

# Critical Literacy for Older Adults: Engaging (and Resisting) Transformative Education as a United Methodist Woman

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## KEYWORDS

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Over the past several years, I've noticed a curious intersection of books on the shelves in my office and in my mother's house. As a member of my university's first-year common reading program, I reviewed potential selections like *Long Way Home: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* by Ishmael Beah, *Just Mercy: A Story of Redemption and Justice* by Bryan Stevenson, and *Enrique's Journey* by Sonia Nazario. Meanwhile, as a volunteer librarian, my mother was reviewing the annual lists of the United Methodist Women (UMW) Reading Program to select titles for her church library. An avid book collector, she often buys personal copies from the UMW list, which explains how the above books—along with others on topics like global water resources and microloans in developing countries—have come to be on her shelves. How does a liberal English professor at a state university in a rustbelt city end up reading the same kinds of books as a conservative, religious, eighty-one-year-old woman living in the rural south?

The answer lies, I believe, in certain shared values and goals of our institutions. While the United Methodist Women pursue transformative education for religious ends and my university operates in a secular context, both institutions have established programs of critical literacy for their members. The university's general education program promotes social responsibility, ethical and critical reasoning, and understanding of diversity. Students apply interdisciplinary perspectives to issues like climate change, health disparities, and poverty with the goal of understanding what it means to be a responsible citizen in an interconnected world. A liberal education such as this, argues the American Association of Colleges and Universities, promotes values and skills central to a democracy: the ability to understand the perspectives of others, respect for human dignity, and a commitment to active citizenship (Schneider).

The national organization of United Methodist Women embraces similar values. The UMW identifies transformative education as a central part of its mission, with emphasis on personal change that leads to social action. This educational mission extends to women of all ages, as the church operates on “the principle that ongoing faith development of midlife and older adults is critical for the transformation of the world” (United Methodist Church, “Discipleship”). Every four years, the UMW selects priority issues for service and advocacy such as economic inequality, human trafficking, global migration, and racial justice. The goals of their 2018 Reading Program are strikingly similar to the cultural diversity learning outcomes of my university's general education program: “[To]

inform, educate and raise the consciousness of women to our social, economic and political realities, including the inter-connectedness of race, class and gender in women's lives" (United Methodist Women, "2018 Reading List"). Given the similarities in the liberal education goals of my university and the transformative education goals of the United Methodist Women, the intersection of my mother's reading and my own makes sense. Both institutions seek to develop critical, reflective reading practices that lead to understanding of diversity, power, and inequities in the world.

To understand the connection between religious and secular critical education, we need look no further than the work of Paulo Freire, which has roots in both Marxism and radical Catholicism. Shari Stenberg argues that Freire's liberation theology shares common elements with critical pedagogy discourse as espoused by Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, and Ira Shor: "Each tradition is concerned with making visible and challenging arenas where human suffering is ignored as well as fostering in individuals a sense of agency and commitment to change" (275). Both traditions promote critique of social structures, understanding of diverse perspectives, and empowerment for marginalized people. Yet, as Stenberg points out, critical pedagogy has largely followed the modernist tradition of US higher education, which brackets off faith from educational practices (275-6). This approach obscures the interplay of religious and pedagogical theory: one might study Freire in the academy, for example, without ever examining how radical Catholicism influenced his work. Although scholars like Patricia Bizzell, Lizabeth Rand, Michael-John DePalma, and Elizabeth Vander Lei and Bonnie Kyburz have called for greater attention to the role faith plays in academic literacies, bracketing remains the norm for post-secondary teaching and scholarship.

Composition research on religious students has largely associated faith with resistance to critical pedagogy. When students engage their religious identities in first-year writing classes, there can be conflict. Some evangelical students have difficulty in negotiating the expectations of their composition classes, particularly in regard to pluralism (Ringer). Perhaps because of this difficulty, a significant percentage of instructors believe Christian students violate academic norms of critical thinking and tolerance (Thomson-Bunn). Shannon Carter states the case bluntly: "the evangelical Christianity with which a number of my students most identify functions—rhetorically, ideologically, practically—in ways that appear completely and irreconcilably at odds with my pedagogical and scholarly goals" (572). As a critical pedagogue, she hopes to foster critical consciousness and the ability to engage different perspectives; many of her evangelical students, however, resist these goals and view the academy as hostile to their Christian worldview. This perception is supported by the public discourse of conservative leaders, who view academics "as promoting agendas of 'secular humanism' and 'cultural relativism'" (575). Like Carter, Heather Thomson-Bunn sees "the competing discourses of Christianity and composition" as a source of conflict between instructors and students (278). In *Toward a Civic Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism*, Sharon Crowley frames this conflict more broadly as she analyzes the impasse between academic liberalism and Christian fundamentalism and underscores the lack of common ground between these two powerful discourses.

The story of religion and critical literacy, then, is commonly told as a conflict narrative in academic and popular venues. Philip Marzluf argues that this narrative operates on multiple levels:

Composition research, teacher lore, and politically conservative commentary about U.S

higher education use the conflict narrative in order to express assumptions about pedagogy, literacy, and the values of colleges and universities, constructing “stock figures” (Helmets, 1994) of secular, liberal teachers and their narrative counterparts, fundamentalist Christian and conservative students. (2-3)

In the conservative version of this narrative, college instructors seek to destroy the faith of students; in the liberal version, intolerant students reject essential values of higher education. One thing remains constant in both versions: the conflict narrative depends on a view of religion and critical education as incompatible. Dominant cultural narratives such as this one provide ready-made structures through which experiences are organized and meaning is created. The more powerful the cultural narrative, the more difficult it becomes to express alternative perspectives and even to imagine counternarratives.

And yet there are my mother’s bookshelves, where faith and critical literacy sit side by side. The more she and I talked about these books, the more I saw her experience with the UMW Reading Program as a challenge to prevailing views of critical literacy, religion, and aging. What might we

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learn from an older adult’s literacy practices in a nonacademic setting where bracketing is *not* the norm, where faith and critical education are intertwined? As a critical reader, my mother appears to be doubly

deficit: the conflict narrative defines her faith as an obstacle to critical consciousness, and her status as an older adult is commonly associated with increasing conservatism and intolerance (Chamorro-Premuzic). Yet she does engage in critical literacy—in a process full of stops and starts, contradictions and dissonance. She negotiates perspectives that challenge a set of strongly held beliefs she has developed over eight decades, drawing on church-sponsored literacy practices to guide her. Her story complicates the conflict narrative that places religion at odds with critical literacy and offers insight into the complex nature of belief, value, and change in older adults.

My research included an extended face-to-face interview and multiple follow-up conversations with my mother, whom I’ll refer to as Janice in the body of this essay. Using an informal and collaborative interview style, I hoped to create an environment that would elicit “small stories” that allow the expression of “important thoughts, reactions, and other experiences of aging that are outside of the grand master narratives of age” (de Medeiros 79). My stance as a researcher was inevitably affected by my position as a daughter, particularly because my mother and I talked about issues on which she and I have long disagreed. I tried (not always successfully) to practice what Krista Ratcliffe calls rhetorical listening, “a conscious choice to assume an open stance” to foster “identifications across commonalities and differences” (26). In other words, I tried to stop arguing with my mother and start listening to her. After our interview, I shared the transcript with her as well as early drafts of this essay, which led to many discussions that clarified details and shaped interpretations. My analysis has been influenced by my commitment to critical literacy and my work

as a university professor, as well as the deep respect I have for my mother's desire to live a life of spiritual growth.

## Church and School: Cultural Foundations of Literacy

Janice's house is full of books: a set of encyclopedias from the 1970s, a dozen leather-bound editions from the *Franklin Library* series, old college textbooks, children's books, and—most of all—spiritual books. She lives in the same farmhouse where she was born, although much has changed since her childhood. The Bible was the only book in the house when she was growing up. "We were too poor to have books," she says. Electricity was slow to come to the rural south, and her house wasn't connected to the grid until 1948, when she was twelve. The library of her rural school provided access to books, and she particularly enjoyed reading historical accounts and biographies. About her literacy, she says, "Church and public education—these were the foundation for me."

Especially since her retirement, Janice has made spiritual reading part of her daily life. She favors devotionals, which are annual publications that provide a short reading for each day of the year. Each entry begins with a Biblical verse or quote, followed by reflection, explanation, and illustrative examples. Some devotionals provide historical context, while others take a more contemporary, story-oriented approach. Janice purchases multiple books each year to get various perspectives. She says, "I look forward every morning to reading. I don't just read one person's devotional. I'll read one week's devotionals in one day, and I'll comment on it in my mind. And sometimes I have to share it with people." Her reading process is consciously dialectical, through either inner dialogue as she makes comments to herself or discussion with friends or family. For Janice, a central benefit of devotional reading is interpersonal, in that the insight she gains helps her negotiate her relationships with others. She says devotionals help her understand

... how I can be happier in life. And I'm happier when I love everybody and I feel I'm being loved. I'm not happy if I feel somebody's got an angst against me. I worry and think, what did I do wrong, and why do they feel that way. That's when you have to read and get on the positive side. It's negative or positive. You've got to read—I've got to read—things that are going to be uplifting, and those things are Biblically based.

The daily practice of reading and reflecting helps her "get on the positive side" of challenges and conflicts. At several points in the interview, she stresses that reading materials should be positive and uplifting. The criterion of positivity is central to how she evaluates reading materials, and, as we will see later, is at the root of why she resists some books in the UMW Reading Program.

Janice seeks out what is "good and true" in her reading and has a particular affinity for narratives that demonstrate "grit"—the ability for individuals to overcome adversity and contribute to their communities. She was raised to believe literacy plays a key role in an individual's success and credits her mother for shaping her taste in reading:

Number one, when I was growing up, my mother didn't like for me to read junk. We could not read junk. So I started reading biographies. I just loved reading about how other people did something good, where they contributed to life. When I was left with four children

I prayed to God that I could get them educated so they would not be dependent on the government to take care of them. When you're exposed to reading things that have some grit to it, you have more quality in your life.

Janice's mother taught her to view literacy in strongly moral terms, with "good" reading practices connected to progress and merit-based success. Romance novels and magazines like *True Confessions* were considered "junk" that led girls and young women to waste time and embrace frivolous values. In contrast, reading stories of exemplary individuals who contributed to society had an edifying effect. Reading the right kind of texts leads to "more quality in your life," just as getting an education leads to a life of respectability and independence from government assistance.

Janice tells her own life story as a story of grit, particularly in regard to literacy acquisition. As a young mother, she remembers reading the dictionary and memorizing definitions so her "brain wouldn't turn to mush." She sold encyclopedias long enough to get a free set for the family. Divorced at a time when marriage was the social norm, she struggled financially to raise her four children, working low-wage, pink-collar jobs as a clerk on the nearby military base and as an uncertified librarian in a public elementary school. Disillusioned by the limitations of this work, she began taking college classes and graduated with a degree in library science at the age of forty-nine. She returned to work in the public schools as a certified librarian and retired at the age of sixty-two. Literacy provided her with powerful financial and personal benefits in her youth and adulthood, and it continues to enrich her life as an older adult.

She sees continuing learning as essential to her wellbeing, and the church plays an important role in providing access to educational opportunities. Educational gerontologists have identified four learning needs for older adults: coping needs, expressive needs, contributive needs, and influence needs. Religious institutions offer older adults opportunities for learning across all these categories, perhaps most importantly in the dimension of being "active social agents" (Findsen 74). Janice's expressive needs are met through her participation in small group studies, women's circle meetings, and worship services. She contributes through her work as volunteer librarian and seeks to influence her community by promoting the UMW Reading Program. She believes reading is particularly good for older people:

It will cause your mind to be more sharp. I think that if you sit in front of the TV and you don't participate, you'll become a rotten potato [laughter]. You don't stay with what's in the world. Reading good stuff—you know what that is, I've talked about it before. I think reading has enlightened my life and has enhanced my life.

She sees reading as an active, participatory process that keeps people mentally sharp and helps them "stay with what's in the world." Reading itself is good for you, but the UMW Reading Program requires more from its participants—transformation of the self and the world.

## The Methodist Self: Inner Reflection and Outward Action

Methodism has a long history of sponsoring literacy, from founder John Wesley's promotion of working class literacy to current programs like the UMW Reading Program. One of the most

important aspects of Methodist literacy, especially in context with this project, is the relationship between reading and the inner self. Daily reading and journal writing have historically been encouraged as a method of spiritual growth. Vicki Tolar Burton argues that John Wesley’s “empathic attunement to the inner experience of ordinary people . . . served to enhance a sense of self as a person with potential for development” (103). Janice’s daily devotional reading, with its strong emphasis on self-reflection and dialogic engagement with the text, fits squarely with the Methodist tradition. Through reading, she seeks continual personal development—as do many of her fellow church members. Surveys show 39% of United Methodists read the scripture at least once a week and 25% participate in prayer groups, study groups, and/or religious education at least once a week (Pew 181, 184). The church offers its older members a powerful narrative of personal growth through literacy: everyone, at every stage of life, should actively engage in a journey of faith.

Given the Methodist Church’s historical view of the self as mutable and literacy as a means of change, it is not surprising that the UMW Reading Program defines its mission in terms of personal growth. Just as Paulo Freire calls for praxis, though, the UMW warns its members against viewing reading as separate from service and advocacy: “For almost 150 years, United Methodist Women have been involved in mission that includes prayer, study, and action. The Reading Program is a study opportunity, but it should also lead to action” (United Methodist Women, “Reading Program”). Any UMW member can nominate a book for consideration, and each year the national office creates a reading list for each of these categories: education for mission, leadership development, nurturing for community, social action, and spiritual development. The social action category addresses issues that can be politically controversial, particularly in Janice’s community. As volunteer librarian, she reviews the list and decides which books should be purchased for her church. She looks for books that will be most relevant to the needs of her fellow church members, reading reviews on the internet and selecting ones with the “best value.” Her goal is to build a strong collection for the church library, and she takes pride in the range and quality of her selections. When confronting perspectives that challenge her worldview, Janice turns to church-sponsored methods of reading.

The UMW presents its mission issues within a framework of textual justification that draws from the Bible and the Social Principles in *United Methodist Book of Discipline*. Quotations serve to connect social action to the sacred texts and foundational church principles. When a UMW member reads about an issue on the website or in print materials, she will see how this issue connects with the key texts of the community. For example, the UMW webpage on Economic Inequality prominently situates this advocacy issue within church discourses:

#### Scriptural Inspiration

*“Protect the rights of the poor and needy.”* (Proverbs 31:9)

*“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*

*Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.*

*Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.”* (Luke 6:20a)

From the United Methodist Book of Discipline

As a church, we are called to support the poor and challenge the rich . . . Poverty most often has systemic causes, and therefore we do not hold poor people morally responsible for their economic state. (Social Principles, ¶ 163 E)

(United Methodist Women, “Economic Inequality”)

The United Method Church explicitly emphasizes systemic causes of poverty, offering an alternative to dominant cultural narratives of personal responsibility and meritocracy that advocate “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps.” Janice’s own prized narrative of self is challenged by the church’s counternarrative, which shifts responsibility from individuals to social, political, and economic systems. The Methodist view of systemic poverty complicates her respect for “grit” and her fear of government dependence. By situating disruptive concepts within the context of Biblical and church texts, the UMW establishes common ground—a place for its members to stand as they encounter challenging perspectives.

When Janice explains the UMW’s mission priority issues to me, she follows the same pattern of textual justification, linking contemporary social issues to Biblical references:

It’s very strong . . . to welcome the immigrant. Because they said, in early Biblical times, the Hebrew nation—they were immigrants. They did not own property; they were foreigners in a new land. So this is the religious aspect of that. And not only that, but just loving your neighbor.

Viewing immigration through the lens of scripture encourages church members to draw parallels, for example, between the wandering of the Israelites after their exodus from Egypt and the plight of Syrian refugees today. This method of reading supports a narrative about immigration that runs counter to other narratives that Janice encounters on Facebook, in the news, and in conversation with friends and family. The scriptural lens seems to provide a way for Janice to engage alternative perspectives, even when she holds different political and social views. In our interview, she acknowledges the controversial nature of some mission issues:

Climate change is a big issue. Of course, it’s a controversial one also outside of religion. But people say, [there is] a firm belief that God created this earth. We’re stewards of it, and we have to take care of it. I mean, that’s a mandate to take care of this earth. And that has its grounds in Biblical issues.

In these passages, Janice embraces the ways of thinking and patterns of Methodist literacy, reading the world through the lens of sacred texts. As her daughter, I know that she is skeptical about climate change and supports restrictions on immigration. She doesn’t comment on this dissonance, perhaps because the church provides a Bible-based method of reading that allows her to inhabit the liberal discourse of social justice—at least in this moment.

I must admit that as a daughter I have sometimes found my mother’s ability to move between viewpoints difficult to accept. My academic training has taught me to argue with consistency and avoid contradictions, to see dissonance as a problem that needs to be resolved. As a researcher, however, I have to ask myself: how does my desire for a “coherent” narrative shape the way I

listening to my subject's story? What role does dissonance play in my mother's critical literacy? Am I distorting my mother's story by looking for a linear narrative of change? Debra Journet cautions researchers in writing studies to interrogate the tropes and themes we employ as we interpret data. Stories of belief and attitude change occur again and again in our scholarship: "In particular, composition narratives are often marked by transformational arcs" (19). Critical pedagogy narratives are particularly dependent on this arc, as they recount how learners move from unawareness to critical consciousness. My search for consistency in Janice's story stems from a desire to see an arc of transformation: I am looking for a discipline-sanctioned narrative with a beginning, middle and end. But like all dominant narratives, this limits what I see.

My interview with Janice is not linear or tidy: sometimes her story suggests transformed views; at other times her positions seem less fixed as she moves between engagement and resistance. Paying attention to moments of dissonance in her story helps me focus on critical literacy as a *process*. Cognitive dissonance is a powerful psychological state, one that is essential to learning. When a person experiences contradictions or discrepancies within their perceptions or thought processes, the result is psychological discomfort. It is human nature to want to resolve dissonance, and people often do it quickly by rejecting the conflicting element or minimizing the discrepancy. Justin Walton argues that critical educators should make use of cognitive dissonance by helping students embrace it rather than rushing to resolve it. Dwelling in the perspective of another, even provisionally, is a necessary step in critical consciousness. Because the ability to tolerate cognitive dissonance allows time for critical self-reflection and reconceptualization, educators should create environments that help students "sustain dissonance" and "infuse paradox, conflict, and ambiguity into the curriculum" (775-76, 780). While Walton's work focuses on postsecondary students, we might also consider the role dissonance plays for older learners in nonacademic settings. Janice's willingness to engage perspectives that conflict with her beliefs complicates the idea that viewpoints become rigid with age and suggests there may be similarities in the way older and younger people respond to the challenges of critical literacy.

Janice seems to find it easiest to engage issues that are at a distance from her life, perhaps because the unfamiliar elements create less dissonance. When asked about a book that challenged her views or opened her eyes to a new way of seeing things, she said:

I won't ever forget when I went to one of the [UMW] conferences, and they had some pamphlets laid out there that said "human trafficking." I thought, what are they talking about? Human trafficking—that was back in the slave days, that's not today. But the more I've read the more I know. I can't give you figures but I have books in there that can give you figures of the women and girls, men and boys trafficked for agriculture. They're trafficked for sex, they're trafficked for slave labor in homes. These things blew my mind. I never knew it was going on today.

Since then, she has read several books on human trafficking and is particularly interested in learning about the issues women and girls face in Muslim countries. She favors books provide a positive message of hope, particularly stories of individuals who tackle problems and make a difference in their communities.



Many of the UMW books follow this pattern, particularly those dealing with women's leadership

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in the world. Janice has read *I am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban* (Yousafzai and Lamb) and *This Child Will Be Great:*

*Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa's First Woman President* by Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. She also enjoyed reading about Kenyan ecologist Wangari Maathai, who calls for healing of the earth. She finds books like these uplifting because they show the power of individuals to create social change; reading these books inspire her and bring her joy. But her participation in the UMW Reading Program has inspired other emotions as well: she has felt challenged, irritated, hurt, and angry while reading church-recommended books.

## Contending Narratives: When Beliefs Collide

Reading can be painful, particularly when a book offers a worldview that collides with a cherished belief about how the world works. “Let there be no mistake,” Jim Corder writes, “a contending narrative, that is, an argument of genuine consequence because it confronts one life with another, is a threat” (19). Such a narrative disrupts one's sense of self and the reality of one's worldview: “What happens, then, if the narrative of another crushes up against our own—disruptive, shocking, incomprehensible, threatening, suddenly showing us into a narrative that is not our own?” (18-19). Corder lays out the possibilities: we turn away, lose our conviction, we go to war—or, sometimes, we change our selves (19). The UMW Reading Program poses this kind of deep personal challenge for Janice, particularly when selected books interrogate the structural and systemic causes of social issues. Critical literacy requires readers to open themselves to “contending narratives” and risk change to themselves.

At several points in the interview, Janice's emotions welled up in ways that surprised me. Seemingly straightforward questions led to deeply felt answers that took her back to childhood ways of understanding the world. When asked what reading means to her as a Christian, she said:

It inspires me. It really makes me want to go out and do something for the Lord. It makes me want to [pause, tearfully] really do something good. And I just wish I could have. I was about fourteen, fifteen years old when I saw a film at a camp meeting about the African people. They were living such primitive lives, and I wanted to go and help them. That's the problem, now that I know what I know—they don't really need you to go over there and change them, to be like we are. Really and truly. That's why in *Why Africa Matters*, [the author] is saying, white man came and they're trying to change the culture of these people that don't want it changed. It's like, oh, I know something that will make it so much better for you. . . . I'll use the word culture because that's the bottom line. From what I've read, I've learned that you don't have to change the culture.

This answer reveals the emotional complexity of inhabiting new worldviews. Reading *Why Africa*

*Matters* by Cedric Mayson disrupted a deeply held perspective about the cultural superiority of the West. As a young girl she hoped that she, as a Christian in the developed world, might help the “primitive” people of Africa. Mayson presents a view of pre-colonial Africa as a society that is whole, not broken, and in doing so, challenges narratives and belief central to Janice’s worldview. In the lingo of critical pedagogy, she is experiencing “desocialization,” the process of “critically examining learned behavior, received values, familiar language, habitual perceptions, existing knowledge and power relations . . .” (Shor 114). Through desocialization, a person becomes aware of oppression and works toward critical consciousness. But resulting cognitive dissonance is uncomfortable—as Janice’s emotional response makes clear. Inhabiting Mayson’s worldview caused irreparable harm to her own. She can no longer see Africa through the eyes of her fourteen-year-old self, the idealistic girl who wants to “really do something good” for a downtrodden people. It is no longer clear what “doing good” means.

The conflict she experiences as a participant in the UMW Reading Program must be felt by many of her peers. The Pew Research Center 2017 Religious Landscape Survey shows that 45% United Methodist Church members call themselves politically conservative, while 38% call themselves moderate and only 15% call themselves liberal (193). A significant number of church members hold conservative social views:

- 32% believe homosexuality should be discouraged (202).
- 43% oppose same-sex marriage (205).
- 42% believe “stricter environmental protection laws cost too many jobs and harm the economy” (211).
- 54% believe “government aid to the poor does more harm than good by making them dependent on the government” (214).

Conservative church members like Janice will most certainly experience conflict when the UMW advocates climate justice, health care as a human right, and greater income equalization—issues commonly associated with liberal political views.

The question of how to deal with the conflicting beliefs of its members has been central to the Methodist Church since its founding. John Wesley feared schism and established a concept to accommodate conflict by identifying elements that were vital to faith and allowing divergent perspectives otherwise. The United Methodist Church codifies this approach in its *Book of Discipline*:

John Wesley’s familiar dictum was, “As to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think.” . . . Beyond the essentials of vital religion, United Methodists respect the diversity of opinions held by conscientious persons of faith. Wesley followed a time-tested approach: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.” (56-57)

We might think of Wesley’s approach as a rhetorical strategy for maintaining community in the face of contention. First, the community identifies common ground: the broad, essential beliefs that every member holds in *unity*. Next, the community agrees to treat “non-essential” beliefs with *liberty*. Finally, and foremost, members must embrace the principle of *charity* in all interactions with each other and the world. In his sermon “On Charity,” Wesley argues that charity is often misunderstood

as outward action; it should instead be understood as love marked by humility, a reluctance to be provoked, gentleness to all (especially those who oppose us), and a willingness to suffer “affronts, injuries, and reproaches.” Charity, then, requires one to take a receptive, nonaggressive stance when faced with challenging viewpoints. In terms of educational psychology, charity opens a space for cognitive dissonance.

Wesley’s approach to conflict can help us understand what motivates an eighty-one-year-old woman with conservative political and social views to read a progressive text like *Why Africa Matters*. Diverse opinions “held by conscientious persons of faith” are less threatening when the essentials of faith are shared. Janice shares core values with Cedric Mayson, who served as a Methodist minister and approaches global issues from the perspective of faith. From this common ground, she can encounter challenging ideas with charity. “For some reason, within myself,” she says, “I just want to find out why people are different.” She says she doesn’t always enjoy reading perspectives that differ from hers, but she does try to gain something from the experience: “it opens my eyes to how other people are the way they are. I don’t have to agree with them, but if I get just a little bit of knowledge

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from them or a little bit of good from them, then—yeah.” By suspending judgment and focusing on understanding, Janice opens herself to engage diverse perspectives with a simple goal of understanding

“why people are different.” The stakes are low: she can, in the words of John Wesley, “think and let think” and encounter conflicting views with charity, secure in the knowledge of shared essential values. This method of charitable reading, which echoes Peter Elbow’s believing game or Krista Ratcliffe’s rhetorical listening, allows Janice to set aside questions of disagreement or agreement and focus on what she finds valuable in the text: “a little bit of knowledge” or “a little bit of good.”

Still, Janice finds it difficult to read some books from a charitable stance, particularly those that don’t “keep to the positive side.” She is deeply troubled by *The Massacre at Sand Creek: How Methodists were Involved in an American Tragedy* (Roberts), which tells the story of Colonel John Milton Chivington, a Methodist minister who ordered the massacre of more than two hundred Cheyenne and Arapaho in 1864. “With all the positive stories you could tell,” said Janice, “why do we have to focus on the negative?”

Given her conservative views on homosexuality and same-sex marriage, one might expect her to struggle with books on the UMW reading list that deal with these issues. Yet she has purchased numerous books on sexuality for the church library and thought extensively about these issues. We can see her attempting to engage the “contending narratives” of the LGBTQ community even as she resists them:

The United Methodist Church does not condemn homosexuality. They do not condemn same-sex marriage. It’s not talked about. They do not condemn it. I know we have one book about a minister . . . who had a transsexual change. It’s one of the books on our [church

library] shelves right now. I have not read it—I hope to read it someday—but it’s not my main focus. Lately, all I want to do is read about how Martin Luther thought, and how John Wesley thought.

In this passage, Janice echoes the United Methodist position on sexuality and signals her openness to understanding the perspective of a transgender minister. Her preference is to avoid the issue altogether, though, as she turns her attention to historical readings. The church has taken a similar approach to this issue of same-sex marriage: the United Methodist General Conference voted in 2016 to postpone a decision on same-sex marriage but is headed for a contentious General Conference meeting in 2019 that may split the church (Funk). Janice’s conflicted views on progressive social issues mirror the deep divisions within the United Methodist Church.

One strategy she uses to cope with the conflict within her community is to locate herself within a narrative of change, one that acknowledges her beliefs as situated in the time of her upbringing:

You have to understand that at eighty-one years old it’s real hard for me to accept some things that are acceptable today, whether that means same-sex marriage or whether it means interracial dating. Because I wasn’t raised with this. Today, we have it all around us. I’m not condemning of it; it’s just different. I admire people who are good. I admire people who do something to make this world better—this community, their neighbor. I don’t care who it is, if they’re good to you.

This narrative creates a context for her beliefs by acknowledging their constructed nature: she recognizes that social views change and the era one grows up in shapes one’s beliefs. By viewing her beliefs from a perspective of social change, she can retain her conservative beliefs and at the same time not condemn those who disagree with her. In the words of John Wesley, she has agreed to “think and let think” on matters that aren’t essential. She then moves on to a higher criterion for judgment: she admires good people who make a difference in the world.

At multiple points in our interview and in later conversations, Janice returns to homosexuality as an issue that troubles her. She holds a strong moral position against same-sex relationships:

For me personally, I feel that we human beings were made to praise God. We were created to procreate, to have children and raise them to have children. And unless you get technical input there . . . two men are not going to get pregnant. Two women are not going to get pregnant. You’re going to have to have something outside of nature. That is not how we were created to be.

Yet earlier she had talked with enthusiasm about Adam Hamilton’s *How Christians Get It Wrong*, which presents a pastor’s perspective on his work with the LGBTQ community. “These people are suffering,” she said, “and he’s saying it’s because of how the church is treating them.” When I asked her why she purchased this book for the church library, given her own position on homosexuality, she framed her answer in the discourse of reader rights and institutional authority: “I feel like, just because I don’t feel this way, why should I deny somebody something that’s been approved by, or recommended by, the UMW board for this reading program. You can read all about it online.” She then moves to a different line of reasoning based on empathy. This book, she tells me, shows the need to love gay people who are suffering because of the church’s position on homosexuality. She imagines

how a mother of a lesbian might feel:

Who am I to deny someone who has a daughter who has a tendency to fall in love with another woman [the right to read this book]. I have to put myself in that parent's shoes. You have to make up your mind, am I going to let something separate me from my daughter? I think of the scripture, and the Lord says nothing—*nothing*—can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. Period.

Janice sees the book's value in terms of the comfort it might bring, a judgment she makes by putting herself in the position of a parent who has a gay child. The book may help a mother to love her child unconditionally, as the scripture tells us God loves us. In referencing a Bible verse, she applies the same method of justification as the church does for its social justice issues. The "essentials of vital religion"—unconditional love—are far more important than her personal opinion about homosexuality.

Janice encounters challenging viewpoints on continuing basis, with each year bringing a new book list for the UMW Reading Program. She recently selected a book for the library on a mission priority issue, *Criminalization of Communities of Color and Mass Incarceration*, that surprised and troubled her.

I have a social issue right now that I personally have a problem with. [The book] has to do with there being more Black people than white people in prison, or more Hispanics. And there's something wrong with the system that's doing this. It tells how to organize for a protest, and this protest to "ban the box." They want it to be put into law that an employer can't ask if you've ever had a felony. And of course, this is something I don't agree with.

She feels strongly that employers have rights, and she doesn't feel this is an appropriate issue for the UMW to support. Likewise, she was not happy when she saw a photo in her local newspaper depicting protestors from the UMW Wilmington District holding signs that said, "United Methodist Women against HB 2." North Carolina House Bill 2 would have required people to use the facilities of their biological gender and was widely viewed as discriminatory toward the LGBTQ community. She objected to the use of the name of the United Methodist Women in the protest: "If they want to, that's their business," she said, "But don't make me part of it."

Clearly, Janice feels an uncomfortable dissonance when engaging some of the social justice and advocacy issues of the UMW. When I asked if she would ever consider leaving the church because of its liberal views, she replied: "I know what my niece said, and it hit me right in the heart. She says, I love my church and my church family too much to let a doctrine make me leave my church. She's saying, I will not leave my church family." This answer shifts the question of church membership from divisive issues to "the essentials of vital religion." The essentials of love and community bind her to her church family, and no doctrine will separate her. Yet her story shows that remaining in communion is not simply a decision one makes; it is a process that requires on-going emotional and intellectual work. For Janice, that work involves critical literacy in the Methodist tradition: the on-going engagement of difference through charitable reading.

## Conclusion: Reading Methodically, Aging with Agency

One of my main points here has been to offer a counternarrative to the transformation plot we usually associate with critical literacy. Having argued against a linear narrative, how do I write a conclusion to Janice's story? Her engagement with the issues I've discussed in this essay is ongoing. She has continued to update me on her reading, some of which was undertaken in direct response to the draft I shared with her. She decided to not only read *The Massacre at Sand Creek: How Methodists were Involved in an American Tragedy*, but to do additional research on John Milton Chivington. While she still struggles with the idea of "dragging up negative stories from the past," she now supports the United Methodist Church's apology to Native Americans at its 2016 General Conference. "It was a horrible thing," she says; "the church should have apologized." She has also engaged other UMW mission issues that she initially resisted. On the recommendation of her great-niece, she has begun reading about issues of racism in the criminal justice system. She recently finished Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy: A Story of Redemption and Justice* and told me, "Everyone should read this book." She felt inspired by Stevenson's perseverance and success at helping those who had been treated unfairly by the justice system. "It's not right to incarcerate a child for a lifetime" she says, especially if the child has mental health issues.

To understand Janice's willingness to engage texts with which she (at least initially) disagrees, we must understand the *method* of her reading. She reads to improve herself, to understand others, and to stay "in the world"—even when the world challenges her beliefs. Her church provides a rhetorical strategy for encountering difference: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." The importance of method, according to John Wesley, is that it provides a structure that allows one to become a better Christian. Its purpose is not to achieve an end point but rather to engage in an active process. Janice's literacy poses a challenge to the conflict narrative that places religious faith in opposition to critical consciousness; her faith supports an approach to reading that promotes openness and postpones judgment. Reading with charity allows her to "think and let think" as she dwells in the worldviews of others. For my mother, the clash of worldviews is not an abstract concept; it is a family matter. She is keenly aware that her views are quite different from "the generation I birthed," and her motives for critical reading include a desire to understand "how younger people think." She reads difficult texts not only to improve herself but to build connections with her children—including me.

Janice's narrative does not have an ending; her literacy practices reveal evolving views and opinions, engagement and resistance, and critical insight that occurs in moments. At the age of eighty-one, she reads with agency—intentionally, methodically, and purposefully. Just as she reads challenging texts with charity, we might read her experiences with charity, expanding our notions of where critical literacy occurs and what it might look like in practice. Her story offers a counternarrative to dominant cultural and disciplinary narratives and challenges us to develop more expansive views of literacy. To do so, we must reframe critical literacy as a process rather than a plot. Instead of focusing on end products of transformation, we need to consider the conditions that support the process of transforming.

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