

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

## Jim on Cape Cod

Mary O'Brien Tyrrell

*Memoirs, LLC*

Would you enjoy asking world-renowned genius, James E. Birren, his prediction of the future?

July 24, 2013, with the ocean lapping under our window at Fanizzi's Restaurant on Cape Cod's Province Town, three gerontologists enjoyed lunch. Occasionally waves splashed the pane. The sun was shining and the atmosphere enchanting. Jim Birren and I had scheduled the meeting during his annual family vacation on the Cape, and Jan Hively, entrepreneur extraordinaire, was meeting him for the first time. The dynamic conversation reached a pinnacle, when, as we discussed the general world state of affairs, Jim answered my question, "What would you say is the next *big thing*?" Jim, in his relaxed style (and later reinforced in an email) shared, "My thinking (is) about an emerging new era... (with) attention to life stories... I do think a new era is emerging. It is being stimulated by cultural changes, new technology, and people living longer in retirement years. I remember the times when orphan homes were a big issue. Parents often died before their children left home. Now five generations alive are common and people can visit with their great, great, grandchildren."

Even with 34 years under my belt in gerontology, to personally hear his pronouncement on that day was and remains a pivotal point in my career. Jim, known for his scientific discoveries, believed the next big thing to come was hearing, expressing, and sharing individuals' life stories. That day, he went on to describe how, if we actually had the ability to share and understand one

another's life stories, it would lead to world peace. No one at the table that day had any alcoholic beverages, but I went home higher than a kite.

Jim had a manner of suggesting sweeping epiphanies in a quiet and assured voice. No drama—just the facts. Anyone privileged to view his resume could hardly stop a racing heart to see his prolific research and commentary in academic journals and books. Along with his colleague, Robert Butler, Jim was a co-founder of the field of gerontology and remains an icon of our field. His quiet ability to blend discoveries of psychological findings along with sociological principles without expressing self-importance was truly amazing.

And here's the irony of the man who designed GAB and shared his discovery all over the world. Whenever Jim taught GAB to a class, he too would write the class assignment and the results, which had been shared with his students, had accumulated in his garage—800+ pages of his GAB. Cheryl Svensson told me back in 2011 that one of the items on Jim's bucket list was to write his own life story and asked if I wanted to help. Soon thereafter, I received those 800 pages. Oh, my. After many, many hours, I whittled it down to what became his autobiography, which Cheryl edited and her son, Chris, designed into Jim's autobiography. Sometimes even with a genius, it takes a village.

What a blessing he was and is to those of us enjoying his heritage. We miss you Jim, and I, for one, am eternally grateful that you literally spread your findings worldwide.

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Mary O'Brien Tyrrell, MPH, President, Memoirs, LLC

Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Mary O'Brien Tyrrell, E-mail: [MaryOBTyrr@aol.com](mailto:MaryOBTyrr@aol.com); [www.MemoirsLLC.com](http://www.MemoirsLLC.com)