
Shared Reminiscence

Remembering Betty Birren

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I first met Betty Birren in the early 1980's when I was a graduate student at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver. Jim and Betty had been invited to UBC to offer a summer course on the Guided Autobiography (GAB) and I was to be a student in the class. My faculty mentor (Jim Thornton) who had invited the Birrens to UBC had also invited me to join them for dinner on the evening before the class began. I was nervous meeting this couple about whom I had heard, and read, so much. On my way to the restaurant, which was walking distance from my apartment, a bird relieved itself on my head and shirt. Some say this is lucky; at the time I didn't share that appraisal. I returned home to quickly wash-up, change my clothes before starting on my way back to the restaurant, now late and anxious. I was seated beside Betty who immediately put me at ease and allowed us to both to laugh at this incident. I was lucky after all.

The next day, class began; the format of the GAB was an intensive two-week session of morning lecturers and discussions followed by afternoon small group experiential sessions based on the themes of the GAB. Jim led the morning seminars reviewing theory, research, and practice with the acumen and depth for which Jim is so well known. Betty would offer pithy comments, sharing from her experience with keen and direct observation. One such comment, that has stayed with me for now almost three decades, was her description of the experience of GAB participation. Betty likened the process of thematic life review to a light refracting through a multi-sided prism: even as it was ostensibly the same light (read: life) being projected (read: reviewed), it was refracted differently based on the side of the prism (read: theme) offering a unique, colorful and mutable perspective. I was struck by the elegance and imaginativeness of this analogy; I have been taken by and will always remember the elegance and creativity of Betty Birren.

Betty skillfully led the small group of which I was a member in the GAB and, as such, we got to know each other well, through the group sharing, and in ways that were very different from how Jim and I knew each other. That is, Betty and I got to know each other based on the intimate (and sometimes secret and even embarrassing) details of my life story sharing; Jim and I got to know each other based on our mutual interests in research on such stories. Over the many years of our association, Betty and I had a type of "insider" language and knowledge and she always honored the confidentiality of the source of this knowledge. Her integrity always impressed me.

A few years later, as a post-doctoral fellow, I spent time in residence at USC with Jim (in the program he founded) and with Jim and Betty—literally in their residence where they had kindly offered a spare room for my multi-month stay. ("My room" in their Pacific Palisades home has also been claimed by others as "their room," as Betty and Jim generatively and frequently opened their home to visiting scholars over the years, but I will always lay claims to this space.) I have many fond memories of these times. For example, I recall Saturday mornings when, after breakfast, we would all retreat to our work areas in the home: me in "my room," Jim in his library, and Betty at her work station—a sort of make-shift office in a small room overlooking the beautiful back yard of their home. I would struggle with a paragraph for a chapter I was writing, Jim would dictate a complete chapter he was writing, and Betty would whistle as she worked on membership and other matters related to the California Council on Gerontology and Geriatrics (CCGG), an organization for which she was the founding Executive Director.

I believed she enjoyed this work, from her whistles, and I know she loved this organization, that now offers a scholarship named for Betty and Jim. She nurtured it from a small group of academics meeting in their home, to an agency affecting change and policy in the state of California—and beyond. When I moved to California, Betty was one of the first people to send me a card welcoming me to the state, along with an application to join CCGG.

Betty Birren lived a professional life slightly to the left of the spotlight on many occasions but with an impact that was remarkable and lasting—on colleagues, the field and its institutions. She is an integral part of the Guided Autobiography—and certainly an integral part of my experience in the GAB. She had insight that I respect, an integrity that I admire, and a direct, compassionate and understated manner. This is the Betty I remember; I will be forever grateful for having known her and for the many memories of which she is a part.