

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

Reflections on James E. and Betty Birren: Events Shaping Gerontological Studies at the University of British Columbia and My Life Review

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It is my hope that my thoughts, briefly sketched here, will fully express my thanks to both Jim and Betty Birren for the many enormously engaging experiences since our first meeting in 1979 at the University of British Columbia (UBC). Jim and Betty Birren entered my life as a “team and partners” as recipients of the Cecil and Ida Green Visiting Professorship, UBC. They returned to UBC during the 1980-90s for conferences and symposia, and Jim consulted with the Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies, on the prospects of a Centre on Aging at UBC. I visited Jim and Betty often prior to his retirement from the University of Southern California (USC) and during his subsequent affiliation at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), staying in “my bedroom” in their home in Pacific Palisades on most of these visits.

Jim and Betty Birren have been so influential in my understanding of living a full and productive life. We exchanged our thoughts on Jim’s views on “aging as a counterpart of development”; on learning in later life as an essential factor in the development-aging processes that shape our lives; my educational views on the essential nature of learning in adult development and aging; and shared our experiences in guided autobiography groups through the landscape of reminiscence and life review.

In Birren and Deutchman’s 1991 book, *Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults: Exploring the Fabric of Life*, they wrote the following:

You can help older adults build greater understanding and self-worth by leading guided autobiography groups. From the viewpoint of human development, there is little of greater importance to each of us than gaining a perspective on our own life story, to find, clarify and deepen meaning in the accumulated experience of a lifetime. Particularly in the later years, a person needs to believe that his or her life has mattered, that it has had a purpose or an impact on the world. Guided autobiography

enhances these feelings, promotes successful adaptation to old age, and assists positive choices by a person at a crossroad in life. A grasp of the fabric of one’s life can make a significant contribution to well-being in later life. Guided autobiography is based on a number of concepts about how people develop understanding of themselves and their lives and how memory, personal reflection, and present perceptions interact. It evokes and guides reminiscence, that is, the recall of events from the past, and directs the individual to examine their memories from the perspective of the present. It is a form of semi-structured life review, bringing review of events and emotions over the life course one step further—into a group context wherein different members’ perceptions and histories can evoke further reflection and challenge earlier views of the self. (Birren & Deutchman, 1991, p 1).

Below, I have briefly sketched Jim and Betty Birren’s activities at the University of British Columbia that contributed to the emergence of educational programs of later life learning in the Department of Adult Education, Faculty of Education, and studies in gerontology in other UBC faculties and departments. But first, I need to outline my initial activities at UBC that led to these events.

In 1969, I started teaching in the Department of Adult Education, Faculty of Education, UBC, at the age of 42, a two-year appointment as assistant professor working on my doctorate in adult education at the University of Michigan. I was surrounded by colleagues 15-20 years younger than I. The developing field of academic studies in adult education covered early adulthood to retirement. My educational interests and teaching began to focus on mid-life and older adults as learners—more were entering university programs and attending workshop and summer courses in continuing education on life-long learning. By 1976, my interests took shape—I was 49 years old, an “older learner” exploring the emerging literature of life-long learning and formal adult education courses about older adults as learners, the emerging field of andragogy. I began to lay out a graduate program in education and aging, a sequence of adult education courses and seminars

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leading to a Masters Degree (MEd or MA) in Educational Gerontology, which was approved by Graduate Studies. To launch this new program, Dr. William Griffith, Department Head, Adult Education, suggested that I contact Dr. James E. Birren as a possible nominee for a Cecil and Ida Green Visiting Professorship.

I called Dr. Birren, who was the Dean, Leonard Davis School of Gerontology, Ethel Percy Andrus Gerontology Center, University of Southern California, and introduced myself. After a brief social chat outlining the department's interests in education and gerontology, I asked, "If we submitted your name for the Cecil and Ida Green Visiting Professorship—would that be OK and would you accept and come to UBC?" Dr. Birren agreed, with a provision that Betty Birren be included in the submission. The *Dr. James E. Birren and Mrs. Betty Birren* nomination was submitted for the Cecil and Ida Green Visiting Professorship and awarded for summer 1979. Dr. Robert Havighurst, Committee on Human Development, University of Chicago, was invited to offer a Summer *Seminar for Educators in Gerontology: Developmental Tasks in Later Life* that same summer, 1979. These events inaugurated the graduate program in Educational Gerontology that would evolve over the next 10 years into a series of seminars, public lectures, summer institutes and conferences.

Several years later, I asked Jim Birren: "Why did it seem so easy then (1979) to get you nominated and for you to accept the Cecil and Ida Green Visiting Professorship?" Birren said that it wasn't his first visit to UBC, as in the mid-1960s he was a possible candidate for Dean, Department of Psychology. At the same time, he was considering an appointment at the University of Southern California and the establishment of the Ethel Percy Andrus Gerontology Center. My thought when Jim said this was: "How fortunate for the many disciplines and programs in the study of aging everywhere that you accepted USC." At the time, UBC was unprepared for the cross-inter-disciplinary approaches and studies of gerontology (development and aging) that Jim nurtured at USC.

After the very successful Summer Institute of 1979, I attended a Gerontology Society of America conference in San Diego and had an opportunity to renew my relationship with Jim and Betty Birren. Over breakfast, Jim shared his thoughts on "metaphors of aging" to explore the essence and scope of aging. We discussed the possibilities for a symposium or conference on the topic. I jumped at the opportunity to develop this with him. At the time, I was a member of the UBC President's Committee on Gerontology and thought this potential symposium was an ideal project for the committee in developing educational gerontology at UBC.

In 1982, UBC funded and hosted *Metaphors of Aging in the Social Sciences and Humanities: An International Symposium*. The symposium brought together over 50 scholars from North America, Europe, and Japan and was an outstanding success. Ideas from papers presented and explored at this symposium were not accepted for publication in 1983 but were subsequently collected and published by Kenyon, Birren, and Schroots in 1991.

UBC hosted another symposium in 1984—the *Ethics and Aging Symposium and Conference*. Papers presented at this symposium were published in the book, *Ethics and Aging: The Right to Live, the Right to Die*, edited by Thornton and Winkler (1988). In the book, Jim Birren and Candace Stacey's paper on *Paradigms of Aging: Growth versus Decline* provided this conclusive thought: "The thesis of this paper is that our aging is a product of many complex forces. Our wisdom and meta-strategies can be brought to bear directly on the issue of how we want to grow old. Only through the examination of our scientific metaphors and through interdisciplinary exchange between humanists and scientists can theory in aging progress. Only through these can our ethical behavior in caring for the dependent elderly and caring about the circumstances of their death develop (p. 69)." For me this became an essential element in the foundation and scope of educational gerontology.

In the years 1984-85 I attended seminars at the Andrew Norman Institute for Advanced Studies in Gerontology and Geriatrics, Andrus Gerontology Center, USC. These seminars resulted in the book *Education and Aging*, edited by Peterson, Thornton and Birren (1986). The *Education and Aging Symposium* and the published papers that resulted from it were vital to the development of the Educational Gerontology graduate studies in Adult Education at UBC and the founding of the Educational Gerontology Division, Canadian Association of Gerontology in 1990.

In 1986, I participated in the Summer Institute in Gerontology *Guided Autobiography* seminar course with Jim and Betty Birren. Brian de Vries attended this seminar and completed his UBC doctoral degree in 1988 and, subsequently, post-doctoral studies with Jim Birren at the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1989-1990. This seminar was shaped by theories, methods, and themes being developed since 1975 by Jim Birren that would be outlined and published in the J. E. Birren and D. E. Deutchman, *Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults: Exploring the Fabric of Life* (1991). A second book was published by J. E. Birren and K. N. Cochran, *Telling the Stories of Life through Guided Autobiography Groups* (2001), that provided procedures and themes for organized workshop groups' activities.

During the early 1980s, I began an initiative at the annual meetings of the Canadian Association of Gerontology (CAG) to activate an Educational Gerontology Interest Group. Several members of CAG were now submitting papers on education and aging, and educational gerontology was being explored in England. I helped form the interest group of about 30 people in 1984. As head of that group, I submitted James E. Birren in nomination for a *CAG Award in 1989*, for his contributions to gerontology in Canada. Jim's CAG Award detailed the contributions he had made to the study of aging in Canada and his involvement at many Canadian universities. The award was presented at the 1989 CAG meeting in Victoria, BC. The Educational Gerontology Interest Group sponsored a luncheon and Jim was the featured speaker and

over 200 people attended. The Division of Educational Gerontology in the Canadian Association of Gerontology was formally established in 1992.

Throughout 1988 to 1991 there were many consultations with the Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies, and meetings with members of the Graduate Committee on Gerontology, which I chaired, about the possibilities and potential for a Centre for Gerontology Studies and interdisciplinary programs of aging and gerontology at UBC. Birren also was involved in consulting with the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, and the University of Victoria on gerontology studies (of which I was not informed at the time). During this four-year period, all the possibilities were “tabled”, but no action. In 1991, I resigned as chairman of the Committee, which was subsequently terminated.

After Brian de Vries completed his doctorate at UBC (1988), he pursued post-doctoral studies at USC with Jim Birren. During his studies with Jim, he co-authored a paper in 1990 titled, *Adult Development Through Guided Autobiography: The Family Context*, published in the journal *Family Relations*. Brian returned to UBC in 1991 with an appointment in the Department of Family Studies.

In 1992, Jim and Betty Birren visited UBC for a Summer Institute with the School of Family and Nutritional Sciences, in collaboration with Brian de Vries. Brian had this to say about Jim and Betty’s visit: “Jim and Betty came to Vancouver during this summer for two weeks to teach a course on Aging and the Family through the School of Family and Nutritional Sciences. They stayed at my condo (on Pacific Street) for the two weeks they were there. And, their grandson John was with them for at least part (and perhaps all) of their stay. We spent a weekend on Pender Island during that time. I recall that Jim was to have his working permit papers stamped while crossing the border; they failed to do so and so he had to return to the border by car to have them signed. I recall him saying that he walked across the border to the US to come through the border again with his papers so that they could be signed and he could be compensated for his teaching.”

I retired in January 1993 and relocated in Vernon, BC. I remained active in the Canadian Association of Gerontology initiatives and conferences, and I taught summer courses in Educational Gerontology at UBC in 1993 and 1994. During these initial years of retirement, I also visited Jim and Betty, attending events at USC and later at UCLA, and stayed in “my bedroom” in their home in the Pacific Palisades on most of these visits. In home chats, we had extensive reflections on emerging studies and themes for ‘use it or lose it’ and ‘learning for later life.’

In 2003, Jim Birren and Cheryl Svensson presented a symposium on Guided Autobiography at the annual meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, held in San Diego. This provided the opportunity for me to begin a series of workshops (2003-2010) that resulted in a number of published articles with John B. Collins on guided autobiography as a learning experience. Subsequently, we initiated a research project and published a report titled *Adult Learning and Meaning-Making in*

Community-based Guided Autobiography Workshops (2010).

My post-retirement life continued to be enriched by my relationship with Jim Birren. In 2004, the American Society on Aging, through the MetLife Award, sponsored a workshop presented by Jim Birren and Cheryl Svensson in Guided Autobiography for the Senior’s Learning in Retirement Program at the Okanagan Community College in Kelowna, BC. Jim also presented a public lecture on: *Gerontology – Past, Present and Future – The Agequake*.

These events helped launch my first community based workshops beginning in 2003 and expanded my social experiences through travel to Mexico in 2005 and 2007, and a reunion group in 2009. I organized a workshop series with the Centre on Aging, University of Victoria, BC in 2007, 2008, 2009; a workshop series in Arbutus Ridge Strata, Cobble Hill, BC in 2007 and 2009; and most recently a Wisdom Exchange Workshop in 2015 and 2016 based on GAB workshop methods sponsored by the Hillside Wellness Centre and the Greater Victoria Elder Care Foundation, Victoria, BC.

During all the early activities from 2003 to 2008, I began to review and organize my own life-story in a series of storyboard outlines and written vignettes I had shared with workshop participants as a teacher-facilitator. Subsequently, beginning in 2008, I worked on my own life stories and transcribed my grandparents’ letters of 1883-84. In 2012, I wrote my autobiography and, in 2014, a family memoir of my descendants. These documents were self-published and passed on to my family, relatives, and several community social societies, historic libraries and archives in Ohio and Michigan, and the archives of UBC Library.

Now, as I reflect on events with Jim and Betty Birren over the past 37 plus years, I view them as more than friends—they were significant mentors and my extended family. I know I am not the only person who has experienced and cherished their lives. They made enormous contributions to many individuals, programs, and institutions worldwide in the academic studies of aging, mentoring students and colleagues in educational programs of numerous disciplines—guiding collaborators in research and published papers, and nurturing organizations regionally, nationally, and internationally. They were open, candid, and understanding participants in all that they did and offered their skills and insights to those ‘exploring the fabric of their lives.’ Jim and Betty Birren never wavered in their unique abilities to guide, inspire, and listen, or their willingness to explore and share. They were consummate mentors, collaborators, and professionals, and dear friends to us all.

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