

Special Section: In Honor of James Emmett Birren (1918-2016)

Jim Birren as a Professor and Man

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When my cohort of graduate students entered academia, we *apprenticed* ourselves in what was one of the last vestiges of the *guild tradition*. The Ph.D. was considered the journeyman's certificate. The determination of when to reward the journeyman's certificate was almost entirely in the hands of the *master* professor. This fact afforded them an enormous power over the lives of their apprentices, which illuminated the depths of the professor's character. I experienced great unhappiness in my first exposure to graduate school, and had it not been for the war in Vietnam, my academic career would have ended there.

Instead I transferred to USC, as embittered and cynical about the prospects of continuing a formal education as I could possibly be. I was expecting the worst. It is not hyperbole for me to say that Jim Birren saved me. Even though I produced a paper for his Seminar on Aging that any other professor would have been delighted to give a failing grade, Jim felt obliged to hang in there with me and to find something in that awful paper that would engage my curiosity and which he could nurture. It worked. But there was more: not only did he enhance our education as psychologists, his training grant exposed us to meetings of the Gerontological Society in Toronto, Houston, and Puerto Rico as well as the international meeting in Kiev. He left it for us to decide which path we would take, but he had successfully socialized us all as gerontologists by the time we graduated. We all spoke so highly of our experiences as NICHD trainees at the Gerontology Center to site visitors that they criticized us for having such an unrealistically positive experience in our graduate education.

Jim treated his graduate students in a way that would have resulted in his sainthood were he of that religious persuasion. He treated us respectfully and fairly; in fact, we were treated better than *very well*. Jim Birren's graduate students always had their essential human dignities respected. Jim Birren always spoke to graduate students in terms of "when" they got their degree, not "if" they got their degree. Jim and Betty would even invite us to their home once a month to feed us with crackers, cheese, beer, and wine to talk gerontology where they

treated us like junior colleagues rather than senior students.

In sum, Jim was a remarkable mentor, role-model, and such a regular guy that he was safe enough for all his students to call him a friend if they dared. He was the real thing. He led by example. As a scientist, he was at the top of his field and never fell in love with his hypothesis. He was a kind, temperate, strong, wise man. We students were lucky to know him, much less have him for our professor.

Perhaps what I admire most about Jim Birren is that he steadfastly refused to be closed to new data. He always had a willingness to notice what he hadn't noticed before. He had avoided the fate of most social scientists by never falling in love with his hypothesis. That is why it was always pleasurable and informative to talk with him. There was no problem with his capacity for critical thinking but his critical thinking never was employed defensively. That is, to ward off others' ideas before trying to integrate them with what else he knew. If there were a way that I could change to be more like him, it would be to trade my defensive critical response to something unexpected for Jim's open critical thinking when that occurs. As I review my life portfolio and evaluate where I want to put my energy, I draw considerable inspiration from Jim's view of life.

I would like to share a final thought: I wasn't surprised that Jim died before he reached one-hundred years. I say that because back when I was a graduate student, Jim announced to his seminar that he had been invited to a meeting of centenarians and was looking forward to see what kind of people they were. When at the next seminar meeting he failed to mention his adventure with the centenarians, we asked him what happened. He said something like, "It was a disappointment. It was a roomful of people who chronologically may have been over one-hundred but measured in terms of their experience, no one there was over fifty. It appears to live to be one-hundred, you have to be satisfied living a very dull life." One thing is for certain, Jim never settled for a boring life. He lived life to its fullest. He certainly wouldn't have wanted to be confused with people who only reached advanced age by living a boring life. His life remains a role model for all of us.