

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

The Major Branching Points in My Life Toward Wisdom

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When my university in Osaka offered me a sabbatical leave for a year, I wanted to study abroad and wished to penetrate the deep forest of the science on human behavior and lifelong change, i.e., aging. I was impressed by some books on aging I had read, for example, Birren, 1964; Birren (ed.), 1959; Birren and Schaie (eds.), 1977, and others.

I wrote to Dr. James E. Birren, hoping he would supervise me during this sabbatical period. He not only gave me his consent but also my choice among several psychological fields, including experimental and autobiographical studies. On a summer day in 1980, I set foot into the bright front entrance by the fountain at the Andrus Gerontology Center, University of Southern California (USC), clutching the letter in which he agreed to let me stay there as a visiting research associate for a year.

Only a few days after my arrival in Los Angeles, he advised me to take a class in Guided Autobiography (GAB) during the two-week 1980 Summer Institute at the USC Gerontology Center. I was very fortunate to attend the GAB class without any preconceived idea about it. In the classroom, I simply listened to the lectures on the history of autobiography, on the procedure of the GAB method, writing and reading the autobiographical assignments in small groups every day. As I was approved to postpone my departure for several months until the April of 1982, I also attended the next summer GAB class in 1981. I learned so much from those classes that I was able to continue and introduce the GAB method in Japan (Yamamoto, 1986). I even added some introductory procedures to adapt autobiography into the Japanese culture to ease the students' discomfort with talking openly in a group. During my second sabbatical period from the fall of 2000 to the fall of 2001 at the Center on Aging at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), I eagerly wanted to study more about Birren's original GAB method and his thoughts on aging (Birren and Deutchman, 1991). I was permitted to attend the monthly intense conferences of GAB group leaders at a meeting room in

the UCLA Center on Aging. Fortunately, I could visit one of the most active GAB groups to hear the reading of autobiographies and the warmest conversations among the group members. GAB has since become my prime approach to the study of aging and to understanding people.

At the Gerontological Society of America Pre-conference Workshop, "Exploring Mature Lives: Autobiographical Steps Toward Wisdom," in 2003 in San Diego, I gave a speech on "The Application of Guided Autobiography in Japan." After more than twenty years of experience with GAB classes in Japan, I wanted to emphasize the universal usefulness of the GAB method and thought in order to explore wisdom in human life, rather than cultural differences.

Reviewing Geropsychology

Early in the fall of 1980, Dr. Birren introduced me to some brilliant gerontology graduate students at the Andrus Center and asked me to talk about my previous research in experimental psychology on motor performance in motivational conflicting situations (Yamamoto, 1967; 1969; 1973). After the speech, they asked me questions and discussed freely the various topics I presented. It was a very good time for me to retrace my early research paths. Some days later, Dr. Birren offered me the chance to be one of the coauthors of an article to review the psychology of aging for the next issue of *Annual Review of Psychology* (ARP). I was honored, but was unable to respond to him immediately because I was only beginning to study aging. At that point, I had only experimented on the behavior of young adults and children and had not yet conducted experiments with older adults. After taking a moment to overcome my hesitation, finally, with appreciation for the opportunity to be a part of this very honorable but difficult work, I responded that I would like to do everything possible for this very important article. The result of that collaborative research with Dr. J. E. Birren and Dr. W. R. Cunningham for "Psychology of Adult Development and Aging" was published later (Birren, Cunningham, & Yamamoto, 1983).

In April 1982, at the end of my first sabbatical period at the USC Gerontology Center, Dr. Birren gave me all the three volumes of *The Handbooks of Aging* he edited in 1977 (Birren, 1977). I left the Andrus Center with those

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handbooks as if they were a magnet compass to sail through an open sea. After returning to Japan, I was asked by the editor of a special issue on aging in the *Japanese Psychological Review* 1984 to contribute an article. Birren's thoughts on aging, the above handbooks, the experiences of the GAB classes, ARP research and its secondary data were very useful and helped me write about the advanced methods and information on life-span development and aging. I concluded the article by recommending the study of GAB as a promising approach for both clinical and theoretical work (Yamamoto, 1984).

Twenty five years after Dr. Birren gave me the first edition of *The Handbooks of Aging*, 1977, I was provided an opportunity to supervise a complete translation into Japanese of the sixth edition of *The Handbook of the Psychology of Aging*, edited by J. E. Birren and K. W. Schaie, along with Dr. A. Fujita who had planned to perform the Japanese version. We started the exciting work immediately after the most recent edition of the Handbook was published in 2006. From very trustworthy colleagues in psychological and gerontological conferences in Japan, we deliberately sought translators of "new topics and well established topics written by new authors" (Birren & Schaie (eds.), 2006). The Japanese sixth edition was published by Kitaoji-shobo two years later in 2008. Even now, some colleagues of geropsychology are writing to tell me that their students have been being intent on reading it in their graduate classes of psychology of aging.

Following into a Deep Forest

In our first mail correspondence, Dr. Birren also asked me about the articles written by Dr. K. Tachibana, an early pioneer of psychological gerontology in Japan—especially concerning his thoughts on Buddhism and of *Sabi*, an aesthetic concept of the Japanese culture. During Birren's lecture in the 1980 GAB classroom, he prompted me to talk about that concept, *Sabi*. I briefly presented the concept, but at that time, I could not understand why he was so interested in literary works of such complex artistic value, for example, the essay of Kenko Yoshida, and the *haiku* of Basho Matsuo (Tachibana, 1927; 1971; 1975). Even after I left the Center, we talked more about the Japanese culture and religion. Dr. Birren was often invited to international symposiums in Japan. When he was in Japan, I guided him and Mrs. Birren to the Buddhist temples, the Shinto shrines, Japanese gardens, and museums, and we discussed more by showing them other examples of our culture and religion.

After many years, I wrote an appendix about the research and thought of Kakusho Tachibana in the most interesting book, *A History of Geropsychology in Autobiography*, edited by J. E. Birren and J. J. F. Schroots in 2000 (Birren & Schroots (eds.), 2000). I estimated that Tachibana's work, including his thoughts about the religious-aesthetic concept, *Sabi*, in the medieval and the early modern Japanese culture, was an allegory of the attitudes and feelings of aging people, such as loneliness,

resignation, and tranquillity. Therefore, through his early research on negative aspects of the senescence, Tachibana explored and finally found a positive one, namely the wisdom and beauty of aging (Tachibana, 1975). It took me only twenty years to agree with Dr. Birren about that allegory, *Sabi* and aging (Yamamoto, 2000).

My second sabbatical period at the UCLA Center on Aging was very different from the first one at the USC Gerontology Center twenty years earlier. On weekdays, I was researching the autobiographies of original GAB classes to compile statistical data for analysis, or I was going to libraries to get copies of articles I needed, or I was walking around campus and up the stairs with Dr. Birren as we talked. Almost every Saturday morning, a group of people gathered at the Birren's residence in Pacific Palisades and went on walks through various paths in the Santa Monica Mountains. We all followed closely behind Dr. Birren because he knew every path in the park. We were excited and felt secure to follow him even into a deep forest.

It is beyond expression how much I appreciate Dr. Birren, especially our precious conversations filled with his humor. They eventually led me to a wide variety of areas of learning and the numerous opportunities I was given. Most of all, what he always had in his heart, the constant modesty and respect for others, were what I learned the most from Dr. James E. Birren, the greatest mentor and the bravest explorer in the life toward wisdom.

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