the Preservation Alliance of Greater Philadelphia said to Ellie and Gene LeFevre of Growth Properties: “Your leadership was inspirational, your voices provoked, persuaded, and ultimately preserved an important piece of Phila-



Ellie’s backdrop is the old Lit Brothers Building, now the new Mellon Independence Center, on the eve of the opening gala. (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, Oct 6, 1987).

delphia history. Eleanor, your achievement in founding and chairing the “Let Lits Live Coalition” lives as one of the greatest models of historic preservation advocacy in our city’s long history.” Ellie and Gene also presented an award to John Connors of Brickstone Realty, the current owner, which recently completed an environmentally-conscious rehabilitation.

If one traces the events that led to Ellie’s leadership role with the Lit’s Building, one would have to go back to 1964. That year a young Ellie, a teacher of history, and her newly-graduated physician husband decided that they would like to practice and live in the City. They needed space both for Dr. Gesensway’s psychiatry practice and for a home for their growing family. Noticing federal subsidies to incentivize reclamation of abandoned houses on Spruce Street in the Society Hill section, they signed on with the stipulation that they would not only maintain the façade, but also return the four-floor six-apartment building to a single family home. Ellie and her husband raised their three children there, and she remains in this large and interesting home to this day. There Ellie has a “room of one’s (her) own” with keepsakes of the significant events of her personal life, as well as historic preservation mementos, including rally posters, Lit Brothers boxes, which have an imprint of the architecture on the surfaces, and a Lit Brothers hat box. A very old lady who remembered the store’s millinery “heyday” gave Ellie the hat box with assorted hats and a letter describing her rich memories of the store.

Ellie has decade-by-decade chapters in her preservation story. In the 1970s, Pennsylvania Hospital was going to demolish beautiful Greek revival homes, mansions of the Northeast Pennsylvania coal barons, to create nursing-student housing at 700-714 Spruce Street. In response, Ellie organized “Save Spruce Street” and went through years of organizing rallies, writing letters to the editor, and lobbying the City Planning Commission and the hospital board. On the other side of the spectrum, the conservative flank of her coalition wanted 100% preservation, but Ellie found a way to compromise—the “facadectomy.” Through mediation, she was able to have the facades beautifully preserved and restored while allowing the hospital to tear out the insides and add on to the backs of the houses. Ellie was given several beautifully ornate mouldings, mementos of this campaign, which were salvaged from the houses. She has turned over her meeting notes, pictures, letters, news articles, and press releases

from her many endeavors in preservation to Temple University’s Urban Archives.

An adequate sampling of the many interests of Eleanor Gesensway would require more space than allowed for this article. While she “saved” Philadelphia, she worked full time as a teacher, a National Park Ranger, and finally as the Assistant Manager of Pennsylvania’s National Park Museum Shops, and simultaneously raised three children. Additionally, she has been a violinist in the Orchestra Society of Philadelphia for 51 years and started a thriving Society Hill book club 48 years ago.

It will not surprise that this intelligent and vibrant woman has lived a very active life of the mind. Ellie has expressed profound gratitude for TARP—and then OLLI. She has appreciated the high quality of the course offerings, which led her to contribute as a teacher. When she retired in 2005, she joined TARP to take Nate Albert’s course on *War and Peace*, and in 2010-11, she studied James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Dubliners* and then *Ulysses* with Frank Lyman. The latter led Ellie to research Joyce through the Richard Ellman biography and combine it with her expertise in music to create the 2012 course, “Music in the Life and Writings of James Joyce.” Since that time she has backfilled any gaps in her literary background by organizing year-long courses with geographical or regional themes: “Southern Stories by Southern Storytellers,” “New York in Fiction,” “Westward Wanderings,” “West Coast Chronicles,” and “Chicago Life.” These courses are organized on the Great Books format with discussion facilitators, and she has developed a steady following of students who want to make the effort. In addition, Ellie has been a popular speaker at Summer Cafes.

Ellie has said, “To me it is important not to live in a throwaway society...that you respect what came before.” On her radar now is the threat to Jewelers’ Row and the flashing digital lights atop the Lit’s Building, where once simple letters formed the words “A Great Store in a Great City.” She also has concerns about the effects of the current tax bill which may reduce funding and tax credits for historic preservation and may incentivize developers to demolish and build based wholly on economic considerations. We need to remember what made Philadelphia charming and interesting. Be assured that Eleanor Gesensway will continue to “stick with it”!

Thank you, Ellie, for your service to Philadelphia and OLLI! ■

The Parkway 100 Celebration

by Barbrah Newman

The Parkway 100 is the centennial celebration of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, Philadelphia's grand cultural boulevard. The We Are Connected Festival started in September 2017 and will continue for the next 14 months. The celebration is presented by the Parkway Council, in partnership with the City of Philadelphia, and the Department of Parks and Recreation.

The cultural district open house offers 100 family-friendly activities throughout the Parkway Museums District, including extended hours and free or pay-what-you-wish museum admission. Other programs include inside and outside entertainment, giant dot-to-dot puzzles of the Parkway attractions to celebrate the "We Are Connected" celebration theme.

In November The Barnes Foundation is featuring *Anselm Kiefer at the Rodin*; it's an exhibition which features new work by the renowned contemporary artist created in response to sculptures and drawings by Auguste Rodin. Some displayed in the U.S. for the first time. 2017 is the 100th anniversary of the death of Rodin. This exhibition will also "connect" with the collection housed at our neighboring institution, the Rodin Museum. This exhibition is being presented in cooperation with the Musee Rodin in Paris.

Old Masters Now, is celebrating the Johnson Collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In 1917 John G. Johnson, the most famous lawyer of his day, left his astonishing valuable collection of European art to the city of Philadelphia. One hundred years later, we're taking a look at one of this country's most remarkable collections. Encounter treasures by the likes of Botticelli, Bosch, Titian, Rembrandt, and Monet. This exhibition features a behind-the-scenes look at a living, breathing collection and experience first-hand how our understanding and appreciation of these works have evolved over the years.

Winter Fountains for the Parkway by artist Jennifer Steinkamp will be displayed starting in December. She is a world-renowned installation artist who works with video and new media to explore and share ideas about space, motion and perception. This temporary public art installation will redefine the Benjamin Franklin Parkway after dark, illuminating its vast space and captivating the public as they transverse the Parkway at night, from December 2017 through March 2018. Weather permitting, snow that falls while the project is on view, will create supplemental and stunning variations of the artist's flowing video animations.

Today's Benjamin Franklin Parkway would no doubt make its namesake proud. Extraordinary museums, exceptional schools, businesses, and residences line a colorful, diagonal mile from City Hall to the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. ■



Benjamin Franklin Parkway

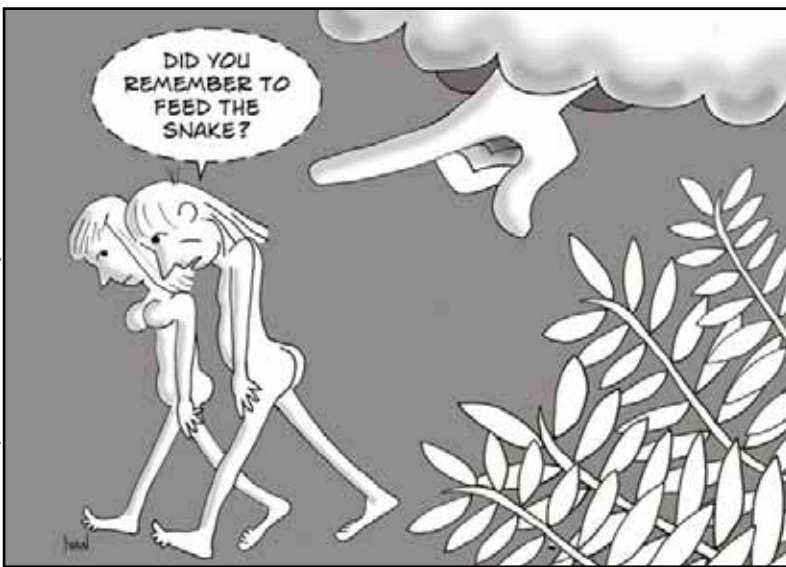
Cartoon by Ivan Kaminoff



Cartoon by Ivan Kaminoff



Cartoon by Ivan Kaminoff



A Call to Action

by Donna Satir

Volunteers are the heart and core of OLLI. Their emotional and physical commitment to the program is why OLLI at Temple University isn't just another brick and mortar continuing education program for people over 50.

OLLI is 43 years old, and moving into its forty-fourth year, because over the years, its volunteers continued to step forward with determination and strength to work for its future and at times fight for its existence.

We often sing praise and rightfully for our volunteer faculty. Without them, we would not be one of the most sought after programs in the region. It is important for our members to recognize that our faculty is comprised solely of volunteers, not paid faculty, that their volunteerism has been a major component in maintaining a very affordable membership fee.

There is another component that is equally as important and a driver in helping to keep membership fees affordable: the 120 volunteers that are not faculty. Some work long hours, at OLLI and/or at home, to help enhance the experiences you have inside a classroom or within the OLLI community.

But the story of OLLI volunteerism doesn't end there, nor does the need for more direct involvement by its membership.

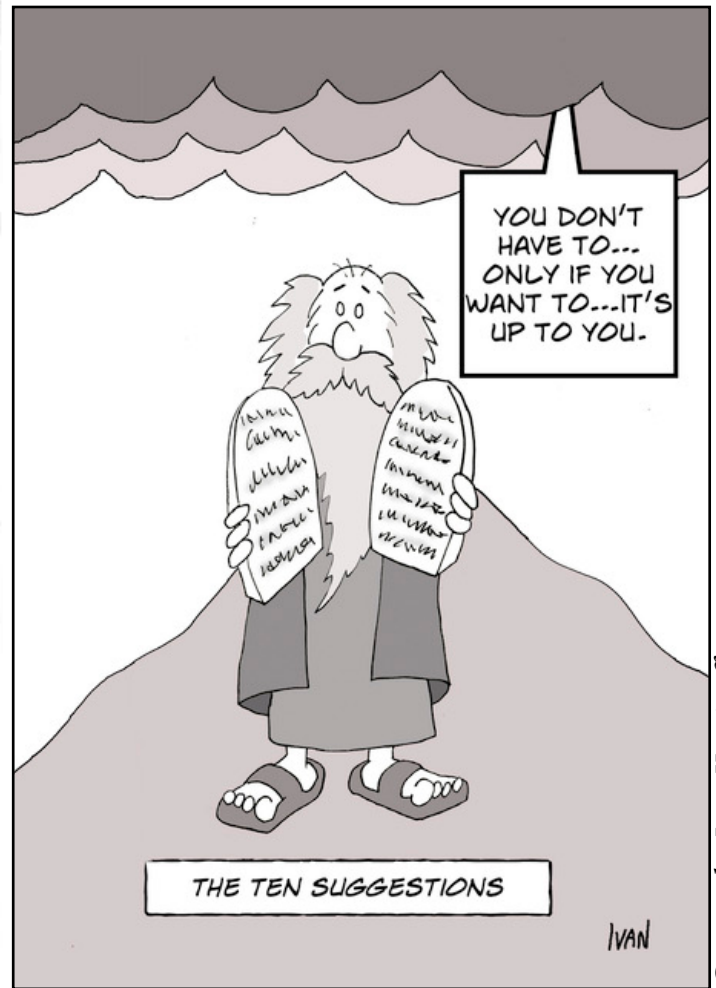
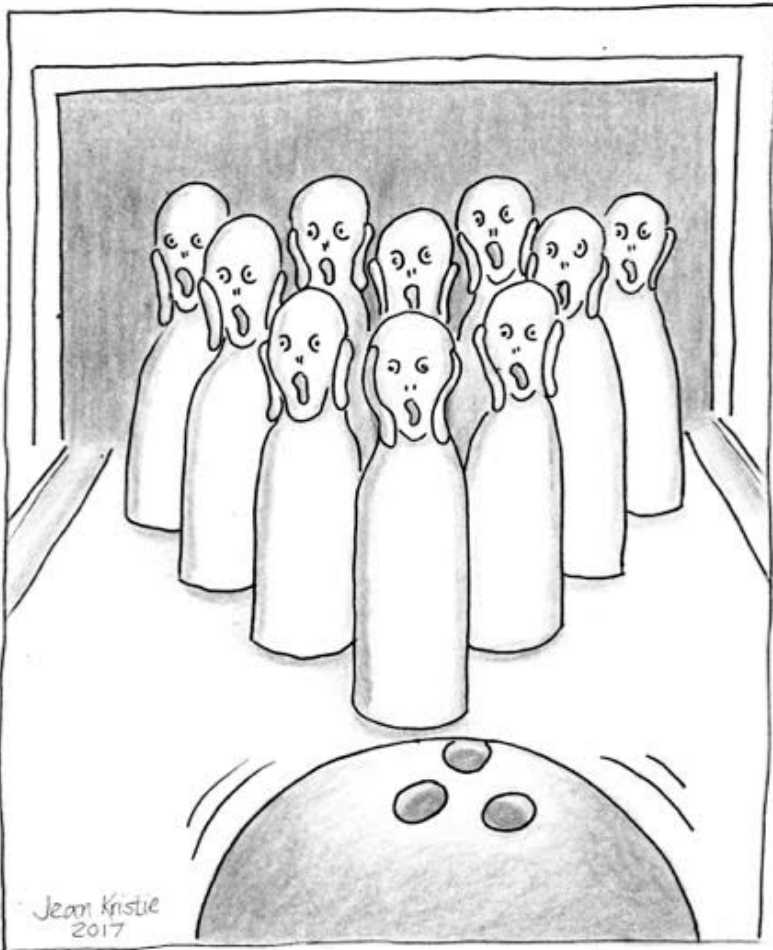
At this moment in time, OLLI's structure is in transition, evolving to conform to the times.

Some of the challenges that we are now faced with are: moving from walk-in to fully registered classes, the use of technology for enrollment, registration, and communication (emails); and going paperless with our catalogue, instructor handouts, and event invitations.

Historically, we have always been able to turn challenges such as these into successful innovations for OLLI's future. For us to do so today, it will take the commitment of our membership to step-up to the challenge and volunteer.

Please look at what you can bring to the table as a volunteer to help OLLI move towards meeting these challenges and building a strong future for all of us.

Become part of the solution.... VOLUNTEER. ■



Stokowski Lived Here

by Ray Greenblatt

Notes deep in the walls
like chinks where pictures once
hung of his great successes,
highly varnished chords
comprised his solid floors.

He walked across the Square
to reach the Academy
but it was always a joy,
humid summer brought out
operatic passions,

autumn tonal colors,
treks through frigid slush

recalled the measures
of the marches in
counterpoint to waltzes,

springtime melodies
what composers heard
from bees, birds, crickets
all the living creatures
in the countryside.

Couples, children, pets, oddballs
were the life he was
trying to bring to life
conducting music
for all the ages. ■

Not About The Train

by Mike Cohen

This is not about the train
that runs its rhythmic course
from town to town through fields and forests.
This is not about the train
that eases into waiting stations,
pausing politely to accommodate a diminishing public.
This is not about the train
you hear in the distance of your sleep,
feel rattling your bed
as if you are aboard, being transported by rail
from dream to dream to dream.
This is not about the train
suspended in a vision as the world rushes past
at so much faster than locomotive speed.

When the mournful whistle fades
and the woods overgrow the rails
and the town entombs the tracks in concrete
and, at the eatery that used to be a station,
the final dozen diners finish supper and depart
leaving the walls to echo unto themselves
like the phantom ocean in an empty shell,
then you will know
this is not about the train. ■

Back In The Space Age

by Mike Cohen

*The Locomotive Age was America's present and future
in 1869 when the transcontinental railroad was completed
with the driving of the golden spike. A hundred years later,
1969, Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon and the Space
Age was America's present and future.*

A long time ago, back in the space age,
ours was the new generation.
The moon was the new America.
We were bound for the sky,
bound, with giant strides,
to appropriate Heaven for Mankind's sake.
The flag was planted, the claim staked.
It was all ours for the taking
and taking was our specialty.

The red shift was on.
The universe was expanding
and we were expanding with it.
Our potential knew no bounds.
We had put a man on the moon,
and having done the impossible
it was impossible to fathom
there might be things we couldn't do.
The cosmos was open for business
and the business was ours.
Yes, we'd put a man on the moon
and were certain that soon
we would put billboards on Mars.

We'd accelerated past the sound barrier
and expected that in no time at all
we'd be traveling through time
at the speed of light.

Since then we have travelled through time,
but not so fast.
And our time travel has landed us here
in this strangely familiar place
where we think nostalgically
of the infinite potential we seemed to have
back in the space age. ■

by Lisa D. Unger, M.D.

by Diane Wolfe Gray

To be free,
To choose, to think,
To contemplate
The missing link.

To understand
That in youth we crawl,
We live our lives
Beneath it all.

Then later on
We walk, we run,
But lose recall
Of what we've done.

How little we knew,
How we have changed,
How roles were assumed,
Many parts rearranged.

Have the wounds left their scars?
Was the journey well spent?
Have we felt it within us?
The shape of content.

And how can we tell?
And how do we know?
And really, does it matter?
When sweet chariot swings low.

Oops, I forgot this short aside—
Despite it all, enjoy the ride. ■

Once upon an absence of time,
A multi-verse reversed,
Declined into an energy of disorder,
As another Big Bang,
Burst to infinite dimension,
Developing to be more,
Once more.

Great galaxies soothe solar systems,
As they incubate self-consciousness,
Where we are partners and products
In the many beds of stars,
All parts at-one ,
At once,
Once more.

Each multi-verse teems with life
Of different frequencies, and limits,
But these, too, discontinue,
For there is no measure of space
When endless time is at an end,
Yet does every dark, deep absence
Develop to be, once more. ■

OLLI Notebook Editorial Staff

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