

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

Who Was James Emmett Birren?

Cheryl M. Svensson

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Jim Birren was a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional, multi-talented man. He was a professor, mentor, colleague, and friend to many. All of us knew and related to a different facet of Jim Birren. We all know that Jim was one of the first gerontologists and that he devoted his entire professional life to the study of aging. He created the Davis School of Gerontology at USC, the first university in the nation to offer a Master of Science degree in gerontology (MSG), in 1975. He stayed as founding dean until 1989 when he left for UCLA to work with his good friend, Dave Solomon, and to set up the Center on Aging. As his wife Betty often quipped, "Jim knows how to spell retirement, but he does not know what it means."

Jim Birren held positions of leadership in all the major gerontological organizations; he was Past President of the Gerontological Society of America, the American Society of Aging, the California Council on Gerontology and Geriatrics, and the Division on Adult Development and Aging of the American Psychological Association. In addition, he received numerous awards and accolades from both American and international organizations. He was a prodigious writer and published more than 250 journal articles and wrote several books. These are some of Jim's many accomplishments that are in the public record; we all know this about him. But what about some things you may not know about Jim Birren? Here are a few things that stand out in my mind.

Jim was Guided Autobiography. Jim created Guided Autobiography (GAB) in the mid-1970's as a method to write one's life story using sensitizing questions based on life themes in a small group format. As time went on, GAB became his passion and his legacy. Jim often said he learned more from his GAB groups than he had from all his many years of education. By the mid-1990's, while Jim was at UCLA, it was his main focus. A group of students, friends and colleagues formed around Jim and GAB. We became the Birren Disciples. Our group met monthly, first at UCLA and then at the Birren Palisades' home. We planned research projects, applied for grants and awards,

created a DVD to commemorate Jim as he introduced five of the GAB themes, supported Jim and Kathryn Cochran as they published the GAB manual, *Telling the Stories of Life Through Guided Autobiography Groups*, and we presented at conferences and conducted workshops, always with Jim's overriding wish propelling us forward to, 'Launch GAB.'

Jim connected with students. Students were a core component of Jim's social network. He loved to chat with them and to learn new things. He was open to new ways and did not want to get stuck in 'old ways of thinking.' He read widely and voraciously and would sometimes come across a study that used new technical methods to measure changes in the human organism. One was studying changes in the brain with fMRIs, and Jim was excited to think a day would come when measurable changes could be seen in the brains of people who participated in GAB classes.

Jim was a man of moderation. Nutrition, along with exercise, were pillars in Jim's life. After his heart surgery while still at USC, he completely changed his relationship to food. He always made the 'healthy choice'. His breakfast fare was a half-cup of cereal with nonfat milk, a glass of juice, and slices of cantaloupe. Never coffee but always green tea. Lunch was always a salad, no derivations. Once while traveling to a conference, we had a layover at an airport and stopped for lunch. Along with our sandwiches, we were offered a choice of an apple or chips. Jim chose the apple and I chose chips. His only downfall was dark chocolate...brownies, cookies, Sees candy... he loved them all.

Jim was a friend. Professorship slipped naturally into friendships, as his former students became colleagues and friends. One group from Jim's early days at USC continued to meet annually with Jim and Betty. At this gathering, there would be food, drink and always questions, laughter, and stories. At the end of the gathering, each person wrote a prediction for the following year on a slip of paper, folded it and tucked it into a special box. The next year, the box was opened and the predictions read aloud to much laughter and surprise.

Jim was a man of nature. Jim loved the outdoors: hiking-fishing-camping under the stars. He was well known for his Saturday morning hikes in the Santa Monica Mountains. A group of fellow hikers gathered at the Birren Palisades home at 8 am each Saturday and set out for a

Cheryl Svensson, Ph.D., Director, Birren Center for Autobiographical Studies, Los Angeles, CA.

Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to: Cheryl Svensson, Ph.D., e-mail:cheryl.svensson@gmail.com

hike. The configuration of the group changed over the years, but the schedule was in place until the Birrens moved away to Thousand Oaks. Jim loved all living things. His pastimes included gardening and tending his plants and flowers. He took pride in his Palisades garden filled with orange, lime, tangerine, fig, and persimmon trees as well as many flowers. Even after the move to University Village, Jim kept a 'container garden' on his balcony.

Jim's life contained rituals. Rituals were a part of Jim's life. Close friends knew that on the 4th of July there would be a gathering at the Birrens to first watch the parade in Pacific Palisades and then join in a backyard barbecue with Jim as head chef. Also, every New Year's Eve a ringing in of the new year and a 'burning of the bad' would take place at the Birrens' home. The friends who joined them were asked to write down whatever bad thing the year had held for them on a slip of paper. The paper was then burned ceremoniously in the fireplace.

Jim loved to learn and question. Jim loved games that challenged his mind and kept him alert. A visit with Jim was not complete without a final game of Scrabble. I was a distracted player and teamed up with Betty whenever possible. Jim was a master, checking his scrabble dictionary for spellings and coming up with words seldom heard of to score triple points. He kept score meticulously. Learning extended to keeping up with all the scientific journals and the psychological and gerontological associations where he had once been an active member. He loved stimulating conversations and was known for throwing out the Big Question at the most unexpected times. What do you think is the meaning of life? If you got to know him well enough, he would share his understanding of the Virgin birth with you.

Jim was a pool shark. Jim loved to play pool. For many years, his good friends, RZ, the Lutheran minister, and Ed 'Mike' Aleks, would meet and walk from their Palisades' homes every Thursday night to the pool hall. There they would play a few rounds of pool, then their spouses would pick them up, and they would all go out for dinner. Jim played his last pool game just four days before he died. His son Jeff stopped off with him in the poolroom at University Village prior to dinner to shoot a few holes. Jim was not a quitter.

Jim loved Betty. Jim and Betty were an entity. The Jim Birren I knew was devoted to Betty. During her final years when she suffered from mild cognitive impairment and could not be left alone, Jim dedicated himself to her care. He never left her side, and she traveled, as able, with him wherever he went. Jim often said that the last years of their marriage were some of the best. They renewed their wedding vows on their 60th wedding anniversary. Jim wore the same tux he wore when they married! They were married for 72 years until Betty died the day before Jim's birthday on April 3, 2013. They were special.

Jim was family. All of his family was an essential part of Jim's life. His three children, Barbara, Jeff, and Bruce, their spouses, and his five grandchildren were a source of love and pride for him. However, Jim was stubbornly independent. His primary reason for moving to a

Continuing Care Retirement Community (CCRC) was because he did not want to become dependent upon his children. He did not want to impose on them for care if the need arose. However, after Jim gave up driving and became increasingly frail, the need did arise and the family stepped in to help. Bruce flew in frequently from Boston and never missed a Sunday night phone call. Jeff made regular trips from Oakland and took over the administrative details, working with the home health agency that provided the 24/7 care for Jim in his home, as well as all personal financial matters. Barbara returned as often as possible from the UK to stay with her father. The family all worked together on the sidelines to allow Jim to live in his own home until the end.

Jim had a big heart. There was simply so very much to Jim. Even trying to piece it all together now I come up with more questions I should have asked him: What was the occasion in 1943 when he had his photo taken with Helen Keller and Ann Sullivan? I'll never know. But there are also some coded, hidden, perplexing aspects of Jim that he left in his handwritten poems dating back to the 60s. Most are written on small scraps of paper, possibly on long flights. A few have been typed up and reworked, even edited by Betty. They all reveal ever-deeper aspects of Jim Birren.

Weighing In

James Birren (1992)

My thoughts led to the question, with uncertain answer,
What am I worth?

What scales, yardsticks, values can be placed upon my
life?

Yours, mine, the other person's?

There are friends I think about.

Have I served them well?

The students I thought I taught

When they were teaching me.

A mentoring role is companionship

To those in difficult passage.

All those have been my service

But where is the gauge to judge my quality?

There are many things I have done and thought.

A few rocks along the path show the marks of my being
here.

Putting it all together and finding a number of

My worth eludes me still.

I think I must be worth

What you think I am.

Jim's sense of 'humility' is revealed time and again. Jim was never proud or vain, rather always the one to question if he was enough...good enough...doing enough...helping others enough... He always kept trying to do more.

Reading through all the submissions for this special edition dedicated to Jim Birren, one can't help but be impressed by the breadth and depth of his connections with a vast array of people, such as students, colleagues, friends, and some, like me, who happened to be blessed to 'stumble upon' Jim Birren at just the right time in life. Jim has left an indelible mark on each and every one of us. Through all the papers, there are underlying traits that emerge to paint a fuller picture of him. Jim was funny and quick to make a quip. Once I read an article to him, which referred to Jim as an icon in the field of aging. Jim, true to form, quickly retorted, 'As long as they don't call me a relic!' On Jim's 90th birthday, his close friend, Jim Thornton, sent him an e-mail: "Jim, You told me age is only a number but many numbers have great stories. Thank you for sharing the numbers with me." Jim replied: "I am now working on 100. It may be harder work!"

I was blessed to work closely with Jim and to get to know him on a deep and personal level. We became not only colleagues but also good friends, the type of friend whom Jim could ask, 'Cheryl, have you noticed if I am repeating myself? Or, 'Do you think my memory is slipping?' He knew he could trust me, and that I would be honest with him. Through the years of my close encounters with Jim, I have been fortunate to see so many sides of his multidimensional self. His one regret was that he did not complete his magnum opus, the article he intended to write titled, "Age Doesn't Cause Anything."

Jim has now been gone for two years and I miss him still. He liked to have the 'last word' and I'll give it to him in this essay. I think he would enjoy that. This is what Jim often declared when ending meetings, and so should we: "Onward!"