

Shared Reminiscence

In Memory of Betty Birren

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It is said that big things come in small packages. There is no question that our beloved Betty Birren embodied that sentiment. 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.

My own association with Betty spanned some 32 years. I really enjoyed our professional interaction talking about developmental psychology. There were numerous occasions at conferences and social gatherings with Betty and Jim Birren. They were seldom seen alone. They were devoted to each other. Betty kept Jim on track to make sure that he didn't miss promised meetings with many of his colleagues, friends, and acquaintances. Indeed, it would not be a stretch to conclude that they were "joined at the hip." Betty was also quite the stickler for accuracy and getting it done right. I remember giving a talk on measurement issues and mentioned the so-called "strongly agree-strongly disagree" Likert Scale. My pronunciation of the name was something like "like-ert." At the end of my talk, she insisted that the correct pronunciation was "lick-ert". And she backed it up by saying that she talked to the famous researcher personally and that is how he wanted it pronounced. Needless to say I offered my apology. Moreover, Betty was the best professional critic anyone could have had. If you wanted an honest opinion you got it from Betty. She never minced words. Betty I thank you for your much appreciated input on a variety of topics important to both of us.

I fondly remember a time in 1986 when I was a visiting scholar on sabbatical leave working with Jim Birren at the University of Southern California. It was Easter time. I was alone away from my family in Canada and I was feeling a little lonely. Betty invited me to join the Birrens at their home for some Easter fare. That act of kindness and concern for others inspired me to write Betty a thank you note in the form of a poem. That poem was meant to express my deep appreciation and sincere gratitude to both Betty and Jim for including me in their celebration. I share this poem in the memory of Elizabeth Ann Birren.

*I was alone.
You asked me to your home
To dine, with family and good friends
At Easter time.*

*I was so pleased.
You shared fine food and wine and never ceased
In giving—of yourself, your time, and place
Of living.*

*I was impressed.
You offered Easter fare, the very best
In town, a basket graced with care
To share around.*

With fondness,

Gary T. Reker, Colleague and Friend