

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

James E. Birren and the Stories of Life

Kathryn N. Cochran

Some Thoughts on the Many Gifts of James E. Birren

Every life has a story. Jim Birren discovered the power of life stories while teaching a summer-session course in gerontology at the University of Hawaii in the 1970s.

In addition to the usual cross-section of graduate students, several senior citizens were auditing the class. One day, as an exercise, Jim asked his students, including the senior auditors, to write a brief history of their life and then share the stories in pairs. As Jim described it, the energy in the room rose, and the students became so deeply involved in their exchanges that it was difficult to end the class.

As a professor, researcher and gifted mentor who loved people and learning, Jim had relished discussions with students and friends, often while taking long walks in the Santa Monica mountains near his home. But the energy in the University of Hawaii classroom was something different, more powerful, and more personal. The sources of that energy, and its potential for further understanding human development, intrigued him.

Jim had already begun teaching autobiography courses in which students wrote their life stories and allowed him to use them anonymously in research. He was interested in learning more about how individuals developed values and attached meaning to their lives. After Hawaii, Jim pursued a new line of thinking: How does the way we *interpret* the events of our lives influence our decision-making, well-being, and health throughout the arc of our development? When he returned from Hawaii to his post as founding dean of the Davis School of Gerontology at the University of Southern California, he continued to think about the potential of autobiography in the context of studies on aging.

Over time, Jim developed the structure for a course in Guided Autobiography. Each class session included a lecture presenting theories on human development and psychology, followed by small-group sessions with an experienced group facilitator. In each small group session, participants focused on a life theme, such as: What was the role of money in your life? Who made the decisions in your family? What were important branching points in your life? What role did health play in your life story?

At each meeting, participants read aloud two pages they had written on a theme. Before ending the session, they discussed questions to “pump-prime” memories for the next session’s theme. Facilitators were present to foster a supportive atmosphere, emphasizing sharing and expanding access to memories rather than judgment of choices or writing style. Participants wrote only what they wanted to share. No one was prodded. The overwhelming effect of this group process was the stimulation of new insight, new memories, and a feeling of acceptance of self and others.

As an editor of USC publications, I had been aware of Jim’s work and of the variety of projects and disciplines associated with the Davis School of Gerontology. Interdisciplinary studies linked the School of Gerontology with the School of Medicine, the School of Architecture, the School of Social Work and more. One of the articles that crossed my desk was about Jim’s work in autobiography. I remembered it a couple of years later, in the late 1980s, when Jim was teaching a summer course in guided autobiography at USC. At the time, my quiet, enigmatic, Scandinavian father had retired and was coming to the end of a house-remodeling project. When I asked him what he planned to do next, he said, “I might write my memoirs.”

I was excited about this but worried that my father, a meticulous engineer, might start his story with the day of his birth and write in detailed, linear fashion, everything that happened after that, day by day. He would, I was sure, spend a lot of time producing an unreadable tome. A focus on life themes might help, I thought. I decided to enroll in Jim’s autobiography class to help my father find a way into his story. Little did I know where this would take *me*.

During the lecture portion of Jim’s class, he shared knowledge and theory gleaned over a long career in the psychology of aging and human development. One concept that rung especially true for me was a comparison of three models for the direction of human development:

- 1) The biological model begins with the birth of an infant, who then, normally, grows in size and physical strength to a peak in early adulthood then experiences a slow, steady decline in physical health and strength into old age and death. Despite exercise, good nutrition and other interventions one can adopt to improve the quality of life along the way, the directional graph for biological development in a normal life is up and then down.

- 2) The social model, generally accepted into the early 20th century, shows a steady climb through childhood as an infant grows, is educated and matures to adulthood. At achievement of adulthood the line flattens to a steady horizontal plane maintained until dementia or death. There is no accounting for growth or change during the course of an adult's life.
- 3) The integrative model when graphed is a steady uphill rise. This integrative perspective on human development evolved in the 20th century, influenced by the work of Carl Jung. It assumes potential for continued growth throughout life through lifelong learning and growing wisdom through the integration of life experiences. The model assumes individuals continue to develop so long as they retain the cognitive skills and will to continue absorbing and integrating new information. There is no getting over the hill.

The integrative model is the one Jim lived and the one that Guided Autobiography enhances and encourages.

Betty Birren, Jim's wife, was my small group facilitator for that summer class. The six members of our group were born in four different decades in widely diverse sections of the world. We were all Caucasian and well-educated from roughly similar socio-economic backgrounds. More diversity would have added more dimension to the memories shared, but there was still plenty of diversity in the details of our life stories to enrich our perspectives. We also found that the details of each story stimulated more memories for each writer's colleagues in the class.

It was striking to me that the participants in the group, despite successful careers and social relationships, had for the most part, not had the experience of sharing their life stories in depth with others. They had few platforms on which they could share their interpretations of their life histories without fear of judgment or conflicting interpretations. The process of remembering, writing, and sharing with others on a similar journey was affirming. Remembering and sharing information with others allowed the present-day adult to look at life experiences with new perspective and, often, new interpretations. We all know how it feels to remember something that happened when we were 15 and experience it again and again with the feelings of a 15-year-old. The process of remembering, writing, and sharing the memory with others as an adult can inspire a broader, more objective understanding of the circumstances and can sometimes alter one's reaction to the memory. I think we all emerged from the Guided Autobiography class and from our experience in guided small groups with a larger measure of wisdom, tolerance and openness to new perspectives.

In the end, my father wrote a linear, but beautiful story of his life. I helped him along the way with questions. We talked about his experiences and how it felt to write them

down, how he felt about offering them to the family to read. I asked him what he might say to his nine-year-old self if he met him today as an adult. The writing brought some peace to childhood memories that he had previously remembered with a child's sense of confusion and turmoil. He could even find humor and abundant kindness in many of his relationships.

In helping him edit his book, I learned some things about him that helped me understand who he was as a man and a father. And he learned to appreciate me in a different way, too. Before he wrote his own story, I don't think he could understand what a writer and editor did or what value that work could have. But now he did. He had become a writer himself.

My friendship with Jim and Betty continued after Jim left USC to join the UCLA Center on Aging in 1989. He continued to facilitate guided autobiography groups at UCLA, the USC Emeritus Center, and at churches, community centers and senior centers in Los Angeles.

One of Jim's former autobiography students at UCLA offered a small grant to create a manual for leaders of Guided Autobiography groups. Jim asked me to take on the project. Over the years, we had had many discussions about how to adapt the course structure for groups beyond the field of gerontology. I could see potential for teenagers, career-counseling centers, outplacement programs, and prisons. The process of examining one's life history while focusing on various life themes can be helpful for anyone in transition. It helps to understand what choices and experiences from the past brought you to where you are today. Examining and writing about one's life history is a good step toward setting goals for the future, which is usually the final exercise in a Guided Autobiography group.

Every story is unique, but every story has universal themes, whether we are aware of them or not. On that plane of learning between birth and death, we are constantly in transition, constantly trying to evaluate what to leave behind to make space for something new and what to carry forward with us. One purpose of the grant was to enable more people to enjoy the Guided Autobiography experience.

Jim and I set goals for our manual. We wanted to:

- 1) Create a guide that would enable interested people to lead a Guided Autobiography group whether or not they had participated in a Guided Autobiography group themselves (though, when possible, this is extremely helpful.)
- 2) Expand the themes and adapt Jim's materials to make the experience equally attractive to groups of all backgrounds and ages.

The manual grew into our book, *Telling the Stories of Life through Guided Autobiography Groups*, published by Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

When Jim retired from USC and before he started at the UCLA Center on Aging as Assistant Director, he was

optimistic and forward thinking in the face of what many might find a daunting transition, retirement from the deanship of a prestigious and growing academic program that he had founded. "I think I would like to write children's books," he said, his blue eyes twinkling as he threw out the idea, still testing it, I think.

Ultimately, the real stories of real people occupied and enchanted Jim into his final days. After his long-time friend, David Solomon, retired as the director of the UCLA Center on Aging, the Center became a focus for fundraising and projects to improve the lives of aging adults. Autobiography continued to be a community outreach offering as long as Jim was involved there.

When Jim and Betty moved to a retirement community when Jim was in his late 80s, Jim gave autobiography classes in his new home. It must have been wonderful for other residents to participate in Guided Autobiography with this kind, intelligent, accomplished man. Most of them had moved fairly recently into their new residence, a place where, usually, no one knew their life history. At advanced ages, many of the people who had

known their life stories might have passed away or were living far away. Autobiography had the potential for creating not only new perspectives on life stories, but also for making new friends. Jim's interest in Guided Autobiography was a late life experiential gold mine for him and for countless others.

While Jim was at UCLA, several former participants in his Guided Autobiography groups continued to meet for several years to develop strategies for expanding the reach of Guided Autobiography. An exciting outcome was the development of webinars to train facilitators and to reach communities far beyond Southern California and the university communities around the world who were familiar with Jim's work in gerontology.

Jim passed away in 2016 and is no longer here to inspire us with his curious and inquiring mind. However, he has left a legacy that is still moving forward, encouraging people to write and learn from their personal histories and, whenever possible, to share their stories in guided group settings. The sense of discovery is thrilling, no matter where one is on the path of life.