

LEE GERSHUNY (Age 78)

I met poet and playwright Lee Gershuny at the Scottish Storytelling Centre in Edinburgh, a place she knows well, having had some of her plays performed there. I had forgotten how petite she was, but the helmet of white hair, the radiant smile I remembered. She was born in New York City, but from the age of 10 lived in small towns in northern New York State.

“I left the University of Rochester, New York in the middle of my third year even though I was an honours student with full scholarships. I didn’t know why I was studying and couldn’t connect to what I regarded as superficial materialistic values of my classmates. I went to Israel because I felt there was a community of like souls there – courageous people, some who survived the concentration camps, people who had walked thousands of miles to create a new life and who gave up religion to discover who they really were. That inspired me. I lived in Jerusalem for about a year where I discovered the poet/visual artist William Blake and, inspired by his work, dedicated my writing to touching people as deeply as Blake touched me.”

Lee has been described as ‘spiritual’. Yes, that came across. “My parents were spiritual socialists in following various esoteric paths that focused on service to humanity. I was brought up to live consciously and creatively in harmony with myself and the rest of humanity.”

When she returned to the Big Apple, her birthplace, she not only completed her undergraduate studies in Literature and Linguistics, but also her graduate studies with a Ph.D in Applied Linguistics. There she totally immersed herself in the city’s cultural and social life of concerts, theatre, opera, poetry readings, exhibitions, parties, etc.

In New York, she enjoyed a successful career teaching in colleges and universities while continuing both academic and creative writing. Although she loved research and publishing scholarly articles, she realised that what she really wanted was to focus entirely on creative writing. With the support of a university faculty award in creative writing, she was finally able to do this when she came to Edinburgh in 1988.

Just about the first thing Lee said to me was, “I got married recently!” Her new spouse is Rodney Stares, her life partner of thirty years, an Englishman she met in New York. Rodney it was who brought Lee to Scotland. He felt that Edinburgh was the best place in the UK for both of them to do the work they loved and follow their other interests. But if she preferred to stay in the US, then he was okay with that as long as he was able to have a garden! The way Rodney described Edinburgh struck a deep chord in Lee. Without hesitation, she said, “Let’s go to Edinburgh. I’ve never been to Scotland.”

“After all, I’m a wanderer,” she says and explains that “Gershon,” in Hebrew, means 'the exiled one' or 'wanderer'. Adding ‘uny’ onto the end makes a sentence that means ‘they threw me out.’” Part of being a wanderer is that she doesn’t identify with labels even though she acknowledges that she’s “a woman, American, a New Yorker, Scottish, Jewish, a teacher, an artist and ‘everyone who crosses my path.’”

Thirty was the right number of years on which to finally marry, Lee informs me, because three is a special number – the Trinity of Body, Mind and Spirit. Rodney and Lee had a simple ceremony with just 2 guests as witnesses in the Leith Registrar’s wedding room in what was once the ‘Leith Theatre.’ “How appropriate,” she says.

On the back of the card announcing their marriage in Edinburgh on US Thanksgiving Day (24th November 2016) is a poem written by Lee:

MAP TO ETERNITY

We found a map to Eternity
with no lines connecting the dots,
no signs pointing the way,
no reason to go and
no reason to stay.

We dress for the trip
with no change of clothes,
nothing to find and
nothing to hold,

Only the map and
the light on the road.

Lee has been busy arranging for her company, The Elements World Theatre, to go on tour later in the year with *Reflections of a Constant Monk*. Lee set up the company in 1992 which grew out of the community work she had been doing, in 1992.

“I am its sole writer, but I work with amazing artists, dancers and musicians who are on the same wavelength as I. *Reflections of a Constant Monk* premiered at the 2016 Luminate Festival of Creative Ageing. The musicians and I were all over

fifty, you see. When I was writing in Mexico, there was one voice that was mine, but not mine – the voice of the monk, the wanderer, anyone. It just poured out of me. I was in the flow.”

A few samples from the flyers and press release show us the sort of performance it is:

'Incorporating storytelling, poetry and original music. Join a modern monk as he, or sometimes she, makes a poetical and musical journey through a world of challenging encounters with familiar experiences -- gaining weight, meeting a bully, falling in love, etc. Often gentle and funny, frequently poignant and always intelligently observed ... rich with a sense of pilgrimage and possibility.'

Lee adds that it's a fusion of poetry, parable, storytelling and music. It is like a surreal riddle or a Zen koan (1). Basic questions emerge through a series of small adventures, questions like, Who am I? Why am I here?

The poem on the reverse side of their marriage announcement is the opening poem from this production. Lee, who also teaches meditation, tells me that, for her, there is no separation between life as it is and the meditative state. 'I'm in a meditative state right now by simply being alert now and speaking from inner peace. I don't need to have my eyes closed.' Lee teaches a form of meditation known as the Bright Path Ascension. In its simplest form you learn four initial techniques based on Praise, Gratitude, Love and Compassion. 'And we ask what do you most want to bring into your life? What is your deepest longing?' Lee's name as a meditation teacher is Srivani, which is another name for the goddess Saraswati, Mother of the Arts. The Bright Path Ascension meditation has been taught to prisoners, the warden and guards who volunteered to try it in the most violent maximum security prison in Mexico. "A documentary film, *A Mindful Choice* was made of how

individuals and communities have benefited from meditation practise. To see the bliss and the peace on the prisoners' faces was inspiring. They finally felt they were somebody and they had a life to lead in peace. The reduction in the level of violence in the prison was extraordinary." The film has been inspiring many people all over the world to make that 'mindful choice' to find an approach to meditation that works for them.

Next week Lee will be attending a conference in Edinburgh on Spirituality in Prisons. "I'm very interested in teaching meditation in prisons and also in schools. I was delighted to learn that Conflict Resolution, mediation and meditation are taught in some Scottish schools."

Lee sees a strong connection between creativity and meditation. "Everyone is naturally creative and meditation allows us to go more deeply into the inner sources of creativity. The chattering mind settles down stress-free without trying or forcing the mind to stop thinking. A simple way of saying this is that in meditative states of being, the rational left side of the brain rests in harmony with non-rational, creative right side of the brain. You don't know what might emerge, but you let it take you wherever it takes you and amazing, magical things happen. You become like a child, innocent, playful, but far more aware and attentive to what's happening both inside and outside of your physical 'reality.' Jesus said it beautifully: 'Until you become as little children, you cannot enter into the Kingdom of Heaven'. So, here we are, becoming younger all the time!"

Lee goes on to qualify this by saying that, although we never lose the awe, wonder, curiosity and innocence of children, we also cultivate the wisdom that experience brings. This life journey reminds her of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*.

When they moved to Edinburgh, Rodney set up the Foundation for Community Leadership Development to help community leaders in council estates – places where people often felt trapped in negative situations – to have more confidence and develop natural creativity skills as community activists. Lee's input to this was to develop a course called 'From Coping to Creating.' The course asked what do you most want to create in your life – both for your community and for yourself? It was based on a course Lee had been teaching in the United States called 'Technologies for Creating.' Rodney and Lee were joint directors of the Foundation. They had a team of facilitators, many of them trained as gestalt therapists (2).

'Our leadership style was one of collaboration, rather than the top-down hierarchical model, often seen in community development programmes. When the funding dried up, I focused most of my attention on writing and developing a theatre that was both cross cultural and, when appropriate, interdisciplinary -- including text, dance, music, poetry, film, etc.

I had studied and taught Conflict Resolution skills which I believe helped me become a better playwright – all drama deals with conflict. A theme that runs through all my plays is the potential we all have to stop in the midst of conflict and change course. It was a conscious decision on my part to allow the characters I developed to find a new way of looking at their conflict. In other words, become more conscious of what really mattered to them, their values and priorities.

Themes of redemption and transformation characterised my work in merging the healing and creative arts. My style tended to be absurd and surreal with what one reviewer called 'an idiosyncratic sense of humour'."

Lee says that she sees herself as ‘something of a mythologist.’ She has written a series of poems called *Love Fables* in which there are different animals in love relationships and her plays deconstruct and transform well-known myths.

“The first major myth we explored was *Return to Eden in 1992*. It was a community theatre event preceded by a week of workshops in an Edinburgh park. The collaborative workshops generated a structure for devising the performance with the ‘audience’. We all built the set and participated in resolving the dramatic conflict. I remember that we had planted a tree in the park during the workshop period, which became ‘The Tree of Life.’ Two workshop participants -- one a Ukrainian professional dancer who didn’t know English and the other a Scottish wood sculptor played the roles of lumbermen looking for a tree to chop down. One chose our newly planted ‘Tree of Life’. over the other’s protests and commitment to protect it. The whole audience and workshop participants built a big wall around the wee Tree to prevent its destruction by anyone else. Our job was to find a way to ‘return to Eden’ and open safe passage through the walls without using force or abuse and without harming ourselves and the ‘Tree of Life.’ Could we be trusted? I was the ‘inner director’ and called myself The Absent-Minded Storyteller because I didn’t ‘remember’ the story since it only existed in the moment and was gradually emerging as we went along. I chose the Garden of Eden myth because I was interested in the genesis of evil. Would it emerge in an open, unstructured drama? It actually did - magically and playfully. The ‘audience’ and the actors processed the conflict like children at play - only the game we played created a win/win resolution with no punishment involved. We could only return in peaceful, ‘innocent’ play, dancing and laughing together.

We created another version of *Return to Eden* when Penumbra International commissioned me to create a week of events for the Federation of Mental Health

International Conference (1998), held at Heriot Watt University. The various events invited conference delegates to play with The Elements team of Edinburgh and Glasgow professional actors and community folk in different states of ‘mental health.’ I re-structured *Return to Eden* as part of this for a plenary session with the audience shouting out answers posed to a classical Indian dancer standing and moving as the Tree of Life. We were a huge hit because we were ‘wacky’ by making the non-rational as essential as the rational. A Polish psychologist said the highlight of the whole conference had been The Elements World Theatre because we had shown that what we all needed more than anything was unconditional love. I nearly jumped out of my seat with joy that at last someone understood what our work was about. I chose my life’s work in art over therapy because I could be free to be ‘wacky’ and unconventional and it could more easily be accepted via theatre than the more ‘rational’ theoretical frameworks of the therapeutic arts.

Then there was *Theseus and the Minotaur: A Love Story*, and *The Old Woman Who Lived in A ...* They were dramatic storytelling through poetry, music and dance. All of my deconstructed myths illustrate how consciousness and meditation connect with creativity. I feel that theatre is not only an intervention in the collective dream and the collective culture, but also simultaneously makes the individual’s dream part of a collective experience. In the theatre a world is created where you are collectively and individually experiencing something which is the same, yet different for everyone. When you read a novel, you read it alone and it’s not the same.

Creativity is as natural as child’s play. Creativity is play; and it’s breaking the rules and being free. When people ask what I do, I say, “I play.” We are all creative. There are so many aspects to it. Defining it is a left brain activity, but creativity itself is a right brain action. Creativity is integral with meditation because you are

accessing deep inner sources when you don't know what will emerge. A friend once asked me why I write. My automatic response was, 'To surprise myself.' The unknown, the unknowing is at the centre of creativity. The rational mind knows things and has lots of information and 'good ideas'. Meditation challenges the rational mind to find balance and harmony with the non-rational mind. Meditation allows habits of mind to gradually dissolve while enabling one to access that culturally unconditioned voice that has no rules attached to it. It just is what it is. On a feedback form for one of our productions, someone wrote: "I was deeply moved and I don't know why." That was music to my ears! It's the not knowing 'why', maybe even not understanding that often opens the doors of perception beyond the conditioned, pre-conceptual closed mind.

I am more relaxed about my creativity than I used to be. Because I wanted to break free of the academic world, I was striving for a play that would be a big Broadway hit and make enough money to support me. I was writing for a particular goal and not from what I longed to express. As soon as I stopped striving for that kind of success, my plays began winning prizes and awards. You could say I moved from writing from the left side of the brain, i.e. fitting into the acceptable trend of writing from the right side of the brain. What set me on the path of wanting to study literature and write poetry was the profundity and simplicity of William Blake. He has always been my inspiration and that hasn't changed. Something that has changed as I get older is that I don't do a show on the fringe anymore, it's too exhausting. And fairly recently I let go of the pressure to produce a new play every year."

I asked Lee what aspects of ageing she feared most.

"I express things more in terms of what I'm going towards instead of what I'm fearful of or avoiding. So what motivates me – and this is partly through

meditation and Qigong (3) – is to move my attention away from fear to constant gratitude for what is and unconditional love. The first time I fell in love I realised I didn't know how to love anyone. I dedicated myself to learning how to love. The second time I fell in love I realised I didn't know how to love myself. I almost lost my life in an automobile accident because I didn't know how to love myself. And I realised that I had to wake up to who I really am or I might accidentally kill myself. Consciousness without drugs was what I dedicated my life to. I used to be a very harsh, demanding critic of myself. Teaching meditation has been a tremendous gentle, humbling opening of my heart. I think that's why Rodney and I decided to get married. We were both on this journey of loving each other and the world unconditionally – It's not always easy! I think Donald Trump is an awkward blessing to the American people. They are waking up to their own greatness; they are fighting back, they are actively standing up for each other and what we collectively value: the Planet, freedom and peace. It's inspiring.'

The conversation turned to reading.

"I don't read as much as I used to. I rarely read novels. The last novel I read was James Robertson's amazing book, *The Professor of Truth*. Beautiful language is not enough for me. I'm interested in something that inspires. Or, as one of my students and closest friends said years ago, "Move towards what opens you." I read a lot of stuff on the web in following a thread of interest, sometimes about the various activists and political figures both here and in the U.S whom I support - financially when I can, and through meditation, and through various pressure groups and activities. I'm dedicated to promoting a culture of peace in my writing, political and personal life."

Several near-death experiences have awakened Lee's sense of what life is about.

“So death is my ally. It enables me to be better at life. Each time I came close to death – a car accident, being threatened with a knife, illness - I just accepted it. Letting go, not holding on, is something I practise regularly in meditation. Whatever emerges is what I deal with. Through Ascension meditation I feel I am able to rest in Nothingness and Silence without fear.”

In reply to my question about the gifts that accompany ageing, Lee says:

“I am learning to see slowing down as a gift. I used to have very little patience. I was a New Yorker, trying to pack it all in. I am learning patience and to give myself space. Other gifts that have come in later life are deeper self-knowledge and feeling connected, both to my true self and the Grand Design. Recently I asked an ageing artist friend what was most important to him. And he said, “Gratitude. I’m so grateful I’m alive. So many people I know have died just in the last year.” I feel the same way. I’m so grateful that I can love unconditionally, that I can have pain without popping pills or suffering, that I am more present. I don’t know what lies ahead, but I’m grateful for what is now and just to go with the flow.”

Since passing seventy, which of her plays have given her the most pride and satisfaction?

“I am proud of my whole body of work and the way it has evolved from community theatre to professional productions. I feel I have produced some great work. It’s difficult to pick out just one. I am proud of everything the Elements World Theatre has produced since I founded it in 1992.

I have to mention *Theseus and the Minotaur: A Love Story* (2012) and *Lockerbie Lost Voices* (2013), which I did for the 25th anniversary of the Lockerbie air disaster. Although I didn’t realise it until recently, my whole life expresses a longing to connect with the Divine, but religion never quite hit the spot. In my

play, *Messages From a Mental Institution* (2014) I felt I had connected with the Divine. The mental institution of the title is the chattering monkey mind we accept as life and as our true selves. In the play, a woman's husband has disappeared and in her search for him she believes he's sending her messages from a mental institution. She wants to help him, but she doesn't know where he is or why he's there. She looks everywhere and consults various authorities, all played by the same actor who plays her husband. Where is this mental institution? Who is really sending the messages and why? An absurd, surreal production with plenty of laughs invites the audience to leave their preconceptions behind and be totally unprepared for whatever happens. And, of course, there is my newest work, *Reflections of a Constant Monk* with its parables and surprises – totally different from anything I've ever written or produced before and for the first time in almost 20 years that I'm actually presenting my own work on stage.”

Lee's advice to those approaching later life is, “Be present and stay committed to your heart's deepest desire regardless of whether you ‘think’ it's possible. Just see what happens and trust yourself I feel that, in later life, we have an opportunity to “return,” not to childhood but to our essence, to whom we truly are, forgetting what we've learned and remembering who we truly are as human beings.”

NOTES

1. **A koan** is a riddle or puzzle that Zen Buddhists use during meditation to help them unravel greater truths about the world and about themselves.
2. **Gestalt therapy** is an existential/experiential form of psychotherapy that emphasizes personal responsibility, and that focuses upon the individual's experience in the present moment, the therapist–client relationship, the

environmental and social contexts of a person's life, and the self-regulating adjustments people make as a result of their overall situation

3. **Qigong** is a holistic system of coordinated body posture and movement, breathing and meditation used for health, spirituality, and martial arts training.

A sample of work done since passing 70

From ***Theseus and the Minotaur: A Love Story***. Dialogue between Theseus and the Minotaur. The theme is Love.

MINOT I'm everything you'd want to be.

THESEUS Man or Beast? A false dichotomy.

MINOT Now you can see the beauty of me.
Now you can see I'm all humanity.

THESEUS Man, Beast, God...

MINOT Theseus, you're decidedly odd.
Don't forget you're here to cut off my Bullish head,
Not fall in love with me.

THESEUS Forget? Not me. Who am I killing?

MINOT Is it the Beast you want dead? Something you imagined or
Something I said?

THESEUS or the blindly frightened Monster swirling around in my head?

MINOT: What took you so long to see your fear?
Now see in me all that you care for.
Face me, embrace me. Embrace all that I am.

THESEUS I know you, you arrogant Monster.

MINOT What a laugh. You're confused. You're here to be consumed
by your own arrogance.

THESEUS I'm here to end your gluttony.

MINOT I'm immortal, the Sun God of the Cretans.

King Minos and I are one:
The Bull is Sun, Fertile, Rich, Life giving, eternal in Nature.
I am the Creator / the Destroyer in One.
. I will always live in the minds of men and women
They long for me eternally as they wander through the
Labyrinth of memories and mundane fears.

THESEUS: I come in peace, Great Minotaur.

MINOT: Really? Which piece? The rump, the tongue or the brains?
I eat it all!

THESEUS: I admire you, great Minotaur.

MINOT: Of course you do. How nice. I've heard that one before.
Pass the salt,

THESEUS: No thanks.

MINOT: The mustard too.

THESEUS: I'm not hungry.

MINOT: I have a treat in store for you.

THESEUS: No, thanks.

MINOT: I have longevity, beauty, youth, power and lots more.

THESEUS: But no friends.