

# “Still Learning”: One Couple’s Literacy Development in Older Adulthood

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## KEYWORDS

adult literacy learners; intertwined trajectory; writing trajectories; lifespan development of writing; ongoing desire for literacy; roles of literacy

**F**or Chief, a seventy-seven-year-old African American man who became literate later in life, writing development has taken an unusual trajectory. As an adult basic learner motivated by a lifelong desire to become more literate, his investment in writing and reading is largely influenced by his wife’s daily practices. During an interview with Chief and his wife Shirley (pseudonyms), I asked Chief about the significance of Shirley’s literate activities. Although they were both present for the conversation, Chief answered this particular question, while Shirley interjected occasional expressions of agreement.

Lauren: I was just wondering how important it is to you that she loves to read and write—in your life together, in your marriage together? Does that matter a lot to you?

Chief: Oh, yes—

L: —That she loves it so much?

C: I love it. I love to see her doing things like that. Not only that, it helps me out. She helps me out a lot. . . . I uh, she helped me out a lot when I first started. But now, I don’t go to her. I go to the dictionary, get my words out [In the background, Shirley confirms: “Yeah”], a lot of words out [S: “Yeah”], that I do now [S: “Yes, um”]. When I started, she was helping me out a lot. And it looked like, it was keeping her away from a lot of work that she wants to do in the house. But now, I don’t think I went to her, for uh, sometime I might go to her actually, but usually I can do it myself. Go to the dictionary, or something I want to know, or uh, something I want to spell, or spell it right, I get the dictionary. And I learn it myself.

For Shirley, who is also African American and retired, writing development has taken a more traditional path. She was born in Austin, Texas, into a military family, spent her early years in Guam, then moved to Springfield, Massachusetts, when her father was stationed at the nearby Air Force base. She recalls that growing up in Guam there wasn’t much to do. “As a youngster, we always, we learned to read. . . . When I got to first grade, I was already reading at a third-grade level.” Shirley also

loved to write. “I learned to write backwards! . . . I used to get a kick out of that.” She would amuse herself by writing right-to-left, then turning the paper over to admire her writing flipped to the correct direction. She adds that even though she is left-handed, “I taught myself how to write with my right hand . . . I’m even-handed . . . I can use the right hand just like I use the left hand.”

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In this essay, I consider Chief and Shirley’s engagement with writing, and with one another, as part of their uniquely intertwined life trajectories. By looking at one couple’s trajectories as writers during older adulthood, I bring together the exploratory interests of the emerging fields of lifespan development of writing and age studies as they pertain to literacy studies in composition. In both

areas, scholars look across disciplinary perspectives for a deeper understanding of development. Lifespan studies centers on the longitudinal development of writers. Age studies, which also looks qualitatively across time, focuses on bodies and how they are socially constructed, leaning away from medical definitions of personhood toward more cultural perspectives on what it means to age, to change, throughout a lifetime (Katz). In this regard, the two fields merge and can inform our understanding of how people relate to self, one another, and cultural representations of body, health, and their own capabilities. Although researchers in Lifespan Studies assert that there are many paths toward writing, and that writing development is individual (Bazerman et al., “Taking the Long View”), research in this area so far (see Bazerman et al., *The Lifespan Development*) tends to assume conventional pathways, such as access to public schooling with its age- and grade-level markers of development. Because Chief’s educational experiences are so far removed from—even opposed to—a typical trajectory toward literacy development, and because I was curious about the role of literacy in his marriage to the quite-literate Shirley, I was compelled by the following questions. I wanted to find out how the literate interactions of this couple demonstrate their ongoing desire for literacy especially in their ordinary interactions; how the reading and writing practices of the more literate partner in a couple impact the less literate partner, and vice versa; and what they can tell composition researchers about writing development across the lifespan, particularly for an older couple in which one partner has become more literate later in life.

In describing the social development of identity and agency, social psychologist Glenn H. Elder, Jr., argues that, “Indeed, we now see that the implications of early adult choices extend even into the later years of retirement and old age . . . from the adequacy of economic resources to adaptive skills and activities. The later years of aging cannot be understood in depth without knowledge of the prior life course” (5). Elder’s research on life-course development (which influences Deborah Brandt’s work on the shifting literacy practices of working adults), concentrates on the trajectories

that determine experience and thus enable or constrain one's choices. He asserts that, "Transitions are always embedded in trajectories that give them distinctive form and meaning" (5). In my ongoing studies of the literacy practices of adult learners, I am interested in the material, historical, and social experiences that shape relationships to literacy. Therefore, in this article, I adopt Elder's idea of trajectories to look at the interlocking pathway of a married couple. Their literate interactions are especially provocative because they have had such different individual experiences with formal and informal education. By partnering with Chief thirty-seven years ago, Shirley joined him in navigating a path that interweaves their individual histories with their current and ongoing relationship to reading and writing. It was this overlap that I sought to understand by meeting with them together.

## Looking Back to Look Ahead

Chief, who was raised on a sharecropper's farm in rural South Carolina during the 1950's, had limited exposure to formal education, although he always craved opportunities to read and write. Despite his occasional access, and the segregated conditions of schooling when it was available, Chief was able to make a decent living because of his extensive early work experiences and the skills he developed as a laborer. During his long career, he worked as a welder and a forklift operator. He owned his first home at the age of seventeen and sent his children to college. Only after he retired following a motorcycle accident that injured his back, did he become able to study. At that time, Chief began to seek informal education at a number of adult learning centers in Springfield, the city where he has resided for most of his adult life. In the fifteen years since then, Chief has become an avid writer and reader. He was editor of the newsletter at one literacy center and involved in a family literacy program there. He has been committed to circulating his writing among known and unknown audiences so that more people can learn about the importance of learning from his example. And, he has been a successful singer-songwriter. (For more on Chief, see Rosenberg *The Desire for Literacy*.)

For more than a dozen years, I have been studying and writing about adult basic literacy learners in order to understand the ongoing purposes that people have for pursuing literacy, especially writing, when it is not motivated by dominant functions such as getting a better job, credential, or becoming a different kind of participant in society (see Rosenberg *Desire*, "Retelling Culture," "You Have to Knock"; Rosenberg and Branch "A Conversation"). This research began with a study of older adults who attended an informal learning center; it has progressed longitudinally because of my continuing relationships with the original participants.

In 2015, after publishing a monograph on this research, I contacted the participants so that I might meet with them and give them the book. Chief took this opportunity to reexamine his own writing and extend our former research project by offering new insights into his texts and reflections on his identity as a writer over the last few years. In other words, he disrupted our previous relationship of researcher and researched and steered it in a new direction that he chose.

During that visit to Chief's house, I was introduced to the vibrant Shirley, whom I had only heard described before by Chief. Relaxing on the sofa after an early morning stint volunteering at

the local food pantry, Shirley was effusive about her lifelong love of reading. Her passion for literate activity includes the personal and the practical. For example, as a home care nurse's aide for most of her career, Shirley engaged in the daily practices she needed to provide care for her clients, which included managing their household and bank accounts, paying bills, driving the car, and even having power of attorney. She explained that the agency she worked for was unregulated, which was why she carried responsibilities outside her training. Once Shirley realized that the company was swindling their customers, she reported them, and they were sued for bilking the elderly. The agency closed down, and eventually it was Shirley who inherited her clients' property. She sold the property, which "gave me a chance to move into the neighborhood I wanted to live in," and she bought her house with Chief.

While I listened to her describe her literacy habits that day in their living room, I wondered whether it was Shirley's practical intelligence combined with her enthusiasm for writing and reading that made literacy education so desirable to Chief. I recalled a discussion I had had with him during our earlier interviews, in which we discussed a pattern I'd heard talk of at the literacy center where we had met: that it is common in traditional marriages for women to be more literate than their male partners and that a change in one partner's writing development can cause a significant disruption. When I reminded Chief of this conversation, Shirley exclaimed that this was not the case for them. Conditions in their lives improved as Chief acquired more literacy. Afterwards, I could not stop thinking about Chief and Shirley together, the way she reclined on the sofa telling her story while I spoke with Chief about the book. Chief and Shirley's interaction that day sparked the current study on what the roles of literacy have been, and continue to be, as they age together.

On the surface, Chief and Shirley present as a heteronormative, retired African American couple in their late seventies and late sixties. But by looking into their literate interactions—specifically at the ways that Chief identifies himself as someone "still learning" at the same time that Shirley maintains her "hands and [my] brain" through daily writing and reading—we can more fully understand the range of possibilities for what writing means and does. My goal in reviewing Chief's early educational experiences is to emphasize that, because of racial and economic oppression, it was impossible for him to become literate through expected channels. His material and social experiences oppose mainstream conceptions of how writing should develop. Yet Shirley, who has identified as literate throughout her lifetime, turns Chief's pathway in a unique direction. Together, they can help literacy researchers in Lifespan and Age Studies understand the unconventional paths that writing development can take in older age, not just for an individual but for a couple, and see the value in looking at writing development as always emergent.

## Adult Learners, Lifespan Studies, and Literacies of Older Age

Chief's experience is not so unusual. Recent data from the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies reveals that approximately 3.5 million (1 in 6) US adults is considered "low literacy"; of that group, "almost one-third of black adults age 65 and younger have low literacy" (Block and Peñaloza). These numbers are a reminder of why it is important to confront

inequities in our education system and support the efforts of quality adult basic education programs that concentrate on learners' needs and interests rather than on General Education Development (GED) test and workforce preparation.

Becoming a writer has allowed Chief to counter his personal oppression as well as the historic oppression of his community of African Americans. Rhea Lathan, in *Freedom Writing*, addresses the experiences of African Americans whose spoken and written voices have been historically ignored or hidden, implying that literacy researchers must address the writing development of those on the margins as well as within the mainstream in order to counter a dominant narrative that writing instruction begins in school and then continues, enhanced by personal, professional, and civic demands. Medicine, health, and age studies scholar Aimi Hamraie adds that accountability toward race is essential to scholarship on aging and disability, and that we must look into these critical intersections because of the "overwhelming whiteness of mainstream disability (and aging) scholarship." Chief exemplifies how some individuals who have been prevented from having a voice can keep studying and developing their literacy as a means of undoing that oppression. Shirley has important supporting and contributing roles in this endeavor. As a more competent, confident writer, she models her capabilities for both of them, thus countering Chief's oppression and the oppression of her people.

In reflecting on my interactions with Chief and Shirley, I turn to a lifespan development of writing approach to exploring writing in older adulthood. This nascent field seeks to get an integrated picture of people and their writing across their lives, in relation to the experiences that determine their pathways, such as schooling (or its absence in Chief's case), family relationships, material effects such as war and poverty, and work (Bazerman et al., *The Lifespan Development*; Bazerman et al., "Toward an Understanding"). The authors of "Taking the Long View" point out that longitudinal lifespan studies can help us to understand how, "Trajectories of writing development are intertwined with trajectories of intellectual, professional, and personal development, such that writing development contributes to personal uniqueness" (353), something I have suggested in framing Shirley and Chief's common trajectory. While my focus in this project is on Chief and Shirley as a couple who maintain and support one another's literacy practices, it is important to contextualize their activities among the overall interactions of daily life that involve maintaining the self, care for family and community, as well as nurturing intelligence.

While the lifespan group generally refers to age/grade levels of school, there is little research so far in this field that looks at older people continuing their development as productive writers, the assumption being that people who have had these abilities all their lives can simply go on until they cannot (see Rumsey). Although I have worked with populations of adult learners for some time, the reality of participants' aging minds and bodies, combined with their position as subjects that are no longer viewed as relevant in the workplace, presents a specific situation. Within age studies, Suzanne Kesler Rumsey, Ruth E. Ray, Lauren Marshall Bowen, and Donora Hillard state in a chapter on service-learning projects with older writers, that composition scholars and teachers should, "re-think their meanings of 'community' and 'collaboration' and re-consider writing as an act of collaborative risk-taking, experimentation, and imagination. Teaching and learning across the

divides of age and ability remind us that writing is, above all, a living social act” (205). They refer to the value of writing and agency of the writer even as the writer may be declining physically and/or cognitively.

A few other studies look into the writing produced by writers at the end of life, such as Catherine Schryer, Allan McDougall, Glendon R. Tait, and Lorelei Lingard’s project on “dignity interviews.” Joining together rhetorical genre studies with palliative care research, the authors consider how a person’s life-story transcript can have therapeutic and agentive benefits. The individual is no longer developing as a writer, but writing is generated in the form of transcripts of their recorded interviews. The value of this work lies in its attention to the agency of the writer, something that Rumsey, and Rumsey et al., emphasize as well. That age studies takes a reflexive approach, often looking back and reflecting on the writer’s agency, as it considers growth of the person across the life course, strikes me as one of the strengths of this field (see also, Ruth Ray’s *Beyond Nostalgia*). Stephen Katz explains that this stance defines the field of age studies, noting that the critical reflexivity of gerontology work is important for studies in the humanities that take up its approach: “. . . one looks forward and backward, outward and inward at the same time.”

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Brandt extends the lifespan approach by contributing perspectives from “life course” research, explaining that this area of social psychology and sociology emphasizes that “development comes to people through the roles they play or are

expected to play at different times of life. . . . [D]evelopment is defined in terms of changes that occur in relationships between people and their life worlds over time, changes that gather lasting consequence for the workings of those relationships going forward” (245). She notes that while life course scholarship concentrates on distinguishable life stages, it is a valuable perspective to bring to writing studies because of its attention to multiple, simultaneous roles that people play, and how, by inhabiting complex roles they build their trajectories (251).

When I speak of Chief and Shirley’s entwined trajectory, I am thinking of their individual writing development as well as their daily interactions with literacy that intersect and overlap, in ordinary ways. Practical purposes can include emails to grandchildren (usually sent by Shirley to confirm that they arrived home from school), short notes and lists left for one another, though Shirley and Chief comment that now that they carry cell phones with them they tend to call one another from the car or store rather than communicate through writing. Less frequent purposes for writing might include Shirley or Chief composing personal letters to relatives, Chief completing homework for his Monday morning tutoring session, or Shirley working on a document for her church. These individual activities come together in what Steve Graham calls “writing communities,” noting that a community can be constituted by as few as two members, even spouses, and that people participate in multiple writing communities that are determined by the purposes for writing. According to Graham’s model,

the community in which writing takes place and the cognitive capabilities and resources of those who create writing simultaneously shape and constrain the creation of written text. [W]riting cannot be fully understood without considering how the communities in which it takes place and those involved in creating it evolve, including how community and individuals reciprocally influence each other. (272-73)

While Shirley and Chief compose individually, usually for different purposes, they are not disengaged from one another. Writing, like many life practices they share, indicates commitment, personal and practical, and suggests their collaboration as a couple. For example, while Chief struggles with the physical and cognitive acts of writing, Shirley's competence encourages him. They both refer fondly to the amusing stories he wrote while he was a student at Read/Write/Now, stories that have entertained them and their relatives and friends.

## Disrupting the Balance of the More Literate/Less Literate Partner

I met with Chief and Shirley for a single interview, keeping my knowledge of Chief from our years of research together at the front of my mind as I considered his current literacy practices in relation to those of his wife and vice versa. I observed Chief and Shirley at home where they assumed the interview would take place. Using narrative inquiry (Connelly and Clandinin) and deep interview analysis (Seidman), I reflected upon our conversation as illustrative of a collaboration in which we interact as composers and collaborators (Graham). After a long writing partnership with Chief in which we have *mutually contemplated* his texts, I was interested to see how Shirley would join us. When I speak of mutual contemplation, I refer to a co-interpretive act of reflection on situations and texts that can involve lingering together without an immediate response (see Rosenberg *Desire*; Rosenberg and Howes 82). In addition to Chief and Shirley's entwined trajectory with one another, they also have a trajectory with me as a researcher who has been involved with them across time.

During this visit, Shirley does most of the talking. She and I sit side-by-side on the couch while Chief is a few feet away in his recliner. The television is on, but no one is watching. We talk casually for close to an hour before recording. I expect that Shirley and Chief will exhibit the kind of "rapport" talk that Deborah Tannen attributes to intimates who overlap and interrupt as they contribute to a conversation together, but they mainly take turns. Once we focus closely on Shirley's texts, Chief withdraws from the discussion, dozing briefly. In addition to recording the interview, I have collected Shirley's letters and the holiday cards that she has sent as supplemental writing samples, and I have planned to discuss some of the content during the interview; however, Shirley introduces another text of her choice into the conversation (I explain below), and this document becomes our focus.

Chief continually brings up the shaking in his hands, a tremor that I don't perceive, but which he says is getting worse. He asks Shirley to sign the consent forms for him. Although he is mostly alert throughout the conversation, he indicates ways that he has slowed. He no longer works part-time as a small van driver, and he has stopped singing with his men's gospel choir. Chief claims to have breathing problems now, to be "short wind." His breathing difficulty is symptomatic of Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), which he probably developed working as a welder. Despite

indications that he is aging and doing less, he diligently goes once a week to a neighborhood social service center called Gray House for one-on-one literacy tutoring. In earlier conversations, he has insisted that studying is what he wants to do with the rest of his life, and he remains true to that promise.

The majority of my interactions with Chief occurred while he attended the Read/Write/Now Adult Learning Center, which I have always thought of as an innovative site; yet now I hear Chief speak critically of the library-based,

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city- and state-funded program. At Read/Write/Now, Chief recalls, “if you’re doing the lessons, like math or something. You get the basics of it, but you don’t get, it seems like, something that you got to stay there a little longer so it get to sink in . . .” After reviewing a concept in math, for example, “They push you on to something else. But, *hey!* I learned a lot. But I had to rush.” Studying at home when he was a student at Read/Write/Now required that he turn to Shirley as mentor, a pattern they followed until Chief became able to alter it. He recalls, “She helped me out a lot when I first started. But now, I don’t go to her. I go to the dictionary, get my words out, a lot of words out, that I—. When I started, she was helping me out a lot. And it looked like, there was a lot of work that she was doing. But now . . . usually I can do it myself.”

Shirley’s enthusiasm for reading is apparent in their physical space. Within the living room, for example, there are religious books on side tables and holiday cards displayed along the door frame (it is just after New Year’s when we meet). Shirley remarks that the cards she likes best are the ones with a bit of scripture or a personal note inside. She gestures toward one of the back bedrooms where Chief studies, his “computer room,” where he comments, “I can do my writing.”

The model Shirley has provided for Chief, and the support she has given him as he disrupts the balance of the more literate/less literate partner, is expressed in our discussion about paying bills and using the mail. Chief claims that the greatest benefit he gained from studying at Read/Write/Now was learning the math skills he needed to pay bills:

C: I really learned. I learned so much. . . . the best thing happened to me when I learned how to write my own bills—make my own bills. Cause she [referring to Shirley], she got tired. She pushing too. She got tired of it. Writing all my checks, paying bills. She got tired. So, . . . I learned to do it. It was a blessing to me too.

L: That’s great. [Turning to Shirley:] What was that like for you?

Shirley: Well, I, I said, “Now, you’re going to school now, now you’re going to learn how to do some things for yourself. Now you doing—that’s going to help me too.” So, we got the checkbook out, and he learned how to, showed him how to use the register, how to record

the number of the check, and write the check, and balance his checkbook, and things like that. And, he understood it very well. And, from that day forward, he was able to do it. So, it was a good teaching; it was a good learning. And, it was a good help to me.

L: Before that, did you have to do all the financial stuff?

S: I did. I did all the financial things. And, kept up an accurate account of everything that was going in, everything that was coming out. But then that was a lot of pressure on me, because any time there was any question about anything, then it was, "See my wife. See my wife." You know. That was on me. You know? So, I'm going to teach you how to do some of this so, you don't have to come to me. You know, you learn how to go to the file cabinet. We got a file cabinet in there; everything was filed, and uh, be able to retrieve all this information, instead of going, "Hey, Shirley, where's this? Where's that? Where's this?" You know. It was a good thing for both of us.

Both Chief and Shirley's remarks indicate that Shirley carried too much responsibility as the partner capable of managing all their literate activities. Their comments show that Chief's developing literacy has been beneficial to their marriage. I asked Chief if it felt good to him to pick up some of the financial responsibilities. His response:

C: It make you feel better that you know how to do something that means something to you. To write checks and to pay your bills. That's the first time that I had to ever start paying my own bills. I went and paid it by cash.

S: Mm hmm. And, I also taught him how to use the mail. How you don't have to run to all these places. To the cable company, or, . . . to the electric company. To here, to here. How to address an envelope, put a stamp on it, let it go [she claps her hands together in a gesture of finality]. Whereas, before he would go out and go to all these places to pay his bills.

L: [to Chief:] You would go with cash to the places?

C: Mm hmm.

L: So, that was a big change.

S: That was a big change. It would take a whole day to run around to all these places, which was unnecessary.

For Chief, becoming more literate means the ability to change his social habits as he wishes. He no longer has to devote a day to driving around the city to pay his debts in cash in person. While readers who are accustomed to online or automatic bill paying may find Shirley's method of recording checks, filing papers in a file cabinet, and sending off snail mail quaint, the contrast between Chief's ways and hers is significant. Adjusting his ways of being and relating with his wife and the public are part of Chief's literacy development and an illustration of their intertwined practices. Further,

Shirley's remark that, "it was a good teaching; it was a good learning. And, it was a good help to me," demonstrates how changes in learning practices impact the couple as well as the individual. As Chief becomes more literate, Shirley is relieved of certain pressures. His changes shape her changes and the pathway of their entwined writing development.

And yet, Chief is losing memory and cognitive ability. He is troubled by back problems and by COPD. He frequently refers to the stroke he had about ten years ago, which left him with a tremor in his hands. When I ask him a question about writing development across his lifetime, he responds by remarking on the physical act of composing in the present moment:

L: How has writing changed for you over your life? . . . you didn't write for a long time, and then you did.

C: My shaking. I write now, and I can't even understand it myself. I don't believe that nobody else will understand it. But, I miss being able to write. Thinking about, when you writing, when you doing writing, you learn more new levels, and different words and everything.

L: Can you say that again? When you write, you learn more about writing?

C: Yeah, you learn more about, uh, you getting the right pronunciation and the right words, and spelling and all that.

L: So, when you're writing, you're thinking about writing?

C: Yeah.

L: And looking things up?

C: Yeah. I always keep a dictionary beside me. I had one here a while ago.

An interesting shift occurs as Chief and I communicate in this passage, each of us steering the conversation differently. Though I ask about writing development across time, Chief's response shows that his attention is on writing as a physical and cognitive act. His commitment to becoming more literate remains strong; however, his remarks suggest that the cognitive act of writing, which has always been challenging, is becoming even more difficult as it is complicated by disability. Suzanne Kesler Rumsey refers to this tendency to "hold onto literacy" as an important means of retaining "dignity, independence, and agency"; however, she is quick to add that holding onto literacy also means acceptance of loss, including the "loss of literacy" (99). Chief is frustrated by his own deterioration, particularly by the sense that his limitations interrupt his writing development ("when you doing writing, you learn more new levels, and different words and everything"). His words suggest that Chief views writing as a pathway toward more writing, greater learning, and knowledge. As a result of his stroke and continuing decline, he can no longer maintain a smooth pathway. When he talks about knowing how to spell, or looking up and pronouncing the "right" words, he is literally

talking about the complexity of creating written words, the effort involved, something he is losing the ability to achieve, but which already required a lot of effort. In Chief's case, unlike Shirley's, writing, even spelling the words, requires cognitive and physical effort; yet, while Chief ages, he simultaneously develops as a learner, reminding us why it is important not to evaluate literacy development based on signs of progress; rather, we can look at shifts within the writer for a more comprehensive picture of writing and reading behaviors as continuing to emerge—as well as to decline—during the course of a person's life.

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## Writing as the Craft of a Precise Hand and an Agile Mind

Reading and writing have always been activities that Shirley embraces. In a letter that she sent to me when I was first getting to know her, Shirley presented herself as a writer: “I love to write. I am the secretary at my church and all my business papers are handwritten. I’m not so into the new technology. I like to use my hands and my brain. I am 67 years old myself so I have to use my brain and stay active.” Shirley is emphatic about maintaining physical and mental health through challenging activity—most significantly, through writing. She associates technology with inactivity, assuming that machines replace the work of the hands and the mind. When she speaks of writing by hand, she conflates the physical act of handwriting with the action of producing text. To Shirley, writing is crafted by hand to display the work of an agile mind.

Age and disability studies scholar Erin Gentry-Lamb points to a cultural “disavowal of disability” that privileges a narrative of the healthy, still physically active older person who is not hampered by disability or disease. This narrative is reinforced by texts like Mary Catherine Bateson’s *Composing a Further Life*, which celebrate “Adulthood II” as a time of opportunity when people may be unencumbered from responsibilities such as work or parenting, yet without emphasis on the deterioration that accompanies aging. In Chief’s case, it is clear that, while he continues to develop as a writer and reader, his current trajectory is nonlinear because of cognitive and physical decline. But Shirley is able to control her body and mind, and by maintaining herself, she cares for them both.

For Shirley, like Chief, writing sometimes means the physical act of handwriting on the page; however, Shirley defines writing in multiple ways. She may refer to cognitive ability at moments; in other instances, she discusses writing as an interpretive act. Shirley shuttles back and forth between these definitions and functions of writing as she gives an extended example of her competence as a writer:

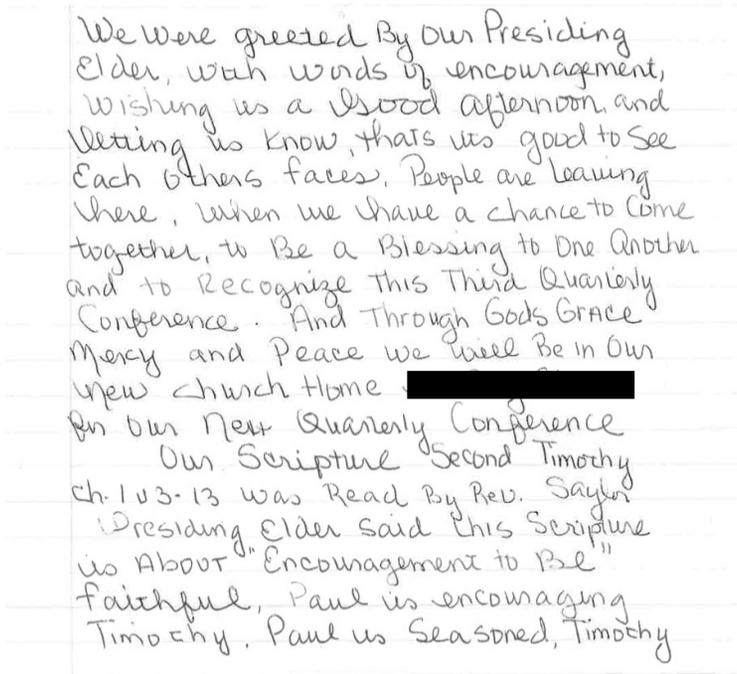
S: I am the secretary of the part in our church, which is very important. This is when we have our big business meetings. And usually, all this information requires me to be on a computer, and typing and things like that, and *I have chose to continue to use my hands. So, everything that I do, and all the little things that are done, is, are always printed.*

L: You mean, printed in handwriting?

S: Handwritten. Handwritten. . . . A lot of people would, "Oh, no. I'm not accepting this. I want it typed." But [our presiding elder] could just not believe how I print those minutes. And sometimes I, if it was typed, it probably would be done in two or three pages. And sometimes my minutes are seven and eight pages. And the time that I put in to do it. There is not one mistake in them. And [our presiding elder] really has—it really makes me feel good when he gets up before the congregation and says, "I wish you guys would see. Pass these minutes around. I want everyone to take a look at 'em." You know. And even down to the pastor—

L: He passes your minutes?

S: I'm going to show you.



We were greeted By our Presiding Elder, with words of encouragement, wishing us a good afternoon, and letting us know, that its good to see each others faces. People are leaving here, when we have a chance to come together, to be a blessing to one another and to recognize this third quarterly conference. And through Gods Grace mercy and peace we will be in our new church home. [REDACTED]

for our next quarterly conference  
Our Scripture Second Timothy ch. 1:13-14 was read by Rev. Saylor  
Presiding Elder said this Scripture is about "Encouragement to be faithful, Paul is encouraging Timothy. Paul is seasoned, Timothy

Fig. 1. Excerpt from Shirley's introduction to the minutes of the quarterly meeting. (Identifying information redacted.)

Shirley highlights the precision of her own work, the attention to detail that allows her to produce a lengthy error-free text, and the quality of her writing (Fig. 1). Her minutes are so well written, that the presiding elder circulates them around the congregation. Shirley's writing thus serves as a model for others of serious engagement with the church. For a moment she excuses herself, then she returns to the room with a copy of the quarterly meeting minutes and reads aloud her narrative of introduction:

We were greeted by our Presiding Elder with words of encouragement, wishing us a good afternoon and letting us know that its good to see each others faces. People are leaving here. When we have a chance to come together, to be a blessing to one another and to recognize this third quarterly conference. And through God's Grace Mercy and Peace we will be in our new church home for our next Quarterly Conference.

Our scripture Second Timothy ch. 1 v. 3-13 was read by Rev. Warner. Presiding Elder said this scripture is about 'Encouragement to Be' faithful. Paul is encouraging Timothy. Paul is seasoned. Timothy was from good stock, he was letting Timothy know at times you have to stir up that gift that God has given you, you have to fan into flame, for God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love, and self discipline.

So we know our gift we have to fan it back to flame and help each other. Go "Guard your Gift." "Hold fast to it." "Cherish your gift."

We as a church are going to be considered in a way we weren't before. When you step now really step. "Do justice to the blessing".

The minutes blend the transcription that Shirley creates without a recording, information that she documents in her notes, and a carefully composed narrative. Not only does she reproduce portions of the presiding elder's words to those church members present at the meeting, she selects the passages to include and combines them into a narrative that introduces the event in her own words. The minutes are Shirley's interpretation of the meeting rather than a straightforward account. She explains:

S: This is all my own rewording. ... I put it in my own words. I go over my minutes, and then I put it in my own wording.

L: [referring to the text] So, this is something that the pastor may have talked about at the meeting? ... But, you wrote this introduction—

S: Then I do the introduction. Now, right here is when all the business comes to order: "The third quarterly conference is now called to order by our presiding elder at 4:30 p.m." And then it goes on to the next order of business: "This is the reading of the minutes, from the second quarterly conference held on December third, twenty-sixteen, by our conference secretary, Sister Shirley Dawson, for the twenty-sixteen, twenty-seventeen conference year. Presiding elder asks for a motion on the reading of the minutes from the Quarterly Conference held on December third, twenty-sixteen. ..."

Shirley continues to read from the minutes and to describe the process of giving and accepting

reports, all of which is documented in her text. She interrupts her review to make a point about her role as recording secretary:

S: I have been the quarterly conference secretary (I think) this might about be my twelfth or my thirteenth year, and they *all know* that when I am taking these minutes that I'm serious. The first thing they have to do is tell me who's speaking. Cause I'm writing. I don't have time to look up and see who it is. But there have been incidents where there were some little commotions going on in the church, and people weren't happy about this and that and the other; and, I let them know before it started: I am going to be recording everything that's said, so if you *don't* want it to be read, don't say it. . . . Oh, they were talking about this person and talking about the pastor and doing all this, that, and the other. But you know what I did? When it came that time for that next meeting, and it was time for me to read those minutes—Lauren, I was so ashamed to read those minutes, but these people were so headstrong and so bad. “Well, if you wrote it—” I said, “You know what? I'm going to tell you something.” I said, “I'm really ashamed to read these minutes.” . . . I started reading those minutes, and I looked around that table, and everybody had their heads down. Well, you know what? You had the opportunity to keep your mouth shut, and so. It's kind of funny because they know that I'm going to record everything that's said, so, everybody's kind of on one accord now. A lot of your thoughts you keep to yourself. Because these minutes don't go to me; these minutes go all the way to the bishop. You know, so he sees all these things. So, people have learned to be a little more serious when it comes down to it.

I ask Shirley whether she perceives the work she is doing as simply recording, or if she believes she is crafting a narrative when she creates the minutes. We go back and forth between looking at documents and discussing her process, until she explains that part of the act of composing is producing a piece of writing that members of the congregation will read and understand. Various themes emerge in Shirley's account. As secretary, she is spectator, recorder, interpreter, and author. She alone creates a permanent narrative of the quarterly meeting. There is a moral component to Shirley's narrative as well. She holds church members accountable for their words and actions. As recording secretary, she is an arbiter of truth. She can decide to expose the inappropriate talk of others to teach a cautionary lesson about badmouthing fellow churchgoers: “If you *don't* want it to be read, don't say it.” Shirley concludes this section by agreeing that she is not “just being a recording secretary.” Accuracy is surely important to her, but her remarks about what people said in church reveal something else. She is documenting the behaviors of people in the congregation as well as documenting the words of the pastor. The responsibility she takes on as recording secretary is to create a text that encapsulates the truth of church members and their leaders. She warns her peers that she is observing. She has put herself into James Britton's spectator role, as Britton describes it when he distinguishes between the major positions writers take as participants in and spectators of their experiences: “as participants we APPLY our value systems, but as spectators we GENERATE AND REFINE the system itself” (157, emphasis in original). By choosing the position of spectator, Shirley permits herself—even assigns herself the obligation—of recollecting events as they occurred, of representing the truth as she perceives it, as she documents it through her own trustworthy

hand. When she composes the narrative of the report, it becomes her unconstrained account, her “rewording” of events as she experiences them, and her words go all the way up to the bishop.

Shirley’s rendition of her work as church secretary perfectly illustrates a point Brandt makes about the “role of role”: “Indeed when we look closely enough we can see that what people write and how they write it will embody an interpretation of role—what it calls for and what it makes possible or not at the time of composition—contributing to individual variation in writing” (255). In her detailed recounting of her experiences, recording, recalling, writing, and delivering that writing, Shirley demonstrates the elaborate way in which she inhabits the role of secretary. Being acknowledged by the elder pastor for her writing in that role helps to shape the role for her. She *is* the writer of minutes—a role she also determines, one that calls upon members of the church to pay attention to her words as well as to their own behaviors. For this role, she is rewarded with the respect of the church elders and admiration of her peers. Shirley can also admire her own accomplishments as a writer.

## Why Literacy Continues to Matter

In the final chapter of *Composing a Further Life*, Bateson defines wisdom as, “the fruit of continuing reflection on encounters over time, a skill at drawing connections and finding similarities, looking for underlying patterns” (234). This definition resonates with Shirley and Chief’s accounts of their ongoing relationship to literacy. They are active learners who express a commitment to nourishing themselves through older adulthood, and they regularly revise their patterns while making new connections. In Chief’s case, he has established a structure for continued informal schooling: every Monday he drives across the city for his one-on-one lesson with his teacher. He does this at the same time he is restricted by physical limitations and cognitive decline.

When I asked Chief whether it was important to him that Shirley loves to read and write, his immediate, “oh, yes” reinforced the significance of understanding their literate relationship. Shirley clearly inhabits the role of expert for this writing couple. She determines many of the tasks that matter, such as managing finances and recording appointments on the calendar. She encourages Chief to write emails and even to help her with some computer skills. Shirley is the one who mostly uses writing for personal correspondence, such as letter writing and composing holiday cards, yet Chief reflects on the written correspondence he used to keep up with his family members. Both of them express pleasure in maintaining relationships through letter writing.

While Chief’s loss of memory and cognitive function is undeniable, his signs of decline are balanced by a stubborn desire to be “still learning,” the impulse that has fueled his literacy learning throughout older adulthood. Shirley’s confidence and skill clearly inspire Chief. For example, in comparison with his own increasing inability to physically write, he praises Shirley’s precise hand: “That’s the way I would like to write.” Shirley’s literate activities reflect lifelong practices of turning to reading and writing to participate in the world. Reading and writing are activities she associates with communicating with others and sustaining herself individually and in communities. Because she has been practicing avidly all her life, Shirley approaches new tasks with curiosity and pleasure. She

brings her enthusiasm for writing into her relationship with Chief when she tells of her experiences. Shirley enjoys new literate challenges, one of which is supporting her husband's desire to get an education during retirement. By continually placing Shirley in the role of expert, Chief reminds her of the value of her literacy to both of them. She is his primary role model; yet, it is the two of them together who create an intertwined trajectory. When he is in the position of admiring Shirley's daily practices, Chief is also learning from her example, contributing to their common writing pathway.

Chief and Shirley provide a good example of how ongoing development of the individual writer depends on nurturing their relationships. Their commitment to writing is bolstered by awareness of their life partner as both writer and collaborator. It is important to remember that Chief's path to reading and writing has always been unconventional, and that it has been up to him to define the meaning and value of literacy. No educational institution or employer has provided him with a trajectory toward literacy; thus, he never takes reading and writing for granted. Shirley has a major role in helping Chief negotiate why literacy matters. This includes a commitment to keep demonstrating the significance of literacy so that it remains a vital pursuit for them both. Shirley's work as church secretary demonstrates her particular relationship to writing as a way of being in her community and of valuing herself.

Together, this couple can offer age studies of literacy in composition and lifespan development of writing an important model for why literacy matters as a continuing life practice among partners. Researchers in these fields can learn from Chief and Shirley to recognize the ways people co-inhabit writing practices throughout their lives. Chief shows how diverse writing development can be from childhood through older adulthood, that there is no prescribed pathway toward understanding how writing functions. Similarly, Shirley demonstrates that trajectories reflect the many interactions that compose relationships, and that these pathways reflect the whole of their combined experiences.

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