

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

Personal Reflections on the Life of a Giant: James Emmett Birren, the Wizard of Age

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In this article I hope to capture the essence of a man whom I admired, respected, and idolized. He became my mentor, my unwavering supporter, a father figure, a man with a brilliant mind. What follows are a number of personal recollections/reflections of events and encounters on a wonderful association with a giant of a man that spans over 35 years.

In the Beginning

The fall of 1980 was shaping up to be an exciting year. I was making preparations for my first full sabbatical leave from Trent University, a small, primarily undergraduate university in the mid-sized city of Peterborough, Ontario, Canada. Two years earlier, I had decided to shift my research interests from child and adolescent psychology to exploring the positive side of aging. I came across the writings of James Birren, a psychology professor at the Andrus Gerontology Center of the University of Southern California. His writing style and way of communicating struck a chord with me. I decided that this was the man with whom I wanted to spend a sabbatical leave.

I sent a detailed letter to Dr. Birren outlining my interest in aging research, my need for library access, and perhaps a small room with a desk. I also indicated that I had a small research grant to support my sabbatical work. The opportunity to leave the cold Canadian winter behind was also very appealing to me. About a month later, I followed up my letter with a telephone call to Dr. Birren. Dr. Birren's administrative assistant, Eleanor James, answered the phone. Eleanor proved to be a delightful, wonderful personality with a bubbly, positive disposition. She indicated that "yes," they had received my letter and "yes," I would be welcomed to the Andrus Gerontology Center as a Visiting Research Associate for the 1981-82 academic year. Well, she made my day!

When I arrived in late August 1981, I did not know that I was one of the five Charter Fellows of the newly established Andrew Norman Institute for Advanced Study

in Gerontology and Geriatrics. Wow, I could not believe my totally unexpected good fortune. That was the beginning of a long-lasting association and beautiful friendship.

What's a Metaphor to You?

One of the things that endeared Jim to me was his love of metaphors, puns, and catchy phrases. In my opinion, Jim had a great sense of humor, sometimes a little dry, but funny. I once commented on his height while we were playing basketball at the USC campus. His response: "Being tall is a natural high." His comment on procrastination: "I once decided to procrastinate, but never got around to it." At one of Jim's autobiography classes, I had scribbled down the following phrase, "Even a purebred dog has fleas," but I neglected to note the context in which it was offered. Now, in hindsight, perhaps he meant to convey the fact that nobody is perfect.

Regarding his catchy phrases, there were a number of them related to hard work, theories of aging, and his beloved guided autobiography. Jim always expected you to work as hard as he did: "There is no such thing as a free lunch." Jim's comment on the state of current research on aging was: "Aging is data rich, but theory poor". On guided autobiography he remarked: "Life is lived forward but understood backward."; "You don't know where you're going unless you know where you have been."; "Guided autobiography is not therapy, but may be therapeutic."; and "A personal life is best understood from the inside out, not outside in."

A Glimpse of Jim from the Inside Out, not Outside In

In some ways, Jim was a very private man. He did not wear his emotions on his sleeve. He was also a very humble man not wanting to attract attention to his many awards, distinctions, and various honours which were always well deserved. He was also not one to volunteer to complete survey questionnaires of any kind. However, I did manage (I still don't know how I did it) to get Jim to complete a Semantic Differential Rating Scale on which he provided a rating of *Myself the Way I Am*, *Myself the*

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Way I would Like to Be, and the Way Others See Me, on a number of bi-polar adjectives. His responses gave me a glimpse of Jim from the Inside Out. Although I am not in a position to report Jim's specific responses, he seemed quite at ease with who he was as a person, with no aspirations to change.

On my first sabbatical leave in 1981, I was given the opportunity to give a colloquium at the Andrus Gerontology Center. Following the presentation, Jim invited me to join him for a walk and talk around the USC campus. He very much enjoyed the exercise and the privacy of a walk and talk. I asked him what he thought of my presentation. He came right to the point, "Gary, you have to speak more slowly and more clearly. Back up your points with good examples. You'll be fine." Needless to say, I really respected his immediate, honest, and supportive feedback. In hindsight, things turned out just fine.

On another walk and talk occasion at the USC campus, Jim asked me about the political situation in Canada. Not knowing nor caring much about politics, I responded in typical political fashion. I tried to fake it by saying a lot about nothing. He promptly filled me in with embarrassingly accurate detail. This was another "mentor moment" that taught me the importance of being honest, especially with a man who knew a lot about everything.

One time in a bar at a Gerontological Society of America Conference, Jim challenged me. "Gary, if you can tell me where my ancestors came from, I will buy you a beer." I promptly replied, "Luxembourg." A very surprised Jim shouted, "How did you know that?" I replied, "Well Jim, a few years ago you mentioned it in one of your Guided Autobiography classes." It never hurts to pay close attention to your mentor. I really enjoyed that beer!

Joined at the Hips: Jim and Betty Birren

My recollection of my association with Jim Birren would not be complete without including the love of his life, Betty. Diminutive in stature but big in heart and spirit, Betty lived the life of a devoted wife, a doting and supportive mother, a trusted colleague, and a constant friend to many who were blessed to have known her. She was Jim's guiding light. They did everything together. They worked the autobiography classes together. They were seen together at USC sponsored symposia, at public speaking events, and at a variety of social functions. At GSA Conferences, Betty would organize Jim's schedule ranging from his speaking engagements to meeting with colleagues from around the world who had requested an interview with him. An outside observer would think that they were joined at the hips.

Betty was also extremely thoughtful and generous. I specifically recall one time when I received an invitation from Betty and Jim to join them for supper at their home. It was Easter Sunday 1986 and I was by myself, away from home as a visiting scholar at USC. After supper Betty presented me with an Easter basket full of goodies. I was so grateful and so impressed with her generosity that she

inspired me to write a little poem as an expression of my deep appreciation and sincere gratitude for including me in their celebration.

Back in the late 1980s, I invited Jim to be our keynote speaker at the annual Robertson Lecture Series at Trent University. Betty came with him. Our family enjoyed their company very much. Jim, of course, was a very perceptive individual. He possessed an extremely broad range of knowledge and could speak on any subject. He explained difficult concepts with ease and often used concrete examples to back up his points. He had an uncanny ability to focus in on what was hot and current in several fields, particularly in psychology and gerontology. He seemed to be always right on target. When I introduced Jim to our large lecture audience, I spoke about Jim's perceptiveness to be right on the cutting edge of theory and research in gerontology. Not forgetting about Betty in the audience, I turned to her and asked her how it is that Jim is always so good at being "right on target." Her quick-witted response was priceless: "Well, it's simple, Dr. Reker. He shoots first and then draws rings around his mark afterwards." Jim and Betty Birren were like two peas in a pod.

The Birren Legacy

No one will ever dispute the fact that Jim Birren made a significant and lasting contribution to theory, research, and practice in the fields of psychology and gerontology. He was one of a handful of pioneers who drew attention to and promoted awareness of gerontology at a time when the study of aging was not a priority. He guided and nurtured the field of aging from its infancy to its maturity. Through his prolific publications, his approachable personality, and his open door policy at USC, he attracted many young and seasoned scholars from all corners of the world in search of his counsel, his vision, and his wisdom. Jim Birren is someone totally worthy of respect, admiration, and reverence. He was a legend in his time.

In Jim's later years, he continued to receive dedicated and loyal support from many of his followers. Several of them are contributors to this Special Issue. Most noteworthy, however, is the exceptional commitment and dedication provided by one of Jim's most trusted associates, Dr. Cheryl Svensson. On a professional level, Cheryl is a passionate promoter of Jim's guided autobiography approach. On a very personal level, she guided Jim through the physical, mental, and emotional challenges that are often associated with advancing years. Through her current professional activities of teaching and training on the methods of guided autobiography, Cheryl is motivating others to follow in Jim's footsteps. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that Dr. Cheryl Svensson will move the Birren legacy Forward and Onward.

The Wizard of Age

How does one pay tribute to an approachable, inspirational, supportive, caring, and nurturing person-

ality? On January 15, 2016, we lost a brilliant scholar and mentor. He touched many lives. He attracted many followers from all over the world who continue to promote his legacy. My personal worldview and perspective on life

were forever enriched because I was granted the opportunity to stand on the shoulders of a giant. To stand on the shoulders of a giant is a supernatural high. I miss him. Thank you, James E. Birren, for your unwavering support.

James E. Birren, the Wizard of Age

The straw man has no Brain, 'tis told
The tin man has no Heart.
The lion has no Courage, so
His Kingdom fell apart.

Gee Whiz, we can't endure omission.
The whole is part of our condition,
Cognition, affect, and conation,
The brain, the heart, and motivation.

We need an integrating scheme,
We need a Wizard with a Dream.

Great men have tried to pave the way
With useful theories of the day.
Through deep, dark caverns of our minds
They searched for answers of all kinds.

Take Freud, the Wizard of the Id
Or Watson, Wizard of the Kid.
There's Skinner, Wizard of the Mod
And Fritz Perls, the Wizard of Odd.

Of all great Wizards of our time
I have a special one in mind.
A Giant, a Legend, a Leader, a Sage
James E. Birren, the Wizard of Age.