

Melissa Albers—Elder Interview Paper

The elder discussed in this paper is named Richard “Rick” Albers. He was born in August of 1938 and is currently seventy-seven years old. Mr. Albers lives alone in an apartment on the third floor of the building. There is an elevator in the building that he normally uses. He’s lived in the apartment since he and his wife divorced several years ago. They both still live in the same town of Brookfield, Wisconsin which is a suburb of Milwaukee. One of their children, Dea, still lives in town with her husband Tom. Mr. Albers sees them on occasion, but not with great frequency. Mr. Albers will drive down to Peoria, Illinois to visit with his twin brother, Bob, and his wife, Sue some weekends or on holidays. He will also drive down to see his son, Tim, and his family in St. Louis, Missouri. Driving great distances is still something Mr. Albers can accomplish with great ease, though he tries to leave early to avoid driving at night if he can help it. Mr. Albers grew up in Alton, Illinois with his parents and siblings. He has one sister, and four brothers. He is an identical twin. His family had two sets of identical twin boys: John and Jim and then Mr. Albers and Bob. This was highly unusual, especially since all of the children survived childhood. In fact, all six Albers siblings are still alive today. All live independently, and a few of them with spouses. Mr. Albers eventually received his Master in Theoretical Mathematics after years of schooling. However, this is one of the lowest degrees by any of his siblings. Many of them have their doctorates, usually in a field of physics or mathematics of some sort. With this great intelligence, however, came a lower emotional quotient. It is often difficult to hold a conversation with some of Mr. Albers’s siblings, especially Jim or John, both of who have been married several times. If they decide that what they are discussing with a person is no longer relevant, they will simply turn away and start a new conversation with

someone else. At this point, every sibling in his family has been divorced at least once, though many have remarried. Mr. Albers has not.

He met his former wife, Le, while working on his masters at the University of Kansas. She was working on getting a degree in Music Education. They were married for over forty years before divorcing. They had four children together, Dea, Tim, Tom, and Kari. They moved around a lot as young adults. They lived in Missouri, Arkansas, Nebraska, and Wisconsin, which is where they have been since. Dea was the only one to stay in Wisconsin. Tim lives in St. Louis, Tom and his family live in California, and Kari and her son live in Florida. All four siblings have a child or children. Mr. Albers acted as an, “involved grandparent” to Dea’s three children, meaning he was “active in the day-to-day lives of [his] grandchildren. [He] live[d] near them and [saw] them daily” (556). He and Le lived less than fifteen minutes from Dea and her family and often went to many sporting events, theatre shows, and band functions. They provided baby-sitting when needed. However, to his other grandchildren who lived father away, Mr. Albers acted more as a “companionate grandparent”. This means that they “entertain or ‘spoil’ their grandchildren—especially in ways, of for reasons, that the parents would not” (556). Living a great distance from many of his children, Mr. Albers would not have been able to be involved in their daily lives. He did, however, interact and play with them whenever they would visit his home. He and his wife would allow the grandchildren to stay up late watching movies and playing games on the computer, things their parents would not normally let them do. Mr. Albers displays a few of the concepts of late adulthood that are discussed in the textbook. These include activity theory, a contradicting view of positivity effect, and an example of someone in the young-old category.

Activity theory is defined as, “the view that elderly people want and need to remain active in social spheres—with relatives, friends, and community groups—and become withdrawn only unwillingly as a result of ageism” (540). Mr. Albers exhibits this theory mainly through maintaining a work schedule. This keeps him busy throughout the week and engaged in the life of his coworkers and students. He works, “two, three or four days a week depending on the semester as a part time professor at a for profit career college”. He teaches mathematics, with a strong emphasis on remedial math. These are students who want to go to college, but can hardly add or subtract, let alone do algebra. Mr. Albers specializes in these kinds of classes and greatly enjoys the social interaction he gets from it. Helping those students who stick with the class is one of his favorite parts about teaching. He says, “They’re always trying to mess with you. So I mess with them right back. It’s the only way they’ll listen to you. Sometimes I act like I’m lying to them just to keep them interested”. This shows a clear interest in the lives of others and in a community group and setting. It’s clear that Mr. Albers doesn’t want to narrow his sphere of social interactions. He also still meets with his family and keeps relatives close in his life. He drove over six hours to visit with his son’s family over Easter weekend and sees his daughter that still lives close by with some frequency. Mr. Albers also has been keeping in touch with his twin brother as they have grown older. He visits him and his wife often. The three of them have become closer friends as they have aged. Mr. Albers has tried to expand socially after his divorce, despite the fact that it would have been much easier for him to seclude himself and not reach out to anyone. His children have been a great help in making sure he stays active in their lives as well as the lives of Mr. Albers’ grandchildren.

Mr. Albers showed aspects of the positivity effect in his responses during the interview. This effect is described as, “the tendency for elderly people to perceive, prefer, and remember positive images and experiences more than negative ones” (538). The most apparent aspect of this theory was shown in part of Mr. Albers’ answer to the question “What are a few of your most vivid memories or notable events in your life?” He cited that one of his favorite memories was, “solving a geometry problem at work no one else could”. Mr. Albers used to work for a company called Computer Numerical Control (CNC) where they programmed machines for factory floors. Essentially, they programmed computers before there was standard code for them by using mathematics and equations that they developed themselves. Mr. Albers recounted how there was once a time that some men at his work were called in on a project to, “develop plasma cutters for steel beams” in order to program the machines so that they could cut beams properly to support an over pass. When the men became stuck because their equations became an infinite loop, they called Mr. Albers in to look at the equations. He, “had this way with reading the computers and knowing how to stop the infinite loops” and solved the issue by using vector calculus. In short, Mr. Albers looks back on his accomplishment at work with great pride and positive emotions. Another positive view Mr. Albers had on the world was of that of modern medicine and the medical advances the world has made as a whole which was his answer to the question of “What are some positive changes you see in the world today?”. This may be apparent to him, however, because some of the less positive memories he recalled as some of the most vivid of his life. He claims to remember these stories because, “the stories you remember most are the older ones, the short term ones you remember less because you’ve told them less often”. On three separate occasions, Mr. Albers

has sliced off a portion of one of his fingers in one form or another. The first time was due to his twin brother and him attempting to make mud pies by using a hatchet to loosen up the clay in their backyard. He said that he, “was forced to eat in the other room because the smell of his rotting flesh” was too much for others eating. The only medical treatment for something like that was to simply wrap the cut and hope for the best. The second time Mr. Albers cut off a finger was in a lawn mower. He remembers this one because he claims it was, “like looking at a text book drawing where [he] could see the bone, muscle, and skin in perfect circles before the bleeding started”. Again, there was not adequate treatment for the wound. When he cut off his third finger, however, he was an adult and modern medicine was able to reattach his thumb by sewing it back into place. But when asked if he saw any other positive changes in the world, Mr. Albers laughed and said, “I think the whole world is falling apart”.

One of the clearest aspects of Mr. Albers’ life currently is that he is a strong member of the young-old category of late adulthood. Young-old is defined as, “healthy, vigorous, financially secure older adults (generally those aged 60-75) who are well integrated into the lives of their families and communities” (505). Mr. Albers displays these traits in many aspects of his life. As mentioned previously, he works consistently, therefore making him financially secure in the salary from being a professor. When asked, “How do you stay healthy/care for yourself?” Mr. Albers simply answered that he, “takes walks as often as possible, exercises, doesn’t eat sweets, and eats healthy things”. In general, it seems that diet and exercise are large contributors to his continued good health even as he ages. In answering the question, “What are the biggest changes, physically, cognitively, or emotionally that you have noticed in yourself over the course of your life?” Mr. Albers gave lots of good insight into his state of

being. He noted, “a lessening of athletic” ability and commented that he’s, “getting treated for back problems. It's because of something that's fairly common. It's called aging”. Obviously, Mr. Albers has aged with a good sense of humor. He knows his limitations, but isn’t afraid of them. Things like forgetting where the keys are and sensing memories fade happen with more frequency, Mr. Albers said, as people get older. It’s something he’s come to live with and accept. However, Mr. Albers has shown only more dedication to his favorite hobby and pass time of life: wood working. He says that as time goes on, he tries to do, “more complex and precise work” in each project that he does. He has been known to complete pieces using mathematical equations to organize the wood into different patterns.

Mr. Albers shows great strengths in many aspects of his life. He lives in a truly independent environment quite easily. He cooks and cleans for himself as well as budgeting money, paying rent, and driving to work. He still works in the field of mathematics and continues to grow socially by interacting with his students, a part of his job he enjoys greatly. This job also allows him to stay sharp cognitively and not lose the skills he has developed over his life. He still maintains his hobbies and is moderately involved in the lives of his children. While he can view the world in a negative light, Mr. Albers doesn’t allow it to affect how he lives his life.