

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

The Sauna to the Icy Lake: Reflections on my Journey with Jim Birren

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It was a conference in Jyväskylä, Finland. Jim and I and other colleagues were enjoying a sauna in the countryside. It was early June and the ice had not completely melted on the lake in front of us. The Finnish tradition is to heat up in the sauna and then jump into the lake. I asked Jim if he was planning to do the *icy plunge*. He said, “No, I had better be careful... I am not twenty-five years old any longer.” I agreed it was wise thinking, and I headed to the wharf. As soon as I hit the water I heard a splash right behind me—guess who it was! That was Jim—always curious and not to be left behind.

I first met Jim Birren in Vancouver when I was a doctoral student at the University of British Columbia (UBC). Jim and Jim Thornton—who was one of my supervisors—were good friends. Jim Birren was at UBC for a Gerontology conference organized by Jim Thornton. The latter asked me if I wanted to help out with the conference, a request to which I gladly agreed. During the conference my main supervisor, Kjell Rubenson, suggested that I introduce myself to Jim Birren. There was to be a special year-long seminar at the Andrew Norman Institute at the University of Southern California the following year on *Theories of Aging*—the subject of my dissertation. Jim Birren said that he could not promise anything, but to send him my CV and that he would get back to me. I did receive an invitation to USC and thus began my journey on what Betty Birren called, “the magic carpet ride of Gerontology.”

Jim was always curious and enthusiastic about what students and colleagues were doing in their work. He often had good suggestions for directions to take their thinking and/or career further. In my case, he asked me what I wanted to do after completing my Postdoc at USC. I said that I was job-hunting, but that I also really wanted to go to Europe. He offered to write letters of introduction for me and gave me a list of his European colleagues. I know he was surprised at how many letters I requested, but he obliged—that was Jim.

Jim’s curiosity extended beyond academic life. During my time at the Andrew Norman Institute we also

shared parts of our personal lives. Jim learned that I was a martial artist. The next thing I knew he had a group of colleagues organized—including himself—to have me give them a Karate lesson on the roof of the Andrus Gerontology Center.

Following a rich experience in Europe, I was hired to start the Gerontology programme at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, New Brunswick. I remember when the hiring committee asked me what I would do to get the programme off the ground. I recommended we do three things—organize a conference, publish a book, and award Jim Birren an honorary PhD. Well, the university agreed to fund the conference, and Jim agreed to be involved in all three initiatives. The outcomes were the *Metaphors of Aging* conference in Fredericton, the publication of the *Metaphors of Aging* volume, and, in 1990 Jim was awarded an honorary degree. The Gerontology programme could not have had a better beginning. Over the years, I often thanked Jim for opening career doors for me. He simply responded that he had opened doors for others, but that I did the work to walk through the door.

I had the privilege to work and spend time with Jim and Betty in many special places. A project that was particularly meaningful to me was the *Aging and Biography* volume, and the special issue of *Ageing and Society*, which were both completed over the same period of time. These projects were developed in three locations—all truly special narrative settings. The first was the Birren’s garden in Pacific Palisades—you can imagine that working beneath eucalyptus and orange trees was a very special experience for an Atlantic Canadian. The second setting was the Mader’s chalet in a small village in The Black Forest in Germany, and the third was a hunting lodge in the countryside outside Budapest in Hungary.

Aside from the natural beauty of these locations, they were special settings because the time together involved many walks and hikes, great food, and fascinating conversations about the proposed book and many other life themes. It is a precious experience to work with colleagues who also become friends—this was definitely the case with Jim. It was scholarship at its best—especially for narrative gerontologists. Jim was the *glue* for this and many other projects. He would make suggestions about whom to invite to contribute to the volume, and we would add our

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suggestions. Many colleagues agreed to participate because they liked and respected Jim.

Another special memory I have of Jim relates to a project at the Boston Museum of Science. The museum invited a group of gerontologists to help them design an exhibit on aging. It was fascinating to observe how the technicians transformed our ideas into physical exhibits. However, the part of this project that I recall fondly was a dinner at a restaurant with Jim, Betty, and my wife Liz. We were informed by the museum that we would not receive a fee for our services—but that they would subsidize a meal anywhere we liked. A very special restaurant was recommended to us. We looked over the menu and the wine list, and we hesitated. We were all accustomed to a per diem for meals, and this was a lot of money. We debated for a while—“perhaps they did not mean what they said” and “but we are working here”, and so on. We concluded that the museum was very clear about their instructions, so we decided to relax, had a good laugh over the deliberations, and enjoyed an excellent meal and bottle of wine.

Jim Birren was my mentor in professional life. His enthusiasm and encouragement helped me to feel confident in following my own path in Gerontology. Along with colleagues Bill Randall, Brian de Vries, Phil Clark and,

more recently, Ernst Bohlmeijer, this collaboration has resulted in the emergence of Narrative Gerontology and Narrative Care—a perspective that continues to grow and expand in most parts of the world. Jim predicted early on that it was only the beginning of the interest in lifestories. Jim was also a mentor in the sense that he inspired me to teach my students in a way that allows them to follow their interests in our field. Finally, I now find myself increasingly in the mentorship role with new colleagues, and I keep his spirit in mind and share with them any wisdom I have gained on my journey.

This year (2017) I celebrate thirty years as founding chair of Gerontology at St. Thomas University. For those thirty years, I have enjoyed Jim’s company as a colleague and friend. I miss him, but I know he would want us all to keep the journey going. As he used to say, “Death ends a life but it does not end a relationship”.

I compose these reminiscences riding on a train through the Austrian Alps, having just completed a workshop in Graz on Narrative Gerontology and *Pathways to Stillness*—the latest extension of my work with Jim.

I feel his presence.