



## Special Issue in Honor of James Emmett Birren (1918-2016)

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*The International Journal of Reminiscence and Life Review, (2018), Volume 5, Issue 1,*  
URL: <http://143.95.253.101/~radfordojs/index.php/IJRLR/index>

### Table of Contents

Introduction to the Special Issue: In Honor of James Emmett Birren (1918-2016) <i>Cheryl M. Svensson</i>	1
James E. Birren: A Unique Three Generational Perspective <i>Pauline S. Abbott; Pamela S. Abbott-Enz</i>	2-3
A Tribute to Jim Birren <i>Vern Bengtson</i>	4-5
The End: Death as Part of the Life Story <i>Susan Bluck; Emily L. Mroz</i>	6-14
James E. Birren and the Stories of Life <i>Kathryn N. Cochran</i>	15-17
The Journey to Social Policy: Yet Another Birren Contribution to Multidisciplinary Research and Graduate Education <i>Neal E. Cutler</i>	18-21
Research on Guided Autobiography: A Review of Content, Process, and Outcome <i>Brian de Vries; James E. Thornton</i>	22-27
Jim Birren as a Professor and Man <i>John J. Herr</i>	28
The Sauna to the Icy Lake: Reflections on my Journey with Jim Birren <i>Gary Irwin-Kenyon</i>	29-30
A Message of Gratitude <i>Helen Kerschmer</i>	31-32
Jim Birren: Visionary and Master Builder of Gerontology <i>Phoebe Liebig</i>	33-37
Because of Jim <i>Patricia McDonald</i>	38

## Table of Contents (Continued)

Personal Reflections on the Life of a Giant: James Emmett Birren, the Wizard of Age <i>Gary T. Reker</i>	39-41
From Counterpart Theory to Janus Model: In Memoriam – James E. Birren, Friend, Mentor, and Colleague <i>Johannes J. F. Schroots</i>	42-48
James E. Birren – Mentor, Colleague, and Friend <i>Harvey L. Sterns</i>	49-50
Who Was James Emmett Birren? <i>Cheryl M. Svensson</i>	51-53
Reflections on James E. and Betty Birren: Events Shaping Gerontological Studies at the University of British Columbia and My Life Review <i>James E. Thornton</i>	54-57
Jim on Cape Cod <i>Mary O'Brien Tyrrell</i>	58
The Wisdom of Jim Birren <i>Jeffrey Dean Webster</i>	59-61
The Major Branching Points in My Life Toward Wisdom <i>Koichi Yamamoto</i>	62-64
Jim Birren's Role in the Development of Educational Programs in Gerontology <i>Steven H. Zarit</i>	65-66

## Introduction to the Special Issue: In Honor of James Emmett Birren (1918-2016)

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Guest Editor for the Special Issue  
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This special edition is dedicated to the life and work of James E. Birren. Dr. Birren was a pioneer in the field of aging, working in research in the 1940s, long before gerontology became an independent, academic discipline. In 1947 he worked with Nathan Shock in the inaugural gerontology research unit in the U.S. Public Health Service and studied differences between young and old subjects. He attended the first Gerontological Society of America meeting in 1948. At the National Institute of Mental Health he founded the first section on aging and in 1965 he left for the University of Southern California (USC) to set up the university's first gerontology program. He secured grants, raised funds, and built the Ethel Percy Andrus Gerontology Center in 1973. Seeing the need for educational programs for those who would work with older adults, Jim created the USC Leonard Davis School of Gerontology in 1975 and became the inaugural dean until 1989.

Jim Birren was a prolific writer and published more than 250 articles on aging. He wrote the first *Psychology of Aging* textbook in 1964 and was the editor-in-chief for the well-known, three-volume, *Handbooks of Aging* series. He was also the first editor for the *Encyclopedia of Gerontology*. In addition to his many published articles that centered on speed of behavior and aging as well as theoretical issues, he has written three books on the topic of Guided Autobiography, his main focus and passion later in his career: *Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults*, (1991), *Where to Go From Here*, (1997), and *Telling the Stories of Life Through Guided Autobiography Groups*, (2001).

Jim acquired many awards and accolades during his long and illustrious career. He is a Past President of the Gerontological Society of America, the American Society on Aging, the California Council on Gerontology and Geriatrics, and the Division on Adult Development and Aging of the American Psychological Association. He was awarded the Brookdale Award for Gerontological Research, the Brookdale Distinguished Scholar, the

Gerontological Society award for Meritorious Research, the 1989 Sandoz Prize for Gerontological Research, the 2004 National Council on Aging, Ollie Randall Award and many more. He received honorary doctorates from the University of Göteborg, Sweden and St. Thomas University, New Brunswick, Canada.

For those of you who do not know of James Birren, these are just a few of the remarkable achievements from his 97+ years of life. These are the facts that are recorded and easily verifiable (Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James\\_Birren](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Birren)). But what are some of the less well-known aspects of Jim Birren's life and career? Who was he, really? How did others perceive him? What was his overall influence on the field of aging? What impact did he have on family, friends, students, and peers? In this special issue, you will learn of the many facets of Jim Birren's life. He was a researcher and academic who laid the groundwork for further studies in wisdom and personal narrative. He was on the cutting edge of gerontological research worldwide; he attended conferences and spread his wisdom around the world. He was a mentor and even father figure to researchers who today continue to carry on his work. Jim was someone who opened doors, welcomed newcomers to the field of aging and encouraged and even *pushed* them along in their careers. You will get an inside look at how the study of gerontology has grown to encompass Jim's vision of a multi-disciplinary field. You will glimpse the inner life of one of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries' greatest luminaries. Through the words of those who have written about their time spent with Jim and his influence, you will gain an intimate view of his life.

It has been a privilege and honor to be asked to edit this special edition. In many ways, reading the enclosed articles has brought Jim to life once again. I would like to thank Tom Pierce, editor of this journal, for his decision to create a special edition dedicated to Jim Birren. Secondly, I wish to thank all the contributors to this special edition who wrote and shared their memories of time spent with Jim and his impact on gerontology. I also would like to acknowledge and thank Anita Woods for her help editing the submissions and insightful suggestions. Without all of you, this edition would never have occurred. It is now my pleasure to introduce you to James Emmett Birren—the man and the legend.

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

## James E. Birren: A Unique Three Generational Perspective

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It was 1968 when Dr. Bernard C. Abbott, the newly appointed Director of the University of Southern California's Allan Hancock Foundation and Chair of Biological Sciences, first met Dr. James E. Birren, the Dean of the evolving Gerontology Center. As the design for the innovative building progressed, they, along with key faculty and staff, created the plans for the third floor biology research laboratory spaces. The multi-disciplinary nature of the field of Gerontology required faculty appointments jointly held between various disciplines and thus began an administrative relationship for budgets, salary negotiations, and research. Over the ensuing 20 years Bernard Abbott and James Birren became known as 'Bud' and 'Jim', serving on numerous university committees and enjoying an evolving comradery that extended beyond the campus confines. The late 1980's saw both men leave their roles in university administration to pursue other endeavors. Jim left for UCLA to take up his work on Guided Autobiography in earnest.

During the course of the 1970's, the role of the faculty wife was not to be ignored. Both Doris Abbott and Betty Birren worked together as members of the Faculty Wives Group and the campus-wide Town and Gown organization, to make available scholarships for students, and to represent USC in the Southern California Faculty Wives Association. This was the first Abbott generation interaction with Jim Birren and his stalwart partner, Betty. All are now gone, but their legacy lives on.

In 1976, Bernard's daughter Pauline entered USC to complete a degree in Psychology. Her interest was in counseling and she was guided to Jim Birren for some traditional academic advice. However, after a couple of meetings in which Jim asked a few of his 'blue sky' questions, gave his low key 'have you thought about' answers, and 'let me introduce you to...' suggestions, it became clear that Gerontology was not to be ignored. At Jim's behest, meeting Margaret Hartford, social worker extraordinaire and James Peterson Acting Director of the

School of Gerontology, set her out on a new and vibrant path. Following graduation, Pauline began an interesting career in teaching exercise and life skills courses to older adults and working in a senior nutrition program. However, the academic environment drew her back to campus and the world of the Andrus Center, where Jim introduced her to the newly appointed School Director, David Peterson. So began a twenty year career at the Center with the Davis School, the completion of further degrees, and the opportunity to become a professional colleague of the Birrens.

Always an innovator, during the early 1980's Jim and Betty Birren and a colleague established the California Council of Gerontology and Geriatrics (CCGG), a new statewide organization to bring together professionals in the field of aging. Teaching and research faculty from campuses in the statewide systems of the University of California (UC), California State University (CSU), private colleges and universities, and Community Colleges (CC) began to meet on a regular basis. In characteristic Jim Birren style, he encouraged the governance of the group to go forward with rotating officers, while he stayed regularly involved. Betty took on the role of volunteer Executive Director for several years in order to maintain the CCGG's financial integrity through membership. Jim encouraged Pauline's participation in the organization from the beginning; thus allowing her to expand her network, take on different leadership roles including President, and work with colleagues in CCGG to establish a University/Legislative Partnership that resulted in public hearings in Sacramento to further the message of Education on Aging from the Andrus Gerontology Center.

Although Jim's retirement from USC took him to UCLA, his work with Guided Autobiography (GAB) brought together many of his former students to continue to collaborate. Pauline again found herself working with Jim, although by this time she had become the Director of the California State University Fullerton Institute of Gerontology. As part of a small group facilitating yet another Birren innovation and Jim's authorship of the Birren Guided Autobiography Model, Pauline observed Jim as the consummate mentor, guide, and teacher. Pauline was always in awe of Jim's ability to think beyond the established parameters, identify a void and fill it with an appropriate action, and effect profoundly impactful outcomes.

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With the book written and methods tested, the Center for Guided Autobiography was established and given a temporary home at CSU Fullerton. Jim was appointed Senior Research Faculty, and GAB courses were offered for the first time in Orange County. It was during this time that Jim was recognized for his work at the American Society on Aging, with a unique day-long international forum on life history. Dr. Cheryl Svensson began the journey to develop a DVD of Jim leading the GAB session and transform the work into an online instrument. Again, Jim's innovation lives on through others.

Pauline formally retired in 2012 after a very rewarding, successful, and unexpected 35 year career in Gerontology with thanks in great part to Jim Birren—and she continues to work in the field on non-profit boards and in the community. This was the second generation of Abbotts to interact with the Birren legacy.

Pamela Abbott-Enz, daughter of Pauline and granddaughter of Bernard, grew up with the Birren name in the household. A member of her grandfather's cohort, Jim and Betty knew her and she saw them, with the eyes of a child, as a nice older couple. At sixteen, she had her first job as a summer student worker in the USC Gerontology Center working with Dr. Valerie Remnet in the Center's Extended Education office. As the office runner, Pam frequently interacted with Jim, and she was struck by his kind nature. During her freshman year on the USC campus, Pam would take breaks from practice with the Trojan Marching Band Flag Squad and visit the Gerontology Center. She enjoyed interacting with Jim as part of her regular routine. Little did anyone know that the seeds of Gerontology had been planted and just needed to be nurtured.

In 1990 Pam left to attend university in northern California where she met a member of the CCGG network (the organization started by Jim). Susan Hillier, Psychology Professor and Gerontology Program Coordinator, became her mentor as Pam pursued a gerontology certificate. When Pam applied to graduate school, Jim wrote a glowing letter of recommendation. When Pam married in 1993, Jim and Betty attended her wedding reception. She completed her Bachelor's and Master's degrees and established herself in the North Bay

area as an educator. In 2001, Pam was invited to join the Sonoma State gerontology program as a lecturer, and she helped edit the Hillier textbook. Her love for technology forged the way for her to become a sought after online gerontology instructor with roles at Sonoma State University, CSU East Bay, the SSU Gerontology Consortium, and American River College. When interacting with her students, Pam often shares how fortunate she feels to have been a "gerontology baby," growing up in the field and having had a chance to know pioneers like Jim. She also appreciates what a powerhouse Betty was, both as a professor's wife and in her work with CCGG.

In 2004 the American Society on Aging met in San Francisco, and both Pauline and Pam were presenting. They met Jim and Betty in the lobby of the hotel as they were heading to meet their son—a journey that would require them to use BART. They didn't think anything of taking the bus and train, luggage in tow, into Oakland at midnight, but Pam insisted that she would drive them. During an hour drive filled with wrong turns, laughter, and great conversation across the Bay Bridge, Pam forged a bond with Jim and Betty, allowing them to have a mutual laugh whenever they saw each other after that. No one knew that the hour in a car with Jim and Betty would turn out to be another pivotal moment in Pam's life.

In 2016 Pam began evaluating her interest in the connections among wisdom, spirituality, creativity, and aging. As she now pursues her Ph.D/D.Div. Pam is spending hours with Jim's academic work on wisdom and is excited to be participating in the guided autobiography program, creating new connections, and carrying on the legacy through networks that were established and nurtured by Jim. Pam is the third generation of the special Abbott/Birren interaction—a unique golden thread that has woven itself over nearly 50 years.

*We thank you Jim and Betty Birren for all the special people that you brought into our lives, the careers that you have helped develop, and the wisdom and insights you shared over your career that we now glean insights from in new and creative ways.*

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

### A Tribute to Jim Birren

Vern Bengtson

University of Southern California

Jim Birren will always be remembered as a giant:

*A founder in establishing American gerontology.  
A pioneer in the cognitive psychology of aging.  
A builder of multidisciplinary research in aging.*

I will always remember him as a father figure:

*Who helped me begin my career.  
Who mentored me.  
Who influenced my 50 years of academic research.*

Jim Birren gave me my first job:

*He recruited me from the University of Chicago in  
1967.  
He helped me find our first apartment when I landed  
at USC.  
He and Betty gave my daughters their very first  
Paddington Bear books.*

Jim Birren counseled me to obtain my first NIH grant:

*In 1969, to study families and intergenerational  
relationship.  
His advice on the design of the study was so wise.  
That the study is remarkably still going on, 47 years  
later (LSOG Wave-9, 2016).*

Jim Birren counseled me to buy USC season football tickets:

*In 1969, O.J. Simpson won the Heisman Trophy.  
Today, our tickets are almost close to the 40 yard-line  
after all these years (Almost).*

Jim Birren has influenced the lives of so many people, like myself, over the years. As I recall working with him, and the reactions of people who worked with him, I have come to feel there are four words that best describe his

impact. Jim was: Generative, Gracious, Generous—and, of course, he was a Genius.

First of all, Jim was *generative*. Many geniuses, many high achievers soar as their star moves upwards and then -poof! The blaze goes out. But Jim was a builder. He built institutions and organizations on foundations that endured. The Leonard Davis School of Gerontology at the University of Southern California has just celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> year. The series of *Handbooks of Aging*—psychology, biology, and social sciences—which Birren began in 1960 are now in their eighth and ninth editions. Jim had organizational and administrative abilities that were far beyond those of most academicians and researchers. His ability to plan ahead, to see around the next corner, allowed him to be generative far into the future. And with his autobiographies and life review projects he was still intellectually generative well into the ninth decade of his life.

Secondly, Jim was *gracious*. He made you feel valued and that your opinion was important. And he listened. This helped him be generative. I remember him telling me how important “hallway administration” was. Hallway administration means that “You get out of your office and you walk down the hallway and you poke your head in people’s doors and you ask them how things are going for them.” Jim never seemed hurried, or at least not too hurried to listen to you. He wasn’t looking over your shoulder to search out someone more important to talk to. He remembered how many kids you had and how old they were. That seemed as important as how many papers you had published—especially for a junior researcher. And then there were the parties in Jim and Betty’s back yard. Jim and Betty were gracious hosts. And they always made you feel like you were the guest of honor.

Thirdly, Jim Birren was *generous*. He gave people credit and didn’t hog the limelight for himself. Most of his publications were co-authored and most were with students or junior scholars. He actively promoted the careers of his students and junior associates. Of course, this paid off, in loyalty and self-confidence from his junior colleagues. My first encounter with the Birren generosity came when I was still a graduate student at Chicago. I came out for a job interview at UC Berkeley and then down to USC. The two schools each gave me an offer, for the same amount of money, a magnificent \$9,500 (a year, not month). When Jim heard of the Berkeley offer, he impulsively upped the USC offer and pressed me to accept. So I became a Trojan, and not a Cal Bear, for an additional

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\$500--per year. This may be a somewhat trivial example (though it wasn't, for me—I bought a car for that \$500). But early on in my career I saw how Jim was generous to those around him, particularly to students, and how much of a multiplier this was—how this gave confidence and affirmation to all of those in Jim's orbit. I think this maxim is true of Jim's generous style of affirmation: *When you were working with Jim, you always did better than you thought you could do.*

Obviously, Jim Birren was a *genius*. The many of us who worked with him, both locally and abroad, quickly became aware of that. His observers saw him build a world-class research institute on aging at the corner of Exposition and Vermont out of a school that had a

reputation for football, and talk AARP into putting up a world-class research building to house it. We watched him get grant after grant from NIH, while putting out Handbook after Handbook on research on aging. We saw him lobby in Washington for the NIH and the AOA, while turning out cohort after cohort of talented students and publishing paper after paper that advanced our field. An endless line of successes—he was a genius, to be sure, and a fantastic juggler too.

This is the lasting personal memory I will always have about Jim Birren; when I was working with him, I always seemed to do better than when I was working alone. Jim Birren brought out the best in people, and that shows in his astonishingly long and productive career.

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

## The End: Death as Part of the Life Story



Susan Bluck and Emily L. Mroz  
*University of Florida*

This article is a tribute to James Birren (1918-2016), a pioneer in Gerontology. Among his many contributions was the development of Guided Autobiography (Birren & Deutchman, 1991). This structured reminiscence technique includes various themes, but innovatively, explores life experience with death as a key component of individuals' lives. Inspired by his recognition of death as part of life, we provide a conceptualization for further consideration of death as part of the life story. We suggest two central ways in which this occurs: (i) while individuals are alive, others' endings become part of their continuing life story, and (ii) part of being human is that we all die. The fact that humans know that their story will one day end may affect what they do and the stories they tell about their lives well before-hand. Empirical research from our own lab is woven with extant literature to support our conceptualization of death as part of the life story.

This article is a tribute to a Gerontology pioneer (Bluck, Alea, & Ali, 2014). Dr. James Birren, a groundbreaking psychologist, innovative thinker, and rigorous researcher, died January 15, 2016.<sup>1</sup> He was 97. He leaves a rich legacy in the hundreds of scholars he inspired and the thousands who cite his work. Birren, sometimes referred to as the father of Gerontology, joined the field before it was a field. In the 1950s he heralded a cry for national funding to support research on psychological development through midlife, old age, and to the end (Birren, 1958). One of his countless contributions was a refusal to ignore death as part of aging and of the human life story. For this special issue that honors his life, at the time of his death, we focus on that aspect of his work. We begin with a review of his contributions to the field of

aging and memory, and particularly the creation of Guided Autobiography in which experience with death appears as a major life theme. Inspired by Jim's invitation to consider death as central to life, we then present some of our own work on death as part of the life story.

### A Lifetime of Ideas

Birren was an early champion of studying the subjective experience of aging. Not satisfied with the medicalized view prominent then, and still today (Gawande, 2014), that itemizes the 'problems of aging,' he argued for understanding *aging from within* (Ruth, Birren, & Polkinghorne, 1996). This includes retrospective creation of meaning for life's experiences (Freeman, 2010). Birren emphasized heterogeneity, allowing that each person grows, and grows old, in a unique way. His thinking pushed against the theory of disengagement in old age that held sway at the time (e.g., Cumming, Dean, Newell, & McCaffrey, 1960). Remembering one's past, reminiscing, had been reduced to a symptom of aging (i.e.,

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<sup>1</sup> An obituary for James Birren may be found at the following link (Beth Newcomb, USC News, January 15, 2016):

<https://news.usc.edu/90915/in-memoriam-james-e-birren-97/>.  
Learn more about his life at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James\\_Birren](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Birren)



escapism) by disengagement theorists. Trained as an experimentalist, he advocated for scientific curiosity in investigating, not pathologizing, memory in old age. Jim Birren, and his contemporary Bob Butler, were in a minority as they launched the idea of autobiographical reflection as an adaptive psychosocial process (e.g., Butler, 1963). In doing so, Birren helped turn the tide, implicitly opening the way for waves of lifespan developmental research on reminiscence and life review (e.g., Haight, Webster, & Ingebretsen, 1995), autobiographical memory (Bluck & Alea, 2002; Singer & Blagov, 2004) and life stories (e.g., McAdams & McLean, 2013).

### *How to Tell a Life: Guided Autobiography*

While Birren's ideas were rippling out through the academic community, his own research deepened. He proposed that guided reminiscence should result in a more meaningful integration of one's past and present (Reker, Birren, & Svensson, 2013). He held that, "You don't know where you are going unless you know where you have been" (Birren & Birren, 2004). Reminiscence is now accepted as a functional resource in daily life (Bluck, Alea, & Demiray, 2010; Bluck & Levine, 1998) and incorporated in a variety of therapeutic modalities (Singer & Skerrett, 2014; Westerhof, Bohlmeijer, & Webster, 2010). One of the first of these was the *Guided Autobiography* technique created by Birren and colleagues in 1976 as a structured process for community groups (Birren & Deutchman, 1991). It has since been shown to increase well-being (Birren & Birren, 2004), foster personal growth (Reker et al., 2013), decrease depressive symptomology (Westerhof, Bohlmeijer, & Valenkamp, 2005), and reduce negative affect (Richeson & Thorson, 2002).

The theoretical underpinning for Birren's development of the technique was that memory is not a verbatim record of life. Instead, the life story is redefined as we age (Birren & Hedlund, 1986). This was a rather radical notion at the time. While mainstream cognitive psychology focused on documenting age-related declines in memory performance and accuracy, Birren highlighted the importance of memory subjectivity and malleability (e.g., *historical truth vs. narrative truth*, Birren, & Polkinghorne, 1996). He argued that, in the context of Guided Autobiography, one *restories* past experiences in relation to present circumstances (Kenyon, Clark, & deVries, 2001).

### *A Matter of Life... and Death*

Birren and colleagues designed the Guided Autobiography technique to aid individuals to remember events across nine life themes (e.g., your family, the role of money in your life; Birren & Deutchman, 1991). Using these prompts to reflect allows viewing life's events, and how they interconnect, from diverse angles (see *Remembering Betty Birren*, de Vries, 2013). As one life theme, Birren

included: *your experiences with death or your ideas about death*. His innovation is again evident here. Jim Birren did not only demand academic attention to the fact that we all age. With inclusion of this theme in Guided Autobiography, he also squarely points out that we all die. He acknowledged death as an unavoidable aspect of life, and of the life story. Even today, however, little research on memory for the personal past focuses on experiences with death (cf., de Vries, Bluck, & Birren, 1993; Romaniuk & Romaniuk, 1981; Webster, 1993). As such, we felt it a fitting tribute to the end of Jim's life story, to his death, to further elaborate on the importance he placed on death in how individuals story their lives. We do that here by presenting some ideas on what it means to consider death as part of the life story, including some of the research we have been doing at the University of Florida Life Story Lab.

### Death as Part of the Life Story

We are individuals. Our lives are unique. Each life plays out in myriad, incredible, joyous and painful ways in settings from Austria to Zimbabwe, embedded in historical time. The human universal, however, is that our stories share the same ending. The Syrian proverb applies to all: *Birth is the messenger of death*. That is, as Birren & Deutchman (1991) recognized, death is a central theme in the life story.

As researchers doing life story work, we collect various types of memory narratives, providing interesting snippets and glimpses of lives. What are people's earliest memories, the turning points, high points and low points that define their life story (McAdams, 1995)? A vibrant Cuban-American woman tells of falling in love in college and her simple romantic wedding in bare feet surrounded by flowers on a tropical beach. A bright young Turkish woman tells boldly of her independence and determination in coming to America to pursue her scholarly dreams and the amazing job she then obtains. One quiet old Native Indian man speaks sparingly of his struggle with his health and his friends' encouragement to see a doctor despite his distrust. These varied people all follow different paths, their lives unfolding this way and that.

As you hear these people's stories it is only natural to be curious and ask, "Well, what happened next? How did things turn out?" No need for a spoiler alert, however, when we talk about life stories. The answer is that things always turn out the same – in the end. The romantic couple, the promising scholar, the gentle old native man - they all die. A thought-provoking sidebar here, is that it is not just them who die. I myself, now happily writing this text and looking up to see a butterfly flitting around the lantana plant in the garden, will one day die. Also, alas, the news you were hoping I would not be so tactless as to write plainly in black and white: you too will die.

This is and isn't news. In a documentary, (National Film Board of Canada: Kovanic & Murray, 1998) the Canadian artist Joe Average, when diagnosed HIV-

positive in the 1980s, said that everyone acts as if the news of death is a surprise ending, but that of course it's not. It's the only ending. It is one of the only things in life that is not a surprise. There are some surprises though. The mystery of our death lies in when and how it will transpire. The leading causes of death in the US are heart disease and cancer (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). When death is not sudden and unexpected, as in being struck by lightning (e.g., averages 30 per year; US National Weather Service, 2017), the end of our story is shaped with and by others. Those around the dying person often literally affect what happens to them (i.e., the death scene; Pierson, Curtis, & Patrick, 2002) but also play an important role in how death is storied. We depend on those around us not just to feed us apple sauce (as the first author did with her Dad on his deathbed) but to help create the tone and texture of the story's end (in her Dad's case, the feeling once again, of a loving picnic).

This shaping of the death story rings true in that we co-construct stories with others in every phase of our lives (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). Somehow at the end, though, it can be even more poignant (Freeman, 2016a), more crucial, that we realize the power we have to shape stories as actor, agent, and author (McAdams, 2013). After all, everyone knows that a good story depends, in part, on its ending. Crafting that ending together can be a precious gift to the dying person and also to their caregivers, their loved ones (Callanan & Kelley, 1992; Freeman, 2016a).

In sum, our goal in pursuing this line of thinking on death as part of the life story (Birren & Deutchman, 1991) is that it may act as an avenue for deepening compassion. This is important for those in the health and helping professions who may gain purpose from viewing their work as not only providing medical aid but as playing a role in the end of people's stories. Professionals can help create or deny 'what dying people want' (Kuhl, 2003). That said, understanding death as part of the life story is essential for us all. Without exception, we will shape the end of our own life story and our loved ones' stories in what we do and feel and say (Freeman, 2016b), and in what we choose not to, or cannot, do or say.

## Two Ways that Death is Part of the Life Story

In Guided Autobiography (Birren & Deutchman, 1991) the death theme directs individuals to reflect on how experiences with other's deaths have affected their life and to examine how their ideas about death have shifted over time. We translate this into two ways in which death is part of the life story. First, while we are alive, others' endings become part of our continuing life story. When we walk on in life, we take our memories with us. Depending on the sharer, listener, and their relationship, memory-sharing can be an adaptive tool for meaning-making in the face of loss (Baddeley & Singer, 2009). Individuals turn to family and friends to forge the transition through this stressful life event (de Vries, Utz, Caserta, & Lund, 2013). People spontaneously remember and also make a point of

remembering through individual, group, and societal memorializing practices that aid in carrying their loved ones with them as their story continues (Mroz & Bluck, 2016).

The second way that death is part of the life story is that each of us will die. Our life story has an end, a final chapter, a last page. It may even have some famous last words: "I must go in. The fog is rising." (Emily Dickinson, 1830-1886); "I'm shot" (John Lennon, 1940-1980); "I told you I was ill" (Spike Milligan, epitaph, 1918-2005); "Open the bedroom shutter so that more light can come in" (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 1749-1832); "Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow." (Steve Jobs, 1955-2011). Whether we end with wry or poetic last words, we will all have last words, last moments: an end to our story. The knowledge that life ends affects the story that comes before.

## *While We Live, Others' Endings Are Part of Our Life Story*

The idea that death-related events are part of the life story relies on the assumption that when asked about their lives, individuals do remember and nominate such events as central. In one study with over a thousand participants (Glück & Bluck, 2007), we asked individuals to complete a life story matrix listing up to fifteen events central to their life story. Content-coding suggested that 17% of all central events concerned illness and death. This was roughly the same frequency as birth-related events. In another study, (Liao & Bluck, 2017; N = 187) we asked adults to report an important life experience that challenged their sense of self. Eleven percent of young people's events, and 26% of older people's events were about losing a loved one. At a basic frequency level, then, it does appear that individuals include such events as important to their life story. As one example, the second author notes that she sometimes finds it difficult *not* to bring up the death of her father when talking to others. Though she knows it might be seen as morbid, she feels compelled to refer to his life, to remember his sickness and death during her teenage years, because it is so central to her own story.

The question then, is how do these death experiences resonate with people? Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (1975), the influential psychiatrist who forged the field of death and dying, wrote: "I am convinced that my experiences with the reality of death have enriched my life more than any other experiences" (pp. 125). Of course, this may be due to the fact that understanding and working with death was her calling. What do other people report about how experiences with death are integrated into their life story? We asked people with varying levels of experience with death (N = 52) to provide a specific death-related memory as well as what, if anything, they felt they had learned from the experience, in a brief motto (Mackay & Bluck, 2010). Excerpts from a few of the stories are provided here. The first two narratives identify particularly memorable aspects of death experiences:

*I was in the room at the hospice when my wife was sleeping. I had stayed by her bed all night. About 7AM she started to move. I called the nurse. When she came in she found that death was close and went to get my daughter who was in another room sleeping. When my daughter came in my wife seemed to wake up and said "Hello Sweets" to my daughter. It was really strange as she had been sedated and hardly moved for 24 hours or more. It is something I will never forget.*

*A young woman at our Hospice who had one thing she wanted to accomplish and that was to plant flowers in front of the house. I was so sure she would not be able to do this as she was very ill and frail. The next morning her mother called me and told me that she had gotten out of bed and gone out and planted those flowers. She told her mom to make sure that she called me and reported her task as done. Those were her last words.*

The next two excerpts provide a sense of the emotional complexity of such narratives:

*...and I often feel she was handling her illness much better than I. She didn't want sympathy and felt she had to be the strong one both to me as well as her family. I often ask myself if, when that time comes for me, will I be as strong?*

*...then I remembered what he had said to me three days earlier about how he was doing a good job of dying and I had come in and messed it up. I felt he needed me to leave so I went home after I said goodbye.*

Reflections on death-related experiences are often meaningfully interpreted, as shown in these narratives. About 85% of this sample said they had learned a lesson from the death-related event they shared. The lessons were content-coded ( $Kappa = .72$ ). Sixty percent concerned changes in life philosophy. These focus on giving life greater purpose or ways of seeing the world as having order and meaning. Some examples include: (i) Appreciate your family. Never take them for granted, (ii) All is possible through perseverance, (iii) If it was meant to be, it will be, (iv) Listen carefully to friends and their needs, and (v) The Lord is always by your side and will take care of you - if you let him. The other 40% were death-specific lessons, describing a new understanding of death itself that individuals now carry with them, based on their remembered experience. Some examples include: (i) Don't drink too much. It really can kill you, (ii) Death can be peaceful, (iii) Accept death as a part of life, and (iv) Life goes on right up to the point of dying.

These lessons give a sense of how people keep remembered death events with them to guide them, long after the loved one is gone. We collected only brief mottos, however. As such, we include here a case study completed

by a colleague (Freeman, 2016a) that gives a deeper, richer sense of how co-constructing the end of the story can result in profound lessons and experiences that individuals take with them into their own story after the loss. Family and friends take on end-of-life caregiving voluntarily and many find it a rewarding experience (Stephen, Townsend, Martire, & Druly, 2001). Particularly when individuals are very old, or frail, or sick, they become closely interconnected with healthcare providers but also with their loved ones: dying people rely even more on informal care than frail elders who are not yet at end-of-life (Wolff, Dy, Frick, & Kasper, 2007). This interconnectedness may be particularly intimate when the care provider and dying person's stories have been intertwined over a lifetime, as it is with the mother and son in this case study. In describing his mother's decline due to Alzheimer's disease and finally her death, Freeman feels deeply into his mother's world, actively creating life with her even until the end. He writes that on arriving to visit her:

*My mother would likely be slumped over, half asleep, just kind of . . . being. "She" didn't really exist at this point. Maybe this isn't the right way of putting it. Let's just say she was kind of dormant, sliding in and out of consciousness, but more out than in. All of this would change when I entered and said hi or touched her hair or her shoulder. "She" would suddenly come alive. I'm not trying to take some sort of credit for this! But there's a very real sense in which "she" really wouldn't be there, as a self, an alive and feeling person, if it hadn't been for my entry into her life at that particular moment. It nourished her. (Freeman, 2016a, pp. 11).*

In the last phase, the finality of his dearly loved mother's death is so keen that Freeman does what is natural: he yearns, as we all do in memorializing, to somehow take her with him—at least in part. This dedicated yearning may represent the beginnings of the great task of forging a smooth transition such that the end of her story can vitally and vibrantly be part of his own continuing life story.

*I wouldn't call those times "good." But nor were they bad. They were just . . . times. All I could do, all any of us could do, was just take them in, be there with her, be present. This is what I found myself doing the day her rabbi called me to let me know she'd taken a turn for the worse. In fact, I found myself coming up with a curious term for what I was doing, or at least what I was trying to do, later that day. I was trying to memorize her. Would that we could memorize those we love and lose. Would that we could take them in and keep them, like a favored poem or a song. But it can't be. (Freeman, 2016a, pp. 14).*

Individuals often memorialize a loved one. Note however that Freeman does not say *memorializing*, which refers to sociocultural and personal practices (that he likely did do in the days and months that followed). Insightfully, he says *memorizing*. Memory is an important cognitive aspect of loss that is often overlooked. We think of memorizing a shopping list or, as Freeman mentions, a favorite poem. Can we study a person? Can we memorize them? Holding a lost loved one in memory is a difficult feat due to, in cognitive psychology terms, the ‘parameters of the task’: it requires recalling without ever seeing the person again, recalling for a very long time (i.e., forever), and the added pressure of knowing that forgetting comes at a high emotional cost (Mroz & Bluck, 2018).

Spontaneous remembering of the loved one, automatically triggered by cues in the environment (e.g., *involuntary memory*; Berntsen, 2008), will occur but not be sufficient. As Freeman notes, part of grief is that we realize that we cannot fully take the loved one with us, even in memory. We can and do incorporate others’ deaths into our life story through memory, but imperfectly. Memorializing sets up concrete cues to help individuals remember the loved one (e.g., wearing inherited jewelry, visiting the gravesite, connecting with other loved ones on the deceased’s birthday or anniversary death date). As such, both implicit and explicit memory are at work as we weave other’s endings into our story.

### *We Will Die: Our Life Story Has an End*

Another way that death is part of the life story is that we all die. Dealing with others’ deaths is something we encounter in life and learn about through experience. Our own death is an abstraction. We not only die but can contemplate our own death (Becker, 1973). People come to understand, as early as childhood, that death is irreversible and universal (Speece & Brent, 1984). Knowledge about and reflection on death then grows with us through adulthood, as we move toward it.

When individuals talk about their own death, they do so with more complex, nuanced consideration than when talking about others’ deaths (de Vries, Bluck, & Birren, 1993). In line with that, though we know logically that every life story has an ending, researchers cannot empirically collect people’s stories about their own death. Near the end of her mother’s life, the first author was deeply empathizing, ‘feeling in’ to her mom’s situation, sharing thoughts as they came. One day as her mom sat near the window in a wheelchair, she lay on her mother’s bed and asked her: “I mean, we don’t know when it will be for you but Dad’s gone now and I think about that, and know you do too. So what do you think, Mom? What do you think happens when you die?” She answered easily, sourcing her British wit and pragmatism: “I don’t know. I haven’t tried it.” Quite right. We really don’t know and can’t study (as yet?) people’s final moments of their own life story.

### *Thinking About the End Affects the Story*

We can’t tell the end of our own story. The very fact that we all know that our story has an ending may, however, affect what we do and the stories we tell about our lives well before-hand. Across adulthood, people report reviewing their life and thinking about their past so as to prepare for death (Webster, 1993). This has been seen as a positive, adaptive function of remembering (Westerhof et al., 2010). Serious consideration of our own mortality may come earlier or later in our development, depending on normative (e.g., loss of pet, loss of grandparent) and non-normative deaths (e.g., loss of parent or sibling) that befall us in childhood and adolescence. By midlife, though, most individuals have experienced serious losses that render knowledge of their own death more real. Jung (1933) suggests, for example, that one is not fully an adult until having lost both parents (i.e., usually in early or at late midlife; Staudinger & Bluck, 2001). At least from that point forward, knowledge and reflection on our own death may affect how we think about life.

Regardless of the specific life experience with death that each person has, lifespan developmental theorists (e.g., Erikson, 1959; Neugarten & Datan, 1974) mark midlife as a phase when people’s sense of time changes: the beginning and the end feel equidistant. This increased knowing that the story ends can spur different priorities in the second half of life (Carstensen, 2006). These include, for some, a focus on generativity (e.g., Stewart, Vandewater, McAdams, & de St. Aubin, 1998). This may be the beginnings of a desire to eventually wrap up the story with the feeling one has lived ‘a good life.’ Acknowledging life’s finitude, engaging in generative acts that form a legacy, may help one craft a fulfilling denouement to the life story. Alternatively, leaving a legacy may be tinged with a hope for sidestepping finitude: for immortality through positively impacting others’ lives (Vail et al., 2012), or simply living on in memory through family and friends (Hunter & Rowles, 2005). This notion of generativity has now been incorporated in end-of-life therapeutic techniques that help dying individuals pass on what has mattered most to them in life (i.e., Dignity Therapy; Chochinov et al., 2005).

Beyond generativity, in one of our studies (Glück & Bluck, 2011), we found another potential benefit to thinking about death. Wisdom is accepted as a virtue in our society: it involves having extraordinary insight about the human condition and the means and ends to create a good life (Baltes, Smith, & Staudinger, 1992). We asked adults (N = 1,955) where they believe wisdom comes from, how people become wise. The top four answers were: having a wide range of life experiences, learning from a wise other, dealing with negative events, and importantly, confronting mortality. As is typical (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000), many people in our study defined wisdom as involving knowledge, good judgement and complex understanding of life issues. Others expanded that definition to also include empathy toward others and concern for the

common good. Those who did were more likely to view wisdom as coming from confronting mortality. That is, many individuals believe that developing a compassionate, pro-social ability for wise insight on life comes partly from realizing that their story has an end, from thinking about death.

Outside academia, recent popular books and other media have taken up the topic of how knowing that life has an ending changes the story we are telling. For example, in his book, *Veronika Decides to Die*, world renowned Brazilian novelist, Paulo Coelho (1998) writes: “An awareness of death encourages us to live more intensely (pp. 190).” In the music world, contemporary electronica band *Starfucker* has dedicated an entire album (*Reptilians*, 2011) to songs encouraging death acceptance, integrating quotes from British philosopher Alan Watts. As Watts (1974) pointed out, the idea of contemplating one’s own death has prevailed for centuries as part of various religions, notably Buddhism (e.g., *Sūnyatā* as a meditative state of non-self or non-existence; Melvin, Millers, & Ando, 2013).

Current societal interest in death does not end with music and literature. It includes the current trend to create a *bucket list* of things to do before you die (popularized by Rob Reiner’s 2007 film, *The Bucket List*). The phrase is likely derived from ‘kick the bucket’, an 18<sup>th</sup> century euphemism for death ([www.oxforddictionaries.com](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com)). Putting something on one’s bucket list now commonly refers to prioritizing an activity given recognition that one’s time on earth is limited. The international emergence of public art in the form of interactive *Before I Die Walls* ([www.beforeidie.city](http://www.beforeidie.city)), *Death over Dinner* events ([www.deathoverdinner.org](http://www.deathoverdinner.org)), and *Death Cafes*, ([www.deathcafe.com](http://www.deathcafe.com)), also demonstrate interest in thinking about how to craft the story now, so that at the end it will feel complete.

The relative popularity in North America today of literary, musical and cultural activities encouraging thinking about one’s own death may be related to demographic changes in the population: the first of the Baby Boomers (i.e., cohort born 1946-1964) reached 65 years old in 2011. For the next 17 years, almost 10,000 people a day will celebrate their 65th birthday in America (Pruchno, 2012). Some will also stop celebrating birthdays. Joni Mitchell is 73. Bob Dylan is 75. David Bowie died last year at 69. Popular musician Cat Stevens’ lyrics are more literally true for the Boomers today than when he wrote them, in their youth (Stevens, 1970). In considering normative conformity to societal expectations, he resists, saying: “But I might die tonight.” As Pruchno (2012) notes, the Baby Boomers have redefined each life phase as they moved through it, influencing education trends, music genres, sex and race relations, and parenting norms. The Boomers have changed the face of aging. They may now be starting to redefine life’s ending as they see their own parents die, lose spouses and siblings, and grieve some of the musical, political and literary icons of their era.

To this point, we have largely praised death as a great teacher. It may well be. It can also be, as is the common

conception of death, an extremely difficult transition. This is evident, for example, in the memoir, *When Breath Becomes Air*. Kalinithi (2016) a neurosurgeon sharing his story of terminal lung cancer at age 36 writes: “One chapter of my life seemed to have ended; perhaps the whole book was closing... Severe illness wasn’t life-altering, it was life-shattering. It felt less like an epiphany – a piercing burst of light illuminating *What Really Matters* – and more like someone had just firebombed the path forward. Now I would have to work around it (pp. 120).” In short, the complexity of knowing that there is an end, and the effect this has on the way we tell our life story, is a rich area for further research. We will one day die, and we have the unique human capacity to think about the end of our own life-time (Corballis, 2014). We suggest this changes how people construct the story of their life, well before the end is nigh.

### *Nearly Dying*

Returning to the difficulty, methodologically, of studying people’s own stories of their life’s end, another research possibility arises. That is, we can study a time someone *nearly* died. Experiencing a brush with death is the closest glimpse individuals get of their own death, if only for a moment, before their time comes. How do people talk about such events?

In one study we asked young people to recall a time they nearly died. In pilot work, we were surprised to find that all had an experience to report. These varied in the extent to which the individual felt that they were going to die, and also in terms of how much of a threat to life our independent raters saw in these events. That said, the importance here is not the objective threat of death but the subjective feeling, “This is it. I am going to die.” For example, one participant remembered the first time they took a plane, when they were nine years old. There was severe turbulence and this person felt that the plane was going to crash and was terrified he would die. An older, more seasoned traveler might not have felt this was a life-threatening situation: such a narrative receives a high self-rated threat score from the participant but not from the independent raters. This highlights that with death stories, like all stories of personal events, the person’s own feelings and perceptions shape the telling of real-world events (Ruth, Birren, & Polkinghorne, 1996). That individuals experience reality through a variety of lenses is why personal stories matter so much to how we live our lives and think about ourselves (Conway, Singer & Tagini, 2004).

That said, in many stories, both the externally-coded and the subjective threat of death were evident and consonant. A few of the stories are provided here to give a sense of how individuals talk about times they thought they would die. Most events reported by participants reflect ways in which individuals actually die in young adulthood (Center for Disease Control, 2015), that is, through physical violence and accidental injury.

One participant, threatened with physical violence, wrote:

*After a concert my friend and I were walking back to our car. It was downtown and late at night, and I was about 16 years old. The car was parked under a bridge that was not in a good area of town so I was already anxious. When we were about to get to the car, a man walked up with a knife and threatened us asking for our wallets. I was very scared and angry at this man at the same time. I wanted to fight but I bit my lip and handed over the wallet. When I thought he was about to walk away he came to check us again and that's when I thought he might hit us or slash us with the knife. I thought I might die...but made it out alive after he ran off.*

Another participant, describing a car accident, writes:

*I was driving my family back home from church. Then all of a sudden a truck came and rammed the passenger back side of our car. The emotions I felt were horrifying, for I saw a shadow of my life right in front of me. The car turned in three angles in a 360 degree turn. Scared and endless emotions were on me.*

Understandably, individuals feel anxiety when they think they are going to die. In fact, our research shows (Bluck & Liao, 2017) that they also feel anxiety after simply recalling the event even years later (i.e., compared to a control event). How they tell these stories matters, however. Those who included themes of communion with others (McAdams, 2001) in their narratives felt less anxiety on recall.

An excerpt from a story that includes communion (final sentence) was:

*I could see was a beaming red light in front of me. Then, another car hit me on the driver's side and instantly totaled my car. I felt pain all over my body. I couldn't breathe and thought this was how I was going to die. My legs hurt and I was stuck, couldn't move. My door was completely crushed in and I couldn't move. All I could do was scream. I just wanted to see my family and twin sister to tell them that I loved them one last time before I blacked out...*

Studying how people tell stories of a brush with death, including the emotional consequences of different ways of telling, is another way in which researchers can understand death as part of the life story. This includes investigating how individuals confront their own mortality through a brush with death, as we did, or in other situations (e.g., life-threatening prognosis, survivors of cancer). Through such endeavors we can further understand how knowledge of life's ending, whether abstractly in terms of knowing we

will one day die, or more concretely through remembering close calls, helps people to shape their life stories.

## The End

We have argued that death is an important part of the story that each person constructs and reconstructs about their life as they move through time. This article focused on two central ways that death is part of the life story: (i) while individuals are alive, others' endings become part of their continuing life story, and (ii) part of being human is that we die—every life story has an ending. Our work was inspired by Jim Birren through his development of Guided Autobiography. Jim is now dead. His life and now his ending have become part of our story: We honor him through our writing and thinking. His legacy is deep and wide, carried by all those who he influenced, mentored and encouraged. Each person carries different aspects of others' stories after they are gone. In our case, Jim's ideas about death live on.

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

# James E. Birren and the Stories of Life

Kathryn N. Cochran

### Some Thoughts on the Many Gifts of James E. Birren

Every life has a story. Jim Birren discovered the power of life stories while teaching a summer-session course in gerontology at the University of Hawaii in the 1970s.

In addition to the usual cross-section of graduate students, several senior citizens were auditing the class. One day, as an exercise, Jim asked his students, including the senior auditors, to write a brief history of their life and then share the stories in pairs. As Jim described it, the energy in the room rose, and the students became so deeply involved in their exchanges that it was difficult to end the class.

As a professor, researcher and gifted mentor who loved people and learning, Jim had relished discussions with students and friends, often while taking long walks in the Santa Monica mountains near his home. But the energy in the University of Hawaii classroom was something different, more powerful, and more personal. The sources of that energy, and its potential for further understanding human development, intrigued him.

Jim had already begun teaching autobiography courses in which students wrote their life stories and allowed him to use them anonymously in research. He was interested in learning more about how individuals developed values and attached meaning to their lives. After Hawaii, Jim pursued a new line of thinking: How does the way we *interpret* the events of our lives influence our decision-making, well-being, and health throughout the arc of our development? When he returned from Hawaii to his post as founding dean of the Davis School of Gerontology at the University of Southern California, he continued to think about the potential of autobiography in the context of studies on aging.

Over time, Jim developed the structure for a course in Guided Autobiography. Each class session included a lecture presenting theories on human development and psychology, followed by small-group sessions with an experienced group facilitator. In each small group session, participants focused on a life theme, such as: What was the role of money in your life? Who made the decisions in your family? What were important branching points in your life? What role did health play in your life story?

At each meeting, participants read aloud two pages they had written on a theme. Before ending the session, they discussed questions to “pump-prime” memories for the next session’s theme. Facilitators were present to foster a supportive atmosphere, emphasizing sharing and expanding access to memories rather than judgment of choices or writing style. Participants wrote only what they wanted to share. No one was prodded. The overwhelming effect of this group process was the stimulation of new insight, new memories, and a feeling of acceptance of self and others.

As an editor of USC publications, I had been aware of Jim’s work and of the variety of projects and disciplines associated with the Davis School of Gerontology. Interdisciplinary studies linked the School of Gerontology with the School of Medicine, the School of Architecture, the School of Social Work and more. One of the articles that crossed my desk was about Jim’s work in autobiography. I remembered it a couple of years later, in the late 1980s, when Jim was teaching a summer course in guided autobiography at USC. At the time, my quiet, enigmatic, Scandinavian father had retired and was coming to the end of a house-remodeling project. When I asked him what he planned to do next, he said, “I might write my memoirs.”

I was excited about this but worried that my father, a meticulous engineer, might start his story with the day of his birth and write in detailed, linear fashion, everything that happened after that, day by day. He would, I was sure, spend a lot of time producing an unreadable tome. A focus on life themes might help, I thought. I decided to enroll in Jim’s autobiography class to help my father find a way into his story. Little did I know where this would take *me*.

During the lecture portion of Jim’s class, he shared knowledge and theory gleaned over a long career in the psychology of aging and human development. One concept that rung especially true for me was a comparison of three models for the direction of human development:

- 1) The biological model begins with the birth of an infant, who then, normally, grows in size and physical strength to a peak in early adulthood then experiences a slow, steady decline in physical health and strength into old age and death. Despite exercise, good nutrition and other interventions one can adopt to improve the quality of life along the way, the directional graph for biological development in a normal life is up and then down.

- 2) The social model, generally accepted into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, shows a steady climb through childhood as an infant grows, is educated and matures to adulthood. At achievement of adulthood the line flattens to a steady horizontal plane maintained until dementia or death. There is no accounting for growth or change during the course of an adult's life.
- 3) The integrative model when graphed is a steady uphill rise. This integrative perspective on human development evolved in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, influenced by the work of Carl Jung. It assumes potential for continued growth throughout life through lifelong learning and growing wisdom through the integration of life experiences. The model assumes individuals continue to develop so long as they retain the cognitive skills and will to continue absorbing and integrating new information. There is no getting over the hill.

The integrative model is the one Jim lived and the one that Guided Autobiography enhances and encourages.

Betty Birren, Jim's wife, was my small group facilitator for that summer class. The six members of our group were born in four different decades in widely diverse sections of the world. We were all Caucasian and well-educated from roughly similar socio-economic backgrounds. More diversity would have added more dimension to the memories shared, but there was still plenty of diversity in the details of our life stories to enrich our perspectives. We also found that the details of each story stimulated more memories for each writer's colleagues in the class.

It was striking to me that the participants in the group, despite successful careers and social relationships, had for the most part, not had the experience of sharing their life stories in depth with others. They had few platforms on which they could share their interpretations of their life histories without fear of judgment or conflicting interpretations. The process of remembering, writing, and sharing with others on a similar journey was affirming. Remembering and sharing information with others allowed the present-day adult to look at life experiences with new perspective and, often, new interpretations. We all know how it feels to remember something that happened when we were 15 and experience it again and again with the feelings of a 15-year-old. The process of remembering, writing, and sharing the memory with others as an adult can inspire a broader, more objective understanding of the circumstances and can sometimes alter one's reaction to the memory. I think we all emerged from the Guided Autobiography class and from our experience in guided small groups with a larger measure of wisdom, tolerance and openness to new perspectives.

In the end, my father wrote a linear, but beautiful story of his life. I helped him along the way with questions. We talked about his experiences and how it felt to write them

down, how he felt about offering them to the family to read. I asked him what he might say to his nine-year-old self if he met him today as an adult. The writing brought some peace to childhood memories that he had previously remembered with a child's sense of confusion and turmoil. He could even find humor and abundant kindness in many of his relationships.

In helping him edit his book, I learned some things about him that helped me understand who he was as a man and a father. And he learned to appreciate me in a different way, too. Before he wrote his own story, I don't think he could understand what a writer and editor did or what value that work could have. But now he did. He had become a writer himself.

My friendship with Jim and Betty continued after Jim left USC to join the UCLA Center on Aging in 1989. He continued to facilitate guided autobiography groups at UCLA, the USC Emeritus Center, and at churches, community centers and senior centers in Los Angeles.

One of Jim's former autobiography students at UCLA offered a small grant to create a manual for leaders of Guided Autobiography groups. Jim asked me to take on the project. Over the years, we had had many discussions about how to adapt the course structure for groups beyond the field of gerontology. I could see potential for teenagers, career-counseling centers, outplacement programs, and prisons. The process of examining one's life history while focusing on various life themes can be helpful for anyone in transition. It helps to understand what choices and experiences from the past brought you to where you are today. Examining and writing about one's life history is a good step toward setting goals for the future, which is usually the final exercise in a Guided Autobiography group.

Every story is unique, but every story has universal themes, whether we are aware of them or not. On that plane of learning between birth and death, we are constantly in transition, constantly trying to evaluate what to leave behind to make space for something new and what to carry forward with us. One purpose of the grant was to enable more people to enjoy the Guided Autobiography experience.

Jim and I set goals for our manual. We wanted to:

- 1) Create a guide that would enable interested people to lead a Guided Autobiography group whether or not they had participated in a Guided Autobiography group themselves (though, when possible, this is extremely helpful.)
- 2) Expand the themes and adapt Jim's materials to make the experience equally attractive to groups of all backgrounds and ages.

The manual grew into our book, *Telling the Stories of Life through Guided Autobiography Groups*, published by Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

When Jim retired from USC and before he started at the UCLA Center on Aging as Assistant Director, he was

optimistic and forward thinking in the face of what many might find a daunting transition, retirement from the deanship of a prestigious and growing academic program that he had founded. "I think I would like to write children's' books," he said, his blue eyes twinkling as he threw out the idea, still testing it, I think.

Ultimately, the real stories of real people occupied and enchanted Jim into his final days. After his long-time friend, David Solomon, retired as the director of the UCLA Center on Aging, the Center became a focus for fundraising and projects to improve the lives of aging adults. Autobiography continued to be a community outreach offering as long as Jim was involved there.

When Jim and Betty moved to a retirement community when Jim was in his late 80s, Jim gave autobiography classes in his new home. It must have been wonderful for other residents to participate in Guided Autobiography with this kind, intelligent, accomplished man. Most of them had moved fairly recently into their new residence, a place where, usually, no one knew their life history. At advanced ages, many of the people who had

known their life stories might have passed away or were living far away. Autobiography had the potential for creating not only new perspectives on life stories, but also for making new friends. Jim's interest in Guided Autobiography was a late life experiential gold mine for him and for countless others.

While Jim was at UCLA, several former participants in his Guided Autobiography groups continued to meet for several years to develop strategies for expanding the reach of Guided Autobiography. An exciting outcome was the development of webinars to train facilitators and to reach communities far beyond Southern California and the university communities around the world who were familiar with Jim's work in gerontology.

Jim passed away in 2016 and is no longer here to inspire us with his curious and inquiring mind. However, he has left a legacy that is still moving forward, encouraging people to write and learn from their personal histories and, whenever possible, to share their stories in guided group settings. The sense of discovery is thrilling, no matter where one is on the path of life.

*Special Section: In Honor of James Emmett Birren (2018-2016)*

## The Journey to Social Policy and Aging: Yet Another Birren Contribution to Multidisciplinary Research and Graduate Education

Neal E. Cutler

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### 1. The Social Policy Lab Journey Begins

In the early 1970s the seven-year old Andrus Gerontology Center (née Rossmoor-Cortese Institute for the Study of Retirement and Aging)—working from its off-campus offices in an old industrial building on “the other side” of the Harbor Freeway—was implementing plans for a permanent USC Campus home. The new elegant three-story building (plus basement for animal studies and a running track on the roof for human exercise) with its red brick façade, multiple arches, and courtyard [including a “fountain of youth” with a time capsule buried underneath] designed in the “New Formalism” style by Edward Durell Stone, was being built.

The second and third floors would have ample space for the “laboratory” structure that Jim Birren brought to USC, reflecting his substantial experience with the National Institutes of Health. At the USC Andrus Center these included a Biology Lab, a Psychology Lab, and a Sociology—Social Organization and Behavior— Lab. Around the same time that the architectural plans were developing, so too were plans developing for the further expansion of multidisciplinary research in aging and the social sciences. An application submitted to the U.S. Administration on Aging [AoA] resulted in the three-year “Social Foundations of Aging” grant. In addition to resources for Psychology and Sociology the project also would support new Andrus Center faculty positions in Political Science and Economics.

By intellectual inclination and institutional experience, Jim Birren believed in and promoted a multidisciplinary approach to the study of aging. The close physical proximity of biology, psychology, and sociology research labs in the same building was a major expression of this epistemology. The Social Foundations of Aging grant, however, offered an opportunity to develop an even more integrated multidisciplinary activity.

Birren and colleagues decided to create a new “Social Policy Laboratory” that would reflect not the work of a single social science discipline but would be multidisciplinary “inside” the unit. This would be a lab whose identity would be defined by the issues it studied rather than the academic disciplines of its faculty. Political Science and Economics were identified in the AoA grant as clearly central to the analysis of aging and social policy. Demography is typically a field within Sociology and also a “natural” dimension of social policy, and thus would be part of the new lab. After faculty discussion, Communications and Social Work were also included.

Being new to both the USC faculty and the Andrus Center, I worked closely with both Jim Birren and Phoebe Liebig to make sure that USC faculty recruitment policies and diplomacy were followed. In addition to my Political Science faculty appointment, the Social Policy Lab recruited four recent or soon-to-be PhD faculty: Robin J. Walther, Economics; Robert A. Harootyan, Demography; James A. Danowski, Mass Communications; and Raymond M. Steinberg, Social Work. The primary goals of the lab were to contribute to research on aging from multiple perspectives, which these researchers began to accomplish fairly soon.

In addition to facilitating further research contributions to the world of gerontology research, the multidisciplinary nature of research in aging and social policy resulted in a variety of other institutional campus opportunities. It was, for example, the first time Chairs (and Deans) in Economics, Communications, and Political Science were involved in gerontology faculty recruitment. In turn, these new relationships promoted further visibility and multidisciplinary activity between the Andrus Center and an increasingly research oriented USC campus. The recently established (1971) Annenberg School for Communications and Journalism was so new that I met with Dean Frederick Williams in a mobile home trailer in the middle of USC as the ground-breaking for their dramatic new building was literally taking place around us.

### 2. Young Meets Young Meets Young

In September 1973 I joined the USC faculty as Laboratory Chief of the Social Policy Laboratory and Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science.

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My journey “back to” USC and to working with Jim Birren and the Andrus Gerontology Center, however, turned out to be an intermingling of both intellectual and personal factors. I graduated USC as a political science major with a research interest in politics and aging—yes, even before I knew how to spell *gerontology* yet alone pronounce it correctly. During my junior and senior years I was a research assistant in the Population Research Laboratory, the demography research unit of the Department of Sociology, under the direction of Maurice D. (Don) Van Arsdol. This gave me the intellectual direction and the data to write an undergraduate honors thesis examining age, aging, and cohorts in a political context. This became the foundation of a career-long focus: three years later I completed a dissertation still trying to understand and “unwind” the maturational vs. generational causes and correlates of political attitudes and behavior.

During my dissertation-writing year I began to exchange notes with another young “generations researcher,” Assistant Professor of Sociology Vern Bengtson, the Laboratory Chief of the Social Organization and Behavior Laboratory at the Andrus Gerontology Center. Vern’s USC letterhead in this pre-email era was emblazoned with *Ethel Percy Andrus Gerontology Center* in the upper right corner, and just below it the words: *The Study of Generations*. I was impressed; no, blown away. Really! An entire university research center devoted (I concluded) to the study of generations. And at my beloved alma mater no less. The letters turned into phone calls and meetings, and the meetings resulted in an invitation to give a guest lecture (I was now an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania), and so, two recent Chicago-area PhD students in Sociology (University of Chicago) and Political Science (Northwestern) each interested in the study of aging and generations became colleagues and later good friends and international traveling buddies—all combining not only to be a door opener but a critical intellectual part of my journey to the Social Policy Laboratory.

There is, however, a more personal, or anecdotal, and certainly more fortuitous piece of this journey, and one that brings long-term reminiscing about Jim Birren even more front and center. A good part of my undergraduate senior year (1964-1965) was spent working on my senior thesis with guidance from Don Van Arsdol, Director of the Population Studies Laboratory (not to be confused with one of the Andrus Center Labs—which did not yet exist). Although part of the Sociology Department, as with many research groups the “Pop Lab” had separate offices—and they just happened to be on the second floor of that old industrial building on the “other side” of the Harbor Freeway. Knowing of my “unusual” [50 years ago!] interest linking political science with gerontology, Van Arsdol wanted me to meet his new neighbor, the director of the Rossmoor-Cortese Institute on Retirement and Aging, which a few months earlier had set up shop on the first floor. And so on a Friday afternoon in early 1965 I went downstairs and met the smiling, dark-haired, enthusiastic, 47-year-old James Birren. Now that I know

how the journey unfolded I wish I could recall more of that meeting. Even four years later when the two assistant professors were exchanging letters and phone calls, I didn’t make the connection between Birren’s Rossmoor-Cortese Institute and Bengtson’s Gerontology Center that focused solely on The Study of Generations!

### 3. Doctoral Education and Degrees

Jim Birren’s support for multidisciplinary doctoral training at the Andrus Gerontology Center was well-known and long-standing. For successive five-year renewed Training Grants, the National Institutes of Health, and later the National Institute on Aging, funded Andrus Center doctoral students primarily in the “traditional” gerontology disciplines of Biology, Psychology, and Sociology. With the Social Policy Lab faculty now part of the Center, the next USC renewal application to NIH/NIA for the first time included funding for graduate students in Economics and Political Science. As it turned out, this successful application was not only a breakthrough for the Andrus Center but also a notable extension of disciplinary doctoral support policy for the NIA itself.

Although the NIA was created in 1974, the history of aging research at the NIH and James Birren go back much further.<sup>1</sup> In 1959 the NIMH established a Section on Aging headed by Birren, who had been at NIMH since 1950. In 1962 Congress established the NICHD (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development) as part of NIH. A year later the new NICHD expanded its interest into adult human development and Jim was selected to head the NICHD aging division which he directed until 1964 when he moved across country to that old USC building on the other side of the Harbor Freeway. Not surprisingly, when Congress created the National Institute on Aging in 1974 he was asked to be its first Director. By then, however, Jim and his family were solidly established at USC and decided to remain in Los Angeles, and Dr. Robert Butler, his long-time friend and colleague, became the first NIA Director.<sup>2</sup>

As part of this USC and NIH tradition of multidisciplinary doctoral training, the Social Policy Lab took an active role in developing the Davis School of Gerontology’s first doctoral program. The Davis School’s current PhD in Gerontology encompasses the full range of aging studies from biology through social policy; and more recently (2014) a second doctorate in the Biology of Aging also has been established.<sup>3</sup> In the mid-1980s, however, with the strong encouragement of Jim Birren and David Peterson, long-time Director and Associate Dean of the Davis School, we began planning for a new doctorate in aging rooted in the social sciences and focused primarily on social policy. It became the first doctorate in aging in the United States and perhaps the first of its kind in the world.

As the internal and the university-wide planning process evolved over a two-year period, the “academic politics of university degrees” became fully revealed when the Andrus Gerontology Center, now part of the Davis

School of Gerontology, petitioned the university to establish the degree. Because the parent institution was now a *School*, the new doctoral degree could be offered by the USC Davis School rather than by the Graduate School, which is the traditional grantor of doctoral degrees. So, good news and bad news.

The Good: If the degree was owned and offered “in house” then the Davis School would have substantial authority over such traditional rules and requirements as admissions criteria and foreign language testing. The Bad: The Graduate School apparently owns the “rights” to the phrase “Doctor of Philosophy” and so a doctoral degree awarded by the Davis School could not be a PhD. To be sure, our new degree could be called a “Doctor of Gerontology” as are some professional doctoral degrees (e.g., DPharm in Pharmacy, DBA in Business, and JD in Law). Gerontology itself, however, was (and perhaps is still) somewhat unknown publicly as an academic discipline, and so an unknown or ambiguous “Doctor of Gerontology” provenance would likely be an added burden. Further, beyond these issues of traditional usage and academic legitimacy, the Andrus/Davis coordinating committee also saw peril in a “DoG” program and degree. And so, what became the first U.S. doctorate in aging and gerontology is indeed a PhD.

#### 4. Legacy

In 1990 my wife Donna Crane, baby Elizabeth, and I left USC, first for a Fulbright year at the University of Glasgow, and then for Philadelphia.<sup>4</sup> Through USC visits and professional meetings I continued to seek Jim’s counsel. My long-time interest in maturation vs. generation research continued but the focus moved from political gerontology to financial gerontology.<sup>5</sup> For a population of aging baby boomers the central issues of retirement, pensions, and health insurance clearly are a place where politics smashes into finance. Given the current tumultuous national discussion of these issues, perhaps the move from political to financial gerontology isn’t so far after all.

In my capacity as Director of the University of Pennsylvania’s Boettner Center of Financial Gerontology I asked Jim to be a member of our Board of Trustees. During his four years on the Board he continued to be an available and valuable critic, mentor, and friend. Indeed, in 1994 he gave the Center’s annual Boettner Lecture in Philadelphia, again demonstrating his strong multidisciplinary knowledge and insights, linking psychology to finance and policy: “Consumer Decision-Making and Age:

Maintaining Resources and Independence.”<sup>6</sup> At a Board meeting two years earlier, however, I introduced him to Dr. Davis W. Gregg, Founding Director of the Boettner Center—and my “East Coast mentor.”

Even their first conversations revealed that they shared a number of experiences and similar career paths as educational pioneers. Davis W. Gregg (PhD, 1948, Economics, University of Pennsylvania), had been the intellectual leader of the American College of Life Underwriters (initially a program of Penn’s Wharton School, now a school to train financial professionals in Bryn Mawr, PA<sup>7</sup>) for more than four decades, retiring as President (1954-1989) at age 71. In the context of an aging society he saw the need to expand financial education to include social gerontology, and in 1987-1989 laid the groundwork for what became the Boettner Center of Financial Gerontology at Penn<sup>8</sup> (and enticed me to move from L.A. to Philadelphia).

As we know, James E. Birren (PhD, 1947, Psychology, Northwestern University) had developed aging studies at NIMH and NICHD, *retired* as a commissioned officer in the U.S. Public Health Service to oversee the creation and flourishing of the USC Andrus Gerontology Center and Davis School of Gerontology, and “retired again” in 1989 at age 71 to develop the Borun Center for Gerontological Research at UCLA.<sup>9</sup> As I sat in during these first conversations between my two mentors, my own career-long interest in the cohort concept as a lens through which to view the generational dimension of gerontology was brought into amazingly sharp focus. Swapping educational administration stories, Gregg and Birren noticed how their PhD and “retirement” years were similar. I should not have been surprised then, as they were not surprised, that their birthdays were just 22 days apart, March and April 1918. My West Coast and East Coast mentors were members of a very narrowly defined generational cohort!

The following Monday Dave Gregg told me how much he not only enjoyed exchanging shared life (and cohort) experiences with Jim Birren, but how much he admired what Jim had accomplished, especially Jim’s serial successes at NIH, at USC, and then UCLA. He observed simply that in academic life successful professors accumulate impressive vitas, but great leaders build lasting institutions.

James Emmett Birren was truly a great leader.

## End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> National Institute on Aging, “NIA Time Line,” <https://www.nia.nih.gov/about/nia-timeline>.
- <sup>2</sup> NIH History Office, “Telephone interview with Dr. James E. Birren,” conducted by Dr. Ingrid Ferreras, March 22, 2002. <https://history.nih.gov/archives/downloads/birrenjames.pdf>.
- <sup>3</sup> USC, Davis School of Gerontology, Ph.D Programs, <http://gero.usc.edu/students/prospective-students/ph-d-programs/>
- <sup>4</sup> NB: The move did not end my academic affiliation with USC. Moving from traditional work to more applied research I accepted a one-year position in the Los Angeles area which turned out to be five years (2008-2012) as Executive Director of the Center on Aging at the Motion Picture & Television Fund (MPTF) in Woodland Hills. With MPTF encouragement I accepted an invitation from my Gerontology friends and colleagues to teach a course from within my “new field” of Financial Gerontology (an undergraduate seminar on “Silver Industries”) as part of the Davis School’s emerging emphasis on Business and Aging. This became my fourth “tour of duty” at USC: I lived much of the summer between my junior and senior years in high school on the USC campus as part of a high school debate squad clinic (it was the summer of the Democratic Convention that nominated JFK and I got to see his acceptance speech in person at the Coliseum); then four undergraduate years; then seventeen years as Professor; and five years as Adjunct Professor. Quite a journey!
- <sup>5</sup> Wikipedia, “Financial Gerontology,” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Financial\\_gerontology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Financial_gerontology).
- <sup>6</sup> The American College, “1994 Boettner Lecture Invitation,” [http://digitalcommons.theamericancollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1070&context=archival\\_miscellany](http://digitalcommons.theamericancollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1070&context=archival_miscellany).
- <sup>7</sup> Wikipedia, “American College of Financial Services,” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_American\\_College\\_of\\_Financial\\_Services](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_American_College_of_Financial_Services)
- <sup>8</sup> “Davis Gregg, 75, Insurance Authority,” *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/10/29/us/davis-w-gregg-75-insurance-authority.html>
- <sup>9</sup> Wikipedia, “James Birren,” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James\\_Birren](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Birren).

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

## Research on Guided Autobiography: A Review of Content, Process, and Outcome

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Guided Autobiography (GAB) is a structured, thematic, group approach to life review. Since its development by James Birren, it has been widely used and has generated empirical research. The focus of our article is on this research investigating 1) the content of GAB (defined in terms of the assigned themes); 2) the GAB process (as explicitly designed and how it implicitly manifests in the experience of learning); and 3) outcomes of GAB (both tangible, e.g., a written life review document, and subjective, such as increases in mastery and decreases in depression). The existing research supports the premises of GAB and suggestions for subsequent research are offered.

James Birren developed Guided Autobiography (GAB) over a number of years beginning with a Hawaiian seminar in the mid 1970's, along with a number of colleagues, many of whom are included in this compilation. GAB—a structured, thematic, group approach to life review—has an intuitive appeal, earning the praise of legions of older adults who have engaged in this introspective and generative effort. There is also a modest body of empirical literature documenting the process undertaken by participating individuals as well as the products of such participation. This brief contribution offers a selective and partial review of this literature, framed in terms of content, process, and outcome to describe the essence and domains of research undertaken, and it suggests avenues for further empirical investigation. Even as the area of life review has been an appealing and profitable area of research and practice in general, this review restricts its focus to GAB.

### GAB: Content

GAB typically includes adults of all ages, disproportionately older adults, who have registered for a course or workshop, which meets for ten or more sessions (and mostly over the course of ten or more weeks). In academic settings, each meeting is often divided into two sections: a didactic *first* session, during which the concept and theory of life review and the origins of GAB are

discussed, as well as the introduction of specific themes to guide the *second* experiential session, wherein individuals from the class are further divided into small groups of approximately 4-6 persons and a facilitator, to engage in the activity of the structured life review. In more applied settings, the didactic session is frequently omitted. The activity of the group involves participants preparing two-page written pages of texts in advance of the week's session on the assigned themes and then reading these texts, or parts of these texts, to the group. The themes were derived by James Birren and colleagues from a sweeping review of the literature of both theory and research, as well as many years of experience (and are listed below). Through what has been described as the developmental exchange (Birren & Deutchman, 1991), participants choose what and how much to share and often extemporaneously draw associations between themes; they identify overarching themes—for themselves and other group participants and/or draw parallels between their stories and those of others. The groups typically last two hours per session.

### Themes of GAB

The themes of GAB typically comprise the following (de Vries, Birren & Deutchman, 1990, Birren & Deutchman, 1991): the major branching points in life; your family; your major life works or career; the role of money in your life; your health and body image; your sexual identity; experiences with death and ideas about death; your spiritual life and values, and your aspirations and life goals. Other themes have been added according to research or applied interests, e.g., the role of music, art, or literature in your life; your experiences with stress. Each theme is prefaced with a brief description and participants are provided a series of questions to guide their thinking and writing about the theme. Birren has referred to these as

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sensitizing questions, which serve to prime memories, “prime the memory pump,” as Betty Birren would say, and stimulate reflection and recognition (Birren & Birren, 1996).

de Vries, Bluck, & Birren (1996) examined the ways in which participants explored death and dying in the GAB theme. With a sample of 27 women and 27 men, drawn in equal numbers from three age groups of GAB participants (ages 20-39, 40-59, 60 and older), the authors coded the representations of both death and dying, as applied to the self, another, or in the abstract, in the written thematic essays for the theme. They also coded the essays for integrative complexity (representing the structure of thought as revealed in the connected narrative materials) and the levels of involvement, impact, and acceptance with which participants discuss death and dying. Death (as an event) was more frequently referenced and with greater complexity than was dying (as a process). Even as this was the case across age and gender groups, middle-aged persons more frequently discussed death and less frequently discussed dying than either of the other two age groups; no gender differences were observed. The death and dying of another was more frequently discussed than was the death and dying of the self or in the abstract. Overwhelmingly, high personal involvement and impact characterized these discussions. These data reveal the complexity, in multiple forms, with which participants approach and are engaged with these themes and perhaps, by extension, the others—highlighting some evocative age differences.

Ruth, Birren, & Polkinghorne (1996) analyzed data across themes with a sample of 10 men and 10 women. They were particularly interested in the central life goals and dominant activities (e.g., a type of meta-theme) around which the projects of life were formed in the narrative compilations. Using the method of constant comparison, five types of life projects were identified and described as: achieving, being social, loving, family life, and struggling. Life projects involving family, communities and career were more common in the narratives of women; for men, the life projects took a more restricted focus on personal achievement and career development in a social context. Other differences noted included gender, following cohort expectations of traditional gender role scripts and social economic status (SES), where life struggles were more common among those of lower SES, and the achievements and social aspects of life were more common among those of higher SES. These analyses facilitate a more holistic view of the GAB essays—here described as life projects—and further suggest how the experience of GAB may differ by age, gender, and other individual differences.

### *Summary*

Research into the content of GAB has been modest and focused on the themes, both individually and collectively. The guiding themes were established by a review of literature; at least one of the themes has been

shown to be associated with complex, creative thinking. Profitable avenues for future research suggested by this literature may include: 1) an exploration of the ways in which men and women of different ages engage with the themes around which GAB is structured and 2) identifying the salience of particular themes and meta-themes in the life stories. Such research has the potential to also enrich the growing and more general literature on life review and reminiscence, focusing on what and how memories are included in personal narratives.

### *GAB: Process*

James Birren believed that guided thinking about, writing, and sharing one’s life story provides the opportunity to discover, clarify, and deepen the meaning of a lifetime of experiences (Birren & Svensson, 2009). Particularly in the later years, a person needs to believe that his or her life has mattered, that it has had a purpose or an impact on the world. Guided autobiography enhances these feelings, promotes successful adaptation to old age, and assists positive choices by persons at a crossroad in life. A grasp of the fabric of one’s life can make a significant contribution to well-being in later life. When it results in a written form, it can also create an important legacy for families (Birren & Deutchman, 1991, p.1).

In particular, Birren felt that the structured and group nature of the exercise was beneficial. The structured nature derives from the facilitated process and from the themes representing the universality and uniqueness of life to “evoke thinking about the strong threads that bind together the fabrics of lives” (Birren & Svensson, 2009, p. 4). The group nature of the exercise facilitates recall, ensures that one is “heard” or witnessed in the telling of a story, and fosters camaraderie and support. These views expressed by Birren and others essentially focus on enhancing self-aspects, and such issues have been the subject of some research; other research has focused on the method itself and how individuals appraise their experiences, as described below. In general, the modest research could be described as adopting an explicit and more implicit focus on process.

### *The Explicit Group Process and the GAB*

Vota and de Vries (2001) examined the process of GAB with a focus on its virtual implementation, rather than face-to-face, and with many implications for how individual differences may mediate the process and enlistment. Eight participants were selected from a pool of 23 interested candidates; of the initial 8, two left the experience early on citing irreconcilable differences stemming from a chat room dispute and another left after the third week. The final five participants were all Caucasian women averaging 69.5 years of age. Vota and de Vries (2001) describe their process of developing and offering a GAB experience online, highlighting some of the challenges and successes. For example, participants

expressed a strong desire to forego the traditional weekly theme format, “demanding the ‘right’ to respond at will” to any of the themes (Vota & de Vries, 2001, p. 341). The change initiated by this “demand” resulted in greater satisfaction with the process by the online group, marked by an increase in both the frequency and intensity of online posting, the virtual equivalent of essay sharing and discussion contributions. Interestingly, these ‘posts’ were shorter than those produced in the face-to-face administration of GAB and often described as “bite-speak” by the authors: that is, briefer, less likely presented in complete sentences, and with greater jargon. It is difficult to determine if such changes were attributable to the more fluid approach adopted in the face of protest or the increased comfort level with the approach itself (e.g., after the passage of several weeks), but the overall cohesion of the group improved. Birren and Deutchman (1991, p. 44) described this cohesion as the “healing power of the group” facilitated by “developmental exchange” of group members.

The demographics of these participants, however, differed from more traditional venues; Vota and de Vries had the impression that these participants were both relatively more open to new experiences and freer to comment on them than those in traditional groups. It remains an open question the extent to which such challenges to the typical format of GAB are unique to these participants—or part of the more general experience.

### *The Implicit Process (of Change) and GAB*

Thornton has been interested in GAB as a learning experience and has explored this in a variety of ways. For example, Thornton and Collins (2010) sought to understand the learning strategies both reflected in and nurtured by GAB. They asked 114 participants from six GAB workshops two questions in the penultimate and final meetings of the groups: respectively, “What am I learning in this guided autobiography workshop?” and “Where to go from here?” The participants were 88 women and 26 men ranging in age from 46 to 92 years with an average age of 62—typical of GAB groups. The participants’ learning scripts in response to the first question were transcribed and content analyzed. There were 109 scripts that had sufficient data for coding, yielding 940 direct answers and averaging approximately 8.5 learning comments per participant. These scripts were further analyzed, and three superordinate learning constructs emerged: explanatory comments, learning reports, and learning topics. Explanatory comments were relatively rare, comprising less than two percent of all responses and essentially formed excuses for non-completion of GAB assignments. Learning reports were the most common and reflected two axes of learning: a process/outcome axis and an expanding/consolidating axis. The former axis ranged from comments on tangible results (e.g., an interpretation, a new understanding, a framework) to comments on the ongoing efforts in reaching these results (e.g., developing

a new interpretation/understanding). The latter axis ranged from an appraisal of efforts that have helped “pull together” or “establish” a coherent life story to more active, open-ended efforts—poles perhaps best described as integrative, in the case of consolidating, to differentiating, in the case of expanding. Finally, learning reports concerned the content more than the process and coding revealed 19 categories distributed over three broad subjects: learning about the self (8 categories), learning about others (6 categories), and learning about GAB and life review (6 categories). Neither age nor gender introduced any significant differences into these patterns. These efforts highlight the active intellectual experience of GAB for participants, defined in terms of both their approach and response to the materials, discussions, and group interactions.

Several authors have proffered that the mechanism by which the method of GAB effects change is through the self. Reker, Birren, & Svensson (2014), for example, cite a pilot study by Schroots and van Dongen (1995) on the actual and ideal selves—in the past, present, and future—of five female participants before and after participating in GAB. Schroots and van Dongen report greater integration of the actual and ideal selves across time periods, at post-test than at pre-test. They identified greater self-continuity, and that GAB encourages “reflection on the history of one’s self, with the result that experiences and feelings of the past are activated and connected with the individual’s present” (p. 120).

Focusing particularly on changes in the self through GAB, Reker, et al (2014) conducted a study with 21 participants, 10 of whom were 19 to 50 years, and 11 of whom were 51 to 86 years. Seventeen were female and four were male. They were particularly interested in the reconstruction process of the self-system that take place during and as a consequence of GAB and how these structural changes relate to appraisals of life and the ways in which the self is perceived by others. Furthermore, they were interested in exploring age group differences in this self-aspect reconstruction. This reconstruction was operationalized as the extent to which three self-aspects—the actual self, the ideal self, and the social image of the self—were congruent (i.e., the distance measured between pairs of these self-aspects), integrated (i.e., similarity or matching in ratings across self-aspect adjectives), and consistent (i.e., pre-test/post-test similarity in overall ratings of self-aspects) over the course of GAB participation. Analyses revealed increased congruence in the actual vs. ideal self, as well as the actual vs. the social-image self, greater integration for the actual self, and stability for the self-aspects over time—with some greater changes for the older, as compared with the younger, participants.

In pilot research on the therapeutic effects of GAB participation, Malde (1988) reported inconclusive results, suggesting that GAB could “either increase feelings of self-worth and acceptance or lead to a resurgence of guilt and feelings of inadequacy” (p. 290). In a follow-up larger study with 39 individuals, 36 of whom were women, with

an average age of 70, equally divided into three groups (traditional GAB, modified GAB, waitlist control), no group differences were found on the three dependent measures of self-concept, time competence, and purpose in life (reported in Malde, 1988). Sample size, measure sensitivity, and the amenability to change were considered as possible interpretations for this lack of group differences. In a survey follow up with a subset of these participants, data suggested that changes in the sense of self may be more apparent over time as participants integrate the knowledge and experiences taken from participation in GAB (Malde, 1988).

### Summary

The processes of GAB can be seen as both explicit, focusing on how participants engage in the experience, and implicit, focusing on the mechanisms of change implied or evidenced by engagement in the experience. These processes are especially fertile grounds for subsequent research, particularly given the prominent role of the developmental exchange: how do the shared recollections of group members stimulate personal recall and evaluation? How does an individual decide what to share and when to share it or, perhaps, what not to share? The order of the themes makes intuitive sense, although Vota and de Vries (2001) (non-traditional implementation of GAB) challenged the systematic introduction of topics. The underlying processes of such engagement are similarly of interest: perhaps parallel to the development of a cohesive GAB group, what is the intra-individual process of participation? How might this vary by age, gender or other individual difference variables? These questions lead naturally into consideration of the outcome of participation, as reported below.

### GAB: Outcome

James Birren has described GAB as therapeutic—without being therapy. The potential of GAB participation for personal growth is neatly previewed by the influential role of the self-system in the GAB process. Birren and Svensson (2009) and Thornton & Collins (2010) have articulated some of the outcomes anticipated, and observed, from GAB participation. Tangibly and importantly, participants complete the course with a written life review document—something that has drawn people to participate from the outset (Vota & de Vries, 2001). Birren and Svensson (2009) and Thornton, Collins, Birren and Svensson (2011) have also proposed more subjective benefits of participation, including an appreciation of one's life as it has been lived, insight into their own experiences and those of others, and increases in self-confidence and self-worth. Vota and de Vries (2001) reported that their participants described their ultimate experience in GAB to be overwhelmingly positive and sought to continue the process—these are outcomes often reported (Thornton & Collins, 2010).

The study by Thornton et al (2011) describes the processes of the developmental exchange shaped by group activities in GAB and their relationship to learning in later life. The developmental exchange is a central feature of social development, interpersonal dynamics, situated learning, and personal transformation. It is the enabling process in GAB settings that promotes the achievement of personal goals and group accomplishments. Nevertheless, these exchanges are embedded in the GAB structures of time, events, participants, themes, perspectives, medium, and quest for relevance. Ongoing research studies are gradually clarifying the actual, ideal, and social image of self as well as the processes, outcomes and specific learning topics achieved during the GAB experience as they unfold through the listening, participating, and diversifying structures of the developmental exchange.

As one of the first studies to examine the outcomes of participation in GAB, Reedy and Birren (1980) (as reported in Birren & Deutchman, 1991; Birren & Svensson, 2009) described their pilot study of 45 participants and compared their pretest scores with posttest scores on a number of psychosocial variables. They found increases in self-acceptance, energy/vigor, connectedness, and positive views of others (who were also seen as increasingly similar to the self), as well as decreases in anxiety and tension. Although not formally GAB, Bohlmeijer, Valenkamp, Westerhof, Smit, & Cuijpers (2005) engaged a single group, pre-posttest design with 79 older participants (70% of whom were women, with an average age of 66 years) who completed 12 group sessions, each of which had an assigned theme and a structure comprising reminiscence, dialogue, and creative expression. They found, similar in many respects to the pilot work of Reedy and Birren (1980), significant decreases in depression and increases in mastery. These findings align with a growing literature on the benefits of life review in general, as suggested by Butler (1963) many years ago in his introduction of this field.

Brown-Shaw, Westwood, and de Vries (1999) have commented more explicitly on this therapeutic potential, lauding the possible growth as a consequence of involvement but realizing its limitations. They note that in the reviewing and sharing of one's life, critical events may be identified, but risk remaining unresolved—with potential significant personal consequences. Many events may lose their potency over time, or resolve naturally; moreover, not all critical events lend themselves to enactment. They propose that GAB may serve a type of diagnostic function, highlighting those aspects of the self in need of change (including repair) and “may prepare individuals to take these issues to another level of understanding” (p. 112). Brown-Shaw et al. (1999) and Kuhl & Westwood (2001) describe a creative and innovative therapy adjunct to GAB—Group-Based Enactment—for those who have identified unresolved issues through their participation in the groups. They provide several evocative case studies.

The enactment takes place in a cohesive and supportive group typical of the GAB small groups under

the direction of a skilled therapist. The “warm-up phase” helps construct the scene and the script, drawing directly from GAB texts and cross-cutting themes. The “action phase” sets this script in motion. The participant becomes the protagonist in this enactment and the other group members are invited to participate in supporting roles, all directed by the therapist. The story is enacted as per the original script. It is paused in places for further discussion and clarification and the story/event is ultimately resolved, often through acting out what might have been—extending the original script. Participants, including those supporting actors, often take away new interpretations and feelings from these enactments—integrating the previously unresolved event into a new frame of reference. This approach moves the natural and therapeutic aspects of GAB into an active therapy intervention.

### Summary

There has been significant interest in the outcomes of engagement in a life review experience beginning with Butler’s (1963) early proposals. These outcomes are both tangible (such as the written life review document) and more subjective (such as the emotional consequences of considerations of life). Research using GAB, or comparable versions, has been modest and has yielded positive outcomes, although more systematic research is needed; for example, going beyond single samples and follow-up research beyond the post-test. A more focused effort on particular content and its relationship to outcomes would also be a welcomed and sophisticated research strategy, elaborating on the approach adopted by group enactment research—in both therapeutic and educational contexts.

### Conclusion

The brief review above offers both empirical support for GAB and suggestions for future research in three domains: content, structure, and outcome. The content, as expressed by the preselected themes (themselves established theoretically and by a review of research), has received some inherent backing. That is, content analyses on the theme of death and dying reveal a depth of contemplation—a profitable approach to reflection on one’s life. At the same time, the extent to which this is representative of the approach taken to other themes remains to be explored. Similarly, does the approach to themes vary either by theme or experience? Are later themes addressed in ways that differ from earlier themes? This is particularly germane to the understanding of the developmental exchange. The themes represent fertile grounds for reviewing one’s life—particularly with respect to age and gender and perhaps other individual difference variables. The explicit structure of the process makes intuitive sense, even as challenges to this linear progress have been offered by at least the online participants. General support for this thematic progress through the life

story has yet to be established. Similarly, the other elements of the unique structure of GAB merit explicit testing: Do the priming questions enlarge thought and consideration of issues? Does preparing the text encourage reflection? What role does the developmental exchange play in issue consideration and/or group cohesion? The implicit structure has been an especially fruitful area for research, highlighting the self and illuminating the process of learning. The particular dimensions of this experience merit further attention. The outcomes of this activity underscore its psychosocial focus and, further, set the stage for deeper consideration of particularly troublesome events, issues, and possible personal transformation. This is perhaps the most frequent area of research in the field of life review—the consequences of engaging in a life review. How does GAB compare with other forms of life review and reminiscence in this context? It would seem that the systematic nature of GAB renders it especially well-suited for further research; the sampling of studies already undertaken provide a solid beginning.

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

### Jim Birren as a Professor and Man

John J. Herr

When my cohort of graduate students entered academia, we *apprenticed* ourselves in what was one of the last vestiges of the *guild tradition*. The Ph.D. was considered the journeyman's certificate. The determination of when to reward the journeyman's certificate was almost entirely in the hands of the *master* professor. This fact afforded them an enormous power over the lives of their apprentices, which illuminated the depths of the professor's character. I experienced great unhappiness in my first exposure to graduate school, and had it not been for the war in Vietnam, my academic career would have ended there.

Instead I transferred to USC, as embittered and cynical about the prospects of continuing a formal education as I could possibly be. I was expecting the worst. It is not hyperbole for me to say that Jim Birren saved me. Even though I produced a paper for his Seminar on Aging that any other professor would have been delighted to give a failing grade, Jim felt obliged to hang in there with me and to find something in that awful paper that would engage my curiosity and which he could nurture. It worked. But there was more: not only did he enhance our education as psychologists, his training grant exposed us to meetings of the Gerontological Society in Toronto, Houston, and Puerto Rico as well as the international meeting in Kiev. He left it for us to decide which path we would take, but he had successfully socialized us all as gerontologists by the time we graduated. We all spoke so highly of our experiences as NICHD trainees at the Gerontology Center to site visitors that they criticized us for having such an unrealistically positive experience in our graduate education.

Jim treated his graduate students in a way that would have resulted in his sainthood were he of that religious persuasion. He treated us respectfully and fairly; in fact, we were treated better than *very well*. Jim Birren's graduate students always had their essential human dignities respected. Jim Birren always spoke to graduate students in terms of "when" they got their degree, not "if" they got their degree. Jim and Betty would even invite us to their home once a month to feed us with crackers, cheese, beer, and wine to talk gerontology where they

treated us like junior colleagues rather than senior students.

In sum, Jim was a remarkable mentor, role-model, and such a regular guy that he was safe enough for all his students to call him a friend if they dared. He was the real thing. He led by example. As a scientist, he was at the top of his field and never fell in love with his hypothesis. He was a kind, temperate, strong, wise man. We students were lucky to know him, much less have him for our professor.

Perhaps what I admire most about Jim Birren is that he steadfastly refused to be closed to new data. He always had a willingness to notice what he hadn't noticed before. He had avoided the fate of most social scientists by never falling in love with his hypothesis. That is why it was always pleasurable and informative to talk with him. There was no problem with his capacity for critical thinking but his critical thinking never was employed defensively. That is, to ward off others' ideas before trying to integrate them with what else he knew. If there were a way that I could change to be more like him, it would be to trade my defensive critical response to something unexpected for Jim's open critical thinking when that occurs. As I review my life portfolio and evaluate where I want to put my energy, I draw considerable inspiration from Jim's view of life.

I would like to share a final thought: I wasn't surprised that Jim died before he reached one-hundred years. I say that because back when I was a graduate student, Jim announced to his seminar that he had been invited to a meeting of centenarians and was looking forward to see what kind of people they were. When at the next seminar meeting he failed to mention his adventure with the centenarians, we asked him what happened. He said something like, "It was a disappointment. It was a roomful of people who chronologically may have been over one-hundred but measured in terms of their experience, no one there was over fifty. It appears to live to be one-hundred, you have to be satisfied living a very dull life." One thing is for certain, Jim never settled for a boring life. He lived life to its fullest. He certainly wouldn't have wanted to be confused with people who only reached advanced age by living a boring life. His life remains a role model for all of us.

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

## The Sauna to the Icy Lake: Reflections on my Journey with Jim Birren

Gary Irwin-Kenyon  
St. Thomas University

It was a conference in Jyväskylä, Finland. Jim and I and other colleagues were enjoying a sauna in the countryside. It was early June and the ice had not completely melted on the lake in front of us. The Finnish tradition is to heat up in the sauna and then jump into the lake. I asked Jim if he was planning to do the *icy plunge*. He said, “No, I had better be careful... I am not twenty-five years old any longer.” I agreed it was wise thinking, and I headed to the wharf. As soon as I hit the water I heard a splash right behind me—guess who it was! That was Jim—always curious and not to be left behind.

I first met Jim Birren in Vancouver when I was a doctoral student at the University of British Columbia (UBC). Jim and Jim Thornton—who was one of my supervisors—were good friends. Jim Birren was at UBC for a Gerontology conference organized by Jim Thornton. The latter asked me if I wanted to help out with the conference, a request to which I gladly agreed. During the conference my main supervisor, Kjell Rubenson, suggested that I introduce myself to Jim Birren. There was to be a special year-long seminar at the Andrew Norman Institute at the University of Southern California the following year on *Theories of Aging*—the subject of my dissertation. Jim Birren said that he could not promise anything, but to send him my CV and that he would get back to me. I did receive an invitation to USC and thus began my journey on what Betty Birren called, “the magic carpet ride of Gerontology.”

Jim was always curious and enthusiastic about what students and colleagues were doing in their work. He often had good suggestions for directions to take their thinking and/or career further. In my case, he asked me what I wanted to do after completing my Postdoc at USC. I said that I was job-hunting, but that I also really wanted to go to Europe. He offered to write letters of introduction for me and gave me a list of his European colleagues. I know he was surprised at how many letters I requested, but he obliged—that was Jim.

Jim’s curiosity extended beyond academic life. During my time at the Andrew Norman Institute we also

shared parts of our personal lives. Jim learned that I was a martial artist. The next thing I knew he had a group of colleagues organized—including himself—to have me give them a Karate lesson on the roof of the Andrus Gerontology Center.

Following a rich experience in Europe, I was hired to start the Gerontology programme at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, New Brunswick. I remember when the hiring committee asked me what I would do to get the programme off the ground. I recommended we do three things—organize a conference, publish a book, and award Jim Birren an honorary PhD. Well, the university agreed to fund the conference, and Jim agreed to be involved in all three initiatives. The outcomes were the *Metaphors of Aging* conference in Fredericton, the publication of the *Metaphors of Aging* volume, and, in 1990 Jim was awarded an honorary degree. The Gerontology programme could not have had a better beginning. Over the years, I often thanked Jim for opening career doors for me. He simply responded that he had opened doors for others, but that I did the work to walk through the door.

I had the privilege to work and spend time with Jim and Betty in many special places. A project that was particularly meaningful to me was the *Aging and Biography* volume, and the special issue of *Ageing and Society*, which were both completed over the same period of time. These projects were developed in three locations—all truly special narrative settings. The first was the Birren’s garden in Pacific Palisades—you can imagine that working beneath eucalyptus and orange trees was a very special experience for an Atlantic Canadian. The second setting was the Mader’s chalet in a small village in The Black Forest in Germany, and the third was a hunting lodge in the countryside outside Budapest in Hungary.

Aside from the natural beauty of these locations, they were special settings because the time together involved many walks and hikes, great food, and fascinating conversations about the proposed book and many other life themes. It is a precious experience to work with colleagues who also become friends—this was definitely the case with Jim. It was scholarship at its best—especially for narrative gerontologists. Jim was the *glue* for this and many other projects. He would make suggestions about whom to invite to contribute to the volume, and we would add our

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suggestions. Many colleagues agreed to participate because they liked and respected Jim.

Another special memory I have of Jim relates to a project at the Boston Museum of Science. The museum invited a group of gerontologists to help them design an exhibit on aging. It was fascinating to observe how the technicians transformed our ideas into physical exhibits. However, the part of this project that I recall fondly was a dinner at a restaurant with Jim, Betty, and my wife Liz. We were informed by the museum that we would not receive a fee for our services—but that they would subsidize a meal anywhere we liked. A very special restaurant was recommended to us. We looked over the menu and the wine list, and we hesitated. We were all accustomed to a per diem for meals, and this was a lot of money. We debated for a while—“perhaps they did not mean what they said” and “but we are working here”, and so on. We concluded that the museum was very clear about their instructions, so we decided to relax, had a good laugh over the deliberations, and enjoyed an excellent meal and bottle of wine.

Jim Birren was my mentor in professional life. His enthusiasm and encouragement helped me to feel confident in following my own path in Gerontology. Along with colleagues Bill Randall, Brian de Vries, Phil Clark and,

more recently, Ernst Bohlmeijer, this collaboration has resulted in the emergence of Narrative Gerontology and Narrative Care—a perspective that continues to grow and expand in most parts of the world. Jim predicted early on that it was only the beginning of the interest in lifestories. Jim was also a mentor in the sense that he inspired me to teach my students in a way that allows them to follow their interests in our field. Finally, I now find myself increasingly in the mentorship role with new colleagues, and I keep his spirit in mind and share with them any wisdom I have gained on my journey.

This year (2017) I celebrate thirty years as founding chair of Gerontology at St. Thomas University. For those thirty years, I have enjoyed Jim’s company as a colleague and friend. I miss him, but I know he would want us all to keep the journey going. As he used to say, “Death ends a life but it does not end a relationship”.

I compose these reminiscences riding on a train through the Austrian Alps, having just completed a workshop in Graz on Narrative Gerontology and *Pathways to Stillness*—the latest extension of my work with Jim.

I feel his presence.



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

### A Message of Gratitude

Helen Kerschner

National Volunteer Transportation Center

Like many colleagues, I first met Jim Birren when I was a lowly graduate student and he was the Director of the Andrus Gerontology Center at USC; and the person often referred to as “the father of gerontology.” At that time, Jim was known as a notable fundraiser, teacher, and administrator at USC and a nationally recognized researcher in psychology and aging. He also was an inspirational mentor to students and faculty alike.

Jim wasn’t ever my professor because I wasn’t a student at the Center, but I was fortunate to hang out with his students (and to be married to one of them, Paul Kerschner). It wasn’t until I graduated from USC that Jim became my long-time mentor in almost every stage of my professional life. Every time I asked for his suggestions and support, he responded with a generosity of time and talent, and the collegial collaboration of a peer. I knew we weren’t and never would be peers, but it was generous of him to treat me as one. Our collaborations always led to my knowing that I had received an incredible gift of his wealth of knowledge and the feeling that my experience would be something akin to having “15 minutes of fame.”

My professional career has included a number of positions and topics, all of which have included Jim’s input regarding aging. At Westinghouse Electric Company, Jim suggested that older women in developing countries might be the entry point for family education about contraceptives. At AAIA (an international association on aging), Jim worked with me on a research project that asked 100 leaders in aging from countries around the world to respond to the oft asked question, “How old is old?”. At the University of New Mexico, Jim assisted our Center on Aging in developing a plan for a university based retirement community for older adults. Of course, Jim really believed it should be a living and learning community for retired faculty. At the Beverly Foundation, Jim agreed to be on the Board of Directors and (perhaps reluctantly) to help design a research agenda in senior transportation. And, at the National Volunteer Transportation Center, Jim helped me develop the idea for telling stories about volunteer drivers and passengers.

It was Jim’s interest in story telling that resulted in a most profound contribution to my own story and the stories of countless others. Perhaps it also had an impact on many who have contributed articles for this publication.

In the late 1990’s I finally became Jim’s student. Not at USC, but at that other school across town, UCLA. Jim had suggested that I might enjoy taking (actually I think he suggested that I *should* take) the Guided Autobiography (GAB) class he was teaching at UCLA. The GAB process was (and is) a process for self-review (sometimes referred to as life review) that digs deep into the past and explores the future. In fact, one of Jim’s favorite expressions was Kierkegaard’s “Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forward”. One of my favorite “Jim expressions” was “You can’t know where you’re going until you know where you’ve been.” The GAB class was a life changing experience for me, just as it was (and still is) for so many others. In fact, after that class, I was one of the fortunate GAB graduates who became a member of a group often referred to (by us) as “Disciples of Jim”. Many in the group, especially Cheryl Svensson, collaborated with Jim in teaching GAB sessions and in continuing GAB as a James Birren legacy.

As time passed, Jim’s mentoring and teaching became collaboration in the design, development and communication of another way of looking at life today in order to plan for tomorrow. Jim called it “The Life Portfolio.” In truth, it had many of the elements of Guided Autobiography, but it emphasized telling one’s story about current activities and experiences with little or no emphasis on the past. Jim asked me to help him teach a couple of Life Portfolio classes at UCLA. Helping Jim teach a class was like a third grader helping Carl Sagan teach a course on astronomy. I observed, took notes, and cheered the class (and Jim) on. Over time, Jim and I refined the concept of Life Portfolio, and one of these days Cheryl and I may get around to creating a curriculum for use by those who want to explore new ways to live their life forward. However, what I learned from Jim in the GAB and Life Portfolio collaborations was the value of stories; and I became a believer in the need for each of us to tell our story.

Jim was particularly helpful in encouraging me to collect stories about real people, especially older adults, who provided and received transportation. It seems like the “dark ages” when we began collecting stories about volunteers who drive older adults because we collected them via mail. We discovered that just as themes related to

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one's past are of personal value, themes about transportation delivery by older adult volunteers could be captivating. The book, *Stories from the Road: Stories from the Heart* included ninety-eight stories written by volunteer drivers. Although we suggested a variety of themes, many of the writers told their story about the value and satisfaction of being a volunteer driver. The stories were uplifting and resulted in book which many organizations around the country have used as a model for collecting the stories of their volunteer drivers. The stories and the published book also resulted in a major corporation's interest in the personal mobility of older adults. When the leaders asked if they could be part of the volunteer transportation agenda you can imagine my response.

The second book, *The Stories of Passengers* had Jim's blessing but sadly not his involvement. The book currently is in the final stages of completion: it is different in the collection process, the suggested themes, the information collected and most importantly, the content of the stories. We asked the story tellers to tell us their age and many were in their 90s and some were 100+. We were surprised to discover that some in their 70s were caring for parents in their 90s and others in their 90s were caring for children in their 70s. It is probably a good thing that few of the passengers selected our suggested themes because the stories they told ran the gamut of issues in aging: losses of family and friends, health and mobility challenges, poverty and near poverty, isolation and loneliness, needs for

physical and emotional assistance, aging in place, and what one contributor called "something called a-g-e." On the specific topic of transportation, driving cessation, or what some called "giving up the keys," was identified in many of the stories and was viewed as a loss with negative social, economic, and financial implications. Added to that loss was their transition to becoming passengers, often difficult until they discovered a new method of getting where they needed to go. In most cases it was a volunteer driver program, a topic Jim spent considerable time helping me create new ideas for educational material.

Regardless of their health and social challenges, their losses and difficult transitions, a recurring theme expressed by these same passengers was that of gratitude...gratitude for new friendships and socialization, gratitude for physical and financial support, gratitude for random acts of kindness, gratitude for assistance and support and for getting a ride; and gratitude because strangers cared for them and about them. While the breadth and depth of challenges faced by these passengers should have been anticipated, the recurring theme of gratitude was a surprise. In embracing the positive social emotion of gratitude that modern psychology says can benefit the lives of religious and non-religious people, our passengers may be healthier than they realize. Their gratitude was an expression of psychological health that would make Jim proud. I expect that the soon to be published book of passenger stories with its dedication to Jim would also make him proud.

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

# Jim Birren: Visionary and Master Builder of Gerontology

Phoebe Liebig

University of Southern California

Unlike many contributors to this special journal issue about Jim Birren, I first met him and Betty very soon after their move to California in the fall of 1965. Their younger son and mine were close friends through junior high. Initially our relationship was social and had nothing to do with aging—other than our own! However, Jim was always proselytizing about aging as *the* wave of the future. So after several years of friendship built on shared interests in a wide range of ideas (including gardening) and my suffering a severe accident, Jim lured me into the world of aging as a grant writer for USC's gerontology program in 1971.

### Jim's Early Years and Career in Government Research

What were some of the factors that led to Jim's renown in the field of aging? He was born on April 4, 1918 and grew up in Chicago in a family that included his four grandparents. Neither parent attended high school, but they valued education highly. Jim went to local public schools. In high school, he competed in varsity basketball and demonstrated an entrepreneurial bent; he and friends owned a successful gas station. He went to the local community college to become an engineer but then attended a teachers' college to pursue what seemed to be a more stable job prospect. He became interested in psychology and ultimately received a PhD in that discipline from Northwestern in 1947, where he met Betty who also got her master's degree in psychology in the same year.

He was successful in receiving a National Institute of Health predoctoral award that was not only important financially but also a major stepping-stone in his research career. He was engaged in a series of research activities at the Naval Medical Research Institute; the Baltimore City Hospital, home of a new research unit on aging; and the University of Chicago. Some of these activities delayed completion of his dissertation on *seasickness* (based on his

Navy research), but they became the foundation for his lifelong commitment to the study of aging.

At the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), Jim led a multi-disciplinary team that conducted an evaluation of behavioral measures of 47 men age 65+ for a two-week period. An important finding was that older adults continue to acquire and store information but process it more slowly. Jim's subsequent research included neurophysiologists and physiologists whose perspectives became part of his own future inquiries. By the 1960s, he was responsible for both intramural and external research programs on aging at the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). Nathan Shock, David Solomon, and Robert Butler were collaborators who enhanced his research career then and in later years.

Jim was a pioneer in the field of aging. A major force in the history of the Gerontological Society of America (GSA), he attended its first meeting in 1948 and was one of its earliest presidents. His publications in the mid-1940s were centered on his dissertation research in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology* and the *Journal of Applied Psychology*. In the late 1940s he began to publish articles in *The Gerontologist*. He also joined Robert Havighurst in initiating a 1955 American Psychological Association (APA) conference on the psychological aspects of aging, a precursor of APA's Division 20.

In his memoirs, Jim reported that he was getting restless in 1964, occasioned by a lack of promotion opportunities for non-physicians, salary issues, and concerns about costs of education for his three children. He also was particularly interested in linking the effects of children's health and experience into adult life, but that research approach unfortunately was not adopted by the NICHD, much to his chagrin.

### Career Shift

For these several reasons, at age 47, Jim entertained a mid-life change when USC contacted him to develop a center on aging, with \$2 million pledged by a donor who wanted to build retirement housing. This was not an easy decision. The Birrens enjoyed their lives in their Maryland family home of 20 years and their nearby country farm for gardening and relaxation, and USC took its time in the negotiations. Ultimately USC President Topping, who had

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been at the NIH, ensured Jim's appointment as a tenured professor of psychology at an appropriate salary, with a guaranteed program budget for three years. Even before he arrived at USC, Jim was successful in securing a five-year NICHD biopsychosocial training grant for five assistant professors—one of whom was Vern Bengtson—15 doctoral students and travel funds. All was set for success and the Birren family moved—with some reluctance—to Los Angeles. Without this major career shift and Jim's intellectual attributes and personal characteristics, it is very probable the development of the field (and ultimately the discipline) of gerontology would have been very different. But the first few years in academia challenged Jim as both visionary and master builder.

The USC "culture" was very different from that of government research entities, with a focus on local community in the post-Watts riots era of 1965. A Board of Councilors comprised of advisors and prospective donors were standard for all major units, such as the new aging program. USC also was driven by its aspirations to become a top research university, so Jim had a "hunting license" to raise funds; a development officer was his only staff member. The emerging program had limited space in an old clapboard house on the main campus, and no research facilities were in place. But the biggest set-back was the donor's default due to problems with insurance issues, so the prospective Ross Cortese Institute became the Gerontology Center.

The program was subsequently moved to an industrial building off-campus consisting of a few offices and a lounge area on the ground floor used for seminars and for Friday afternoon social gatherings for all affiliated with the Center. Students occupied a series of open "cages" on the second floor. Jim recruited existing USC faculty on a part-time basis, and short-term visiting faculty were drawn from leaders in the field of aging. Classes and eventually some continuing education offerings were taught on the main campus. The Ph.D. students were expected to conduct research and to be advocates for and engage in community projects serving older adults.

### The Center in the Early 1970s

Jim's greatest coup was his partnership with AARP in its search for a way to honor Ethel Percy Andrus. A decision was made in 1969 to fund a building for USC's gerontology program. By 1970, a national drive had raised two million dollars from individual AARP members. Foundations and local donors also contributed to the completion of the Andrus Gerontology Center on the main campus in 1972, seven years after Jim's arrival at USC. A three-story building, with a courtyard and basement vivarium, housed administrative offices, a library, auditorium, research facilities and office spaces for faculty from several disciplines as well as community outreach activities, seminar rooms, and student cubicles. It was dedicated in 1973.

This "new home" enabled Jim to recruit stars such as Caleb (Tuck) Finch and Warner Schaie. But he was also suddenly faced with a series of challenges as the leader of a new administrative unit required to interface with the university, identify new sources of funding, e.g. endowed chairs, and create new educational programs. As a lifelong learner, he hired faculty from different disciplines: economics, social work, public administration, dentistry, political science, architecture, urban planning, and education, in part to enhance his own knowledge, but mainly to incorporate multidisciplinary perspectives. They also had "hunting licenses" to raise resources for their own research; hold a joint appointment in an appropriate USC department/school and "gerontologize" their own discipline; be leaders in professional organizations; and be role models for the Ph.D. students—a challenge that was met with enthusiasm and passion—lots of midnight oil was burned! But it wasn't all work.

Thanks to Jim's *joie de vivre*, he focused on building a feeling of community and created opportunities for faculty, staff and students to socialize on a regular basis to enhance cross-disciplinary research, provide opportunities for exchanges to help shape the Center's future, and foster lifetime friendships. He also inaugurated the annual "Geronting Award" given to the person who had aged the most in the past year! These events not only took place at the Center but also at the Birrens' home. Their 4<sup>th</sup> of July parties in their beautiful garden—Jim's pride and joy—Thanksgiving dinners, Christmas celebrations, gatherings for visiting scholars, and weekend hiking were part of the Center's *esprit de corps*. All were urged by Betty to sign a guest book *every* time they enjoyed the hospitality at Toyopa Drive.

Jim also needed time for his own research and for teaching. Before he came to USC, he hadn't been heavily involved in teaching. He expected the doctoral students to teach *him* and expand his own research activity and interests. His seminars were provocative and spirited. He also found he really enjoyed teaching undergraduates, helping them shed light on their own aging process thus far and how it might affect their future lives.

And somehow he still found time to run the Center—aided by "gatekeeper" Eleanor James, faculty, and senior staff to dream up new programs. He presided over weekly senior staff meetings to exchange information about current activities and to generate plans for the future. One of his classic "leading" questions was "Who answers the phone for...?" That meant not just program responsibility, but also being the "guardian" for that area of intellectual development. He hired a USC Business School faculty member to strengthen staff management styles and provided opportunities for some annual weekend retreats at which discussions centered on what/how current programs might be improved and new ones planned. He also made sure that faculty attended annual Board of Councilors retreats to discuss their research and excite possible donor interest.

## Key Innovations in the Field of Aging

Jim Birren's optimism, self-confidence and peripheral vision were key factors in his revolutionizing gerontology. He was competitive, welcomed challenges and was tolerant of ambiguity. As described in his memoirs, he also set great store by the roles of luck and timing in his career and the contributions of his mentors and colleagues. His analytical gifts led him to identify gaps in the field of aging research and education and convinced others to fill them.

This is not to say that everything was perfect. Jim had to deal with USC policies not always supportive of the Center, such as what unit was entitled to compete for individual donors, but he was successful in getting the Provost to convene a university-wide planning group to discuss the right "fit" for aging across the university. He also encountered politics that led to the loss of an NIA Center grant and having to adapt a National Science Foundation program to include interviewees with similar ethnic backgrounds as the individuals being studied. But the 1970s and 1980s were essentially a golden age for the Andrus Center.

Even before the move into the new building, Jim was well aware of the need to have a substantial library for the Center. A librarian was hired, current books and journals were catalogued, and she and Jim published an annual list of USA PhD dissertations on aging. The new library was accessible to students and faculty from all USC units, other local colleges and universities, and it was a mecca for practitioners and visitors from other USA and international institutions.

Unlike today when large numbers of commercial companies publish books on aging, there was a dearth of such activity then. In the mid-1970s, a Center Publications Office was created to publish faculty monographs, to feature their research and to inspire others. Another of Jim's "leading" questions was a perpetual guide: "What books or articles will be generated from this project?"

But that was only a beginning. With federal funding, Jim initiated a series of *handbooks on aging* in biology, sociology and psychology featuring the most current research; some are in their eighth edition. A subsequent handbook on mental health and aging, an encyclopedia and a book on *theories of aging* helped trigger an explosion in commercial publications and eventual demise of the Center's publications efforts. Like a good gardener, Jim weeded out that program when it no longer filled the need for which it had been created.

Jim then turned to the development of several educational programs. Probably the most famous was the *Summer Institute* of intensive courses taught by leaders in the field for graduate students and faculty from USC and other universities; junior faculty were often expected to teach about aging, without much background. New courses such as literature and aging and autobiography were offered. Besides learning about current research and enjoying southern California and social activities, attendees built networks and made lifelong friends. Jim

became quite famous for his energetic dancing in the courtyard. These institutes became a template for similar programs adapted subsequently by other universities and colleges.

A Masters Dual Degree, co-taught by faculty of the Schools of Public Administration and Social Work was funded by an Andrus Center grant. It was designed to train practitioners to be knowledgeable about interventions and policies on behalf of older adults. Trainees often worked in the Community Programs area to provide technical assistance, viz., in the Watts area to develop supports for older black residents, a non-profit housing company, and an experimental Medicare program called SCAN. Several graduates of this program eventually pursued their PhDs in social work and public health at USC and UCLA. Concurrently, other grants from NIMH and the Administration on aging expanded the Center's short-term training for practitioners, such as nurses, social workers, and "aging network" administrators and staff.

The year 1975 was a banner year for the field of aging; the National Institute on Aging (NIA) headed by Robert Butler, was established, as was the USC School of Gerontology, with Jim as its first dean. He understood that national and state government agencies, companies and foundations were becoming more aware of an aging society and its probable impacts on their policies and activities. In the fall, 55 students comprised the inaugural class; many were non-traditional students already in the field of aging but wanting to enhance their expertise.

The innovative curriculum of the Master of Science in Gerontology was evidence-based. It required an internship and either a comprehensive exam or a thesis for graduation. Its goal was to generate leaders of public and private programs for older adults, including corporations. This model heavily influenced how later gerontology programs were structured, often through USC's consistent engagement in the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE).

In 1976, AARP co-founder Leonard Davis, a friend and supporter of the Center since the late 1960s, established a generous endowment for the school that now bears his name, the USC Leonard Davis School of Gerontology. Under the guidance of David Peterson, the Director of the School, a continuing education department was expanded to provide professional certificates. Undergraduate classes for gerontology minors and majors also were designed and received general education status (no easy task), as were dual degree masters programs with other USC units (e.g., law, health administration, and business), requiring lengthy agreements from each of the two schools involved. Two master's degrees made Davis School graduates more attractive prospective employees, as was also true of the NIA doctoral and post-doctoral trainees. The School made it easier to hire new faculty without requiring up-front financial support from other USC units. However, joint appointments were still desirable for "gerontologizing" the rest of the university.

Two new programs drawing on the contributions of older adults were added in the 1970s to the School's

programs. USC's Emeriti Center, founded in 1978, was located in the Andrus Center building. It was primarily established as a research unit to study the needs and adjustments of retired faculty and staff. Jim viewed this program as a way to promote continued growth in their retirement years by continued participation in USC's social, cultural, athletic, and intellectual events, and to provide opportunities for joint retiree-student projects.

Another unique program, the Andrus Volunteers, comprising retired faculty and staff and older adults from the surrounding neighborhood, initiated intergenerational projects with gerontology students, such as book and white elephant sales, and writing and performing plays for the USC community and its neighbors. Today's Volunteers continue to assist the School in many ways: serving as research subjects and informal mentors and also helping students improve their interviewing skills.

During the late 1970s and the 1980s, Jim continued to create innovative programs in California, nationally and internationally. He and his co-visionary, Bonnie Russell of Cal State San Jose, secured a two-year grant to establish the California Council on Gerontology and Geriatrics (CCGG). Its purpose was to foster statewide communication among California's more than 250 two- and four-year public and private colleges and universities; promote a statewide plan of educational activities in aging; and provide information to policymakers about the need for an educated work force in California. Annual and two regional conferences featured opportunities for student presentations, and three newsletters were sent to members. Other grants provided some support, but Betty Birren became a voluntary Executive Director who expanded the membership and strengthened the organization's operations. Today CCGG is a forum for faculty and students about higher education in aging in the Golden State.

In 1981, perhaps inspired by a 1979-1980 sabbatical at Stanford's Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Studies, Jim got funding to establish the Andrew Norman Institute for Advanced Study in Gerontology and Geriatrics. Fellows from the US and other nations (e.g., Canada, India, Japan, The Netherlands) spent 10 months at the Center, attended weekly seminars, pursued individual research and wrote chapters for four books on different topics: 1) Cognition, Stress and Aging; The Dementias: Policy and Management; Employment; and Education and Aging. The Institute emphasized the aging of societies via cross-cultural and multinational exchanges of information. Unlike similar "think tanks," Davis School and other USC faculty attended seminars, as did a select group of USC PhD students and distinguished faculty from other local universities. Jim believed this program was one of his most distinct contributions to the field and was particularly grateful for Hans Schroots' contributions. The careers of several authors in this journal were impacted by their participation as Fellows.

One outcome was that the Center was asked to help develop new programs in aging. For example, Jim helped a 1982-1983 Norman Institute Fellow, Dr. P.V. Ramamurti

in India, who was asking his Vice Chancellor to consider supporting an aging program in the psychology department. Jim's conversations with the administrator led to the creation of this new entity. That program is now India's leading academic program in aging, and my own Fulbrights have led to more than 20 years of collaboration. David Peterson played a similar role in Taiwan, and School faculty received awards to collaborate with colleagues in Europe, Latin America, and Australia.

Closer to home, was the UCLA/USC Long-term Care Gerontology Center that provided another opportunity for Jim and Dave Solomon to work together. Its purpose was to conduct research, education and service to aging populations, including veterans. Objectives were to develop a successful geriatric fellows program, expand training of a broad range of health professions, conduct a series of research seminars for UCLA and USC faculty, and initiate local community-based long-term care programs.

In the early 1980s, the School of Gerontology and USC's School of Medicine were successful in competing for two new programs. In 1983, the USC Geriatric Education Center (GEC) was one of the first four programs of its kind. Its tasks included faculty development, training practitioners and holding conferences in four states, creating and distributing educational materials, publishing newsletters about progress made, and assisting others to compete successfully for subsequent GEC programs. The second center was one of the first Alzheimer's Disease Centers. It included participation by UC Irvine, other USC health-related Schools, and Cal Tech. Research and education have been its primary tasks up to the present. It is now headquartered at the USC Health Sciences Campus and Rancho Los Amigos.

Jim's final major achievement in the field of aging was the creation of the PhD in Gerontology in 1989, his final year as dean. Several national leaders were not convinced that was an idea whose time had come, but in 1990 the University of Massachusetts, Boston followed suit and the die was cast. Research Institute and School faculty embraced the challenge, and both programs made joint presentations at various professional meetings to provide updates about their success. Since then, other PhD programs in gerontology/aging have been developed and have produced many of today's top researchers, educators, and policy makers.

But at age 71, Jim was not finished with institution building. Dave Solomon was looking for a director to organize the Borun Center for Gerontological Research at UCLA, and Jim looked forward to guiding the growth of a research program. The Borun Center was housed at the Veterans' Administration in west Los Angeles, but securing adequate funding was not easy and after Dave retired, the emphasis was less on active research and education and more on a fund raising and information exchange center. Not done yet, however, Jim and Betty expanded their attention to the area of autobiography that is amply described elsewhere in this journal.

After nearly 51 years of knowing and working with and for Jim Birren, I feel truly blessed and privileged, and know that I am not alone. Even now I keep in mind three of his “leading” questions: “Where do you see

yourself in five years?”; “What influences the choices you make?”; and “What new ideas have you adopted recently?”. His guidance and impact continue...

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

### Because of Jim

Patricia McDonald

I am grateful to Jim for accepting me into the psychology program at USC. Me? I was changing majors from a Ph.D. in literature to psychology. What did Jim do? Point to an empty wall in his office and ask me, "If I was referring to my life, how big would my painting be? What would my painting be?"

I always loved solving puzzles. Jim gave me the opportunity to do that with the scientific method. Better than a crossword puzzle! The scientific method gives more to healing. I struggle to be empathic, knowing I may never get there, because I don't understand the conflicts between science and faith, helping and seeking knowledge. They are not conflicts for me.

When I was at the Bekhterev Psychoneurological Institute, I met the woman physician in charge of caring for

geriatric patients. Many of their injuries were from the Second World War; she understood that Alzheimer's was not the only neurological condition she was treating. I gave her two books, one by Dr. James E. Birren and one, *Counseling the Older Adult: A Training Manual in Clinical Gerontology*, by me. My book was written, inspired by my mentor, Jim Birren. I wanted to give both to her. She had a bust of Lenin on her desk. I had an accurate translator that day, so I asked her why Lenin was still there. She simply said, "Without him, I would not be here." The same was true for me of Jim Birren. Without Dr. Birren (whom I never called Jim for many decades), I would not be here.

It is with love and gratitude that I dedicate these contributions to Dr. James E. Birren.

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*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

Gary T. Reker  
*Trent University*

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.

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

From Counterpart Theory to Janus Model:  
In Memoriam – James E. Birren, Friend, Mentor, and Colleague

Johannes J. F. Schroots  
*University of Groningen*

This 'In memoriam for James E. Birren' is written in the form of an autobiographical article. The story of friendship and academic cooperation starts with my first visit to Jim Birren in 1966, when I was a young psychology student and ends more than fifty years later with the development of the Janus model, based essentially on Jim's general theory of 'Aging as a counterpart of development'. The use of the metaphor 'counterpart' is meant to express the idea that there are latent structures of behavior (emotions, cognitions, and motivations)—carried forward from earlier experience—that interact with present situations. Since 1980, we worked closely together on the clarification of implicit 'Metaphors of development and aging', because making them explicit can provide us with a deeper understanding of existing theories but also because they tend to generate a whole body of theoretical problems and solutions. Based on the study of metaphors, a 'dynamic systems' approach to development (growth) and aging (senescing) was started. These two general processes have been translated in terms of order (information) and disorder (entropy). From this perspective it is inferred that the aging of human beings can be conceived as a series of transformations or 'branching points' into higher and/or lower order structures or processes, showing a progressive trend toward more disorder than order over the course of life. Thus, a new theory was born in 1994 under the title 'Gerodynamics, a branching theory of aging'. Theorizing on the basis of metaphors has its limitations. In the year 2000 a breakthrough took place when the metaphorical approach to development and aging was exchanged for a mathematical model of 'growth & decline' processes, called *Janus*. The universal '*Janus model*' solves the transition problems of development into aging for all kinds of living systems, from cell to society. In recognition of Jim Birren's scholarly work on '*Guided Autobiography*', computer simulations using the Janus model have been conducted with autobiographical memory data, collected with the *Lifeline Interview Method* (LIM). Simulation of the '*reminiscence bump*' resulted in an explanation of the mechanism behind the 'bump'.

In 1966 I met James E. Birren for the first time in Los Angeles. He had invited me to visit him at the University of Southern California (USC) because of my letter of interest concerning the advanced electronic equipment he used in experiments on the relations between behavior, aging, and the nervous system (Welford & Birren, 1965). As a 23 year old bachelors-level student of psychology and physiology from the Netherlands, I was fascinated by his research, bought a \$99 ticket on a Greyhound bus, and went abroad to the New World.

On a hot Friday afternoon in August, I walked into Dr. Birren's office on the USC campus. He gave me a short tour of the gerontology institute and invited me to come back next Monday because, he said, "There is always an empty desk where I might work". Alas, the magic reaction time machine, for which I came all the way from

Amsterdam, didn't work for some reason, much to my disappointment. Fortunately, Dr. Birren organized a seminar on the 'Welford & Birren' book especially for me and helped me write a bibliography on the relationship between 'Aging, Reaction Time, Cerebro- and Cardiovascular disease, and Personality'. My first introduction to gerontology couldn't have been more successful, the more so because Dr. Birren gave me a grant of \$200 when he heard of my financial problems. Filled with inspiration and feelings of lifelong friendship for Jim Birren, I returned to The Netherlands to get a master's degree in industrial and experimental psychology at the Free University Amsterdam (1970).

The next time I met Jim was in 1979 for a one-year research fellowship at the Andrus Gerontology Center, USC. After many years of sending Christmas cards and letters to keep in close contact, Jim invited me for a sabbatical after I had completed my doctoral degree in the Faculty of Social Sciences, Free University Amsterdam<sup>1</sup>. I was supposed to assist with the evaluation of 'guided autobiography' data, but, unfortunately, the project leader had to drop out soon after I arrived. Jim Birren came to the

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<sup>1</sup> PhD thesis: *Cognitive development, learning potential and school achievement* (Schroots, 1979).

rescue and invited me to assist him in his research, and that turned out to be the start of our lifelong collaboration.

In those days, Jim was interested in the psychological characterization of short autobiographical essays on the major branching points in life. During one of our walks we made a thorough search for a single personality descriptor, which would reflect both unique and more general traits of the individual (an impossible task), and an animal metaphor seemed to be a good candidate. For example, what is more appealing to the imagination than that we think of a person as a hyena or a lion? Immediately we see a different person. I became intrigued by the use of metaphors for the description of complex matters and bought Ortony's *Metaphor and Thought* (1979) to learn more about it. This book inspired our thinking and research for the decade ahead.

### Metaphors of Development and Aging

The 1960s and 1970s had shown a reappraisal of the role of metaphor in science. Serious claims have been made that science is in an essential way metaphorical and characteristically employs metaphors, particularly so called implicit, hidden or root metaphors inherent to many scientific theories. It has been argued that we ought to make them explicit, not only because these metaphors provide us with a deeper understanding of existing theories, but also because they tend to generate or create a whole body of theoretical problems and solutions.

Many theories of human development and aging in the social sciences are influenced by biological conceptions of human life. Jim and I became aware once more that development is often compared with incremental processes like biological growth, and that aging stands for decremental processes like deterioration. Psychological and social phenomena, however, do not necessarily follow the same course in life as biological phenomena. Jim pointed out, for example, that the psychological attribute "wisdom" traditionally represents a progressive aspect of change in adulthood and the later years of life (Clayton & Birren, 1980). After many rounds of Socratic dialogue, we introduced new metaphors in order to embrace or integrate various conceptions of *human ontogenesis*, i.e., the course of life between beginning and end (Birren & Schroots, 1980). The term 'ontogenesis' embraces both child and adult change, both development and aging (See Figure 1).

Figure 1 shows our attempts to generate new metaphors of development and aging according to the principle of *catachresis*. That is, new metaphors are developed to introduce theoretical terminology where none previously existed so that they become, almost imperceptibly, constitutive of the theories or conceptions they express. As such, development and aging are viewed as consisting of

three metaphors. The processes of biological, psychological, and social *development* were identified, successively, as *growing*, *maturing* and *adulthood*. Next, the processes of biological, psychological, and social *aging* were labeled with the metaphorical terms of *senescing*, *geronting*, and *eldering* (see definitions below figure 1). Before I knew it, I was the proud co-author of three papers that all contain sections on constructivism in science and metaphors of growth and development versus senescence and aging. What started as curiosity out of pure intellectual interest soon turned into a scientific goldmine. Two conferences were organized: the (unpublished) 1982 Vancouver Conference on Metaphors in the Study of Aging and the very successful 1990 New Brunswick Conference on Metaphors of Aging in Science and the Humanities (Schroots, Birren & Kenyon, 1991).

One question, however, kept nagging in my mind: "How are the processes of development and aging related to each other?" Given the gap between these two processes as pictured in figure 1, there must be some *transition* at some *time* for the different levels of ontogenesis. A definitive answer had to wait till the twenty-first century, but in the next section I will show our first step to a solution of the 'gap' problem.

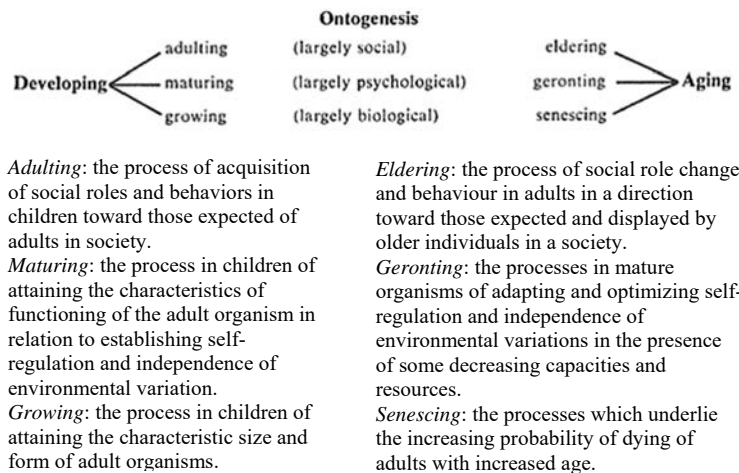


Figure 1. Diagram of human ontogenesis (Birren & Schroots, 1980).

### Counterparts of Development and Aging

In his function as mentor, Jim introduced me to his general theory of 'Aging as a counterpart of development' (Birren, 1960). The use of the metaphor 'counterpart' is meant to express the idea that there are latent structures of behavior (emotions, cognitions, and motivations) – carried forward from earlier experience—that interact with present situations. Aging is viewed as a transformation of the biological and behavioral development of the organism expressed in a 'counterpart manner' in variable ecological contexts. Counterpart theory primarily describes the diachronic or *sequential* relationship between development and aging and does not explicitly address the issue

of their synchronic or *simultaneous* relations. To fill the gap, Jim and I developed a simple diagram of human ontogenesis, much later called the '*butterfly*', in which development and aging are conceptualized as two parallel but related processes of change, or as the two sides of a unitary life trajectory (Figure 2).

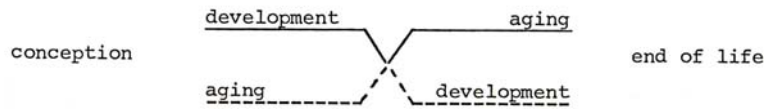


Figure 2. Butterfly diagram of human ontogenesis (Birren & Schroots, 1984; Schroots, 1982).

The '*butterfly*' diagram demonstrates that at the start of ontogenesis (conception), the developmental process is most visible or *manifest*, while the signs of aging are at the time still obscure or *latent*, and *vice versa* at the end of life. The diagram has been very inspiring for our theoretical thinking (Schroots, 1982; Birren & Schroots, 1984), but what the diagram does not show is that the *transition point* varies across the lifespan from function to function, from system to system, and from individual to individual. The discovery of the mechanism behind the varying transitions would take another twenty years.

### Dynamic Systems of Growth and Senescence

From 1980 to 1985, Jim and I worked apart or together on several '*metaphor*' papers for journals, books and conferences. Working together was a very stimulating experience. As Jim would say: 'I am picking your brain', to which I would reply: 'please, be my guest, because you show me a whole new world for free'. In the spring of 1985 I received a letter from Jim inviting to spend another sabbatical with him, this time at the Andrew Norman Institute (ANI) for Advanced Study in Gerontology and Geriatrics, connected to USC. Every year a limited number of promising researchers from different disciplines in gerontology were invited to spend their sabbatical at the ANI for in-depth study and learned discussions with other fellows.

My intention was to write a series of essays on growth and senescence in which changes of form would be discussed as a continuation of previous essays that I had written on '*Life*' and '*Time*'. These essays, then, would be my required contribution to the ANI book, *Emergent Theories of Aging* (under the editorship of J. E. Birren & V. L. Bengtson). It was tradition at the ANI that draft versions of various contributions (chapters) were discussed at length during weekly lunch meetings. In view of the outstanding academic qualities of fellows and guests, the multidisciplinary ANI meetings ensured scholarly discussions. Anxiously, therefore, I presented my newest ideas about growth and senescence on the basis of earlier (translated) essays on metaphors of life and time (Schroots, 1985 a,b). It soon became clear that the group of 12 fellows

didn't really appreciate my '*natural philosophy*' approach to the empirical science of growth and senescence (metaphors, bah!). The judgement of the fellows was anything but positive, to say the least.

I still had two months left to create some *order* in the chaos of my thoughts, so Jim suggested that I should write about the same subject but differently, following the academic rules and format of a scientific paper. I then worked like a maniac day and night on the ANI book chapter "*On Growing, Formative Change and Aging*" (Schroots, 1988), which still has the typical features of an essay. Essentially, my contribution is about Prigogine's revolutionary interpretation of the second law of thermodynamics, which states that

there is an increase of *entropy* (disorder, chaos) with age in living systems, resulting in the system's death (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984). Prigogine, however, postulates that internal or external fluctuations of dynamic systems can pass a *critical point*—the transformation, transition, bifurcation or branching point—and create *order* (negative entropy, information) out of *disorder* (chaos, entropy) through a process of *self-organization*, that is, a process by which a structure or pattern of change emerges with the passage of time.

From this meta-theoretical perspective, I inferred that the aging of human beings could be conceived as a series of transformations (literally "changes of form") into higher and/or lower order structures or processes, showing a progressive trend toward more disorder (chaos, entropy) than order (information, negative entropy) over the course of life. In other words, lower order transformations at the biological or psychological level of functioning, e.g., illness or divorce, do not always result in lower order behavior. Some people, for instance, are strengthened by illness, and divorce may have a positive rather than a negative effect on mental health and lifespan. But, of course, in the end we will all die. Jim, who was already my friend and mentor, now also became my best colleague.

### Intermezzo

From 1985, Jim and I worked together at least once or twice a year, to begin at the Annual Scientific Meetings of the Gerontological Society of America, after which I was invited for a couple of weeks to the Birren's home in Pacific Palisades (CA) to celebrate Thanksgiving and to prepare articles and international conferences in the field of '*Health and Aging*' (Schroots, Birren, & Svanborg, 1988) and '*Autobiography*' (Schroots & Birren, 1993). In the meantime I had started my own research institute ERGO (European Research Institute of Health and Aging, Amsterdam) with Jim as adviser, from where EXCELSA was started, the first Cross-European Longitudinal Study of Aging (Schroots, Fernandez-Ballesteros, & Rudinger, 1999). The most important articles and proceedings of relevant conferences are referenced in the bibliography.

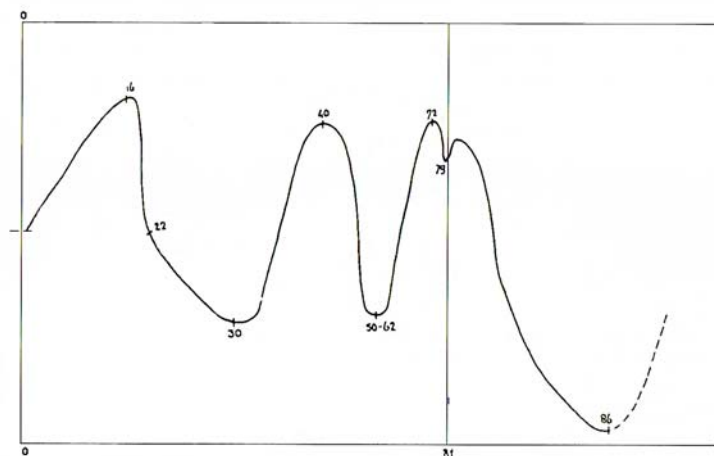
## Lifeline Interview Method (LIM)

Since my first fellowship (1979-1980) at USC and alongside of my work on the dynamics of health and aging, I have been following a second line of research, based on *metaphors of life*. When people are asked to describe their life, they frequently use metaphors like the 'river' or 'footpath'. The river symbolizes the stream of life, and the footpath stands for the journey one makes from birth to death, when one alternately crosses the mountains and valleys of life. Both metaphors enclose the temporal dimension of individual life, but only the 'footpath' metaphor refers explicitly to the dimension of affect. For example, when people say, "I'm feeling *up*" or "I'm really *low* these days", they are using a spatial metaphor, i.e., *hilly country*, to express the positive and negative feelings they had in life.

From the 'footpath' metaphor to the development of a biographical assessment method is only one step as soon as one realizes that the graphical, two-dimensional representation of a footpath—with *time* on the horizontal dimension and *affect* on the vertical dimension—symbolizes the course of human life. When I asked people to map their life in the form of a line, they were perfectly able to do this, much to my surprise. Back in 1980 a new biographical tool was born, called the *Lifeline Interview Method* or LIM for short, with volunteers from the Andrus Gerontology Center as godfather and godmother. In a typical LIM session, a person is asked to place perceptions of his or her life visually in a temporal framework by drawing a lifeline. With the help of this method one can elicit biographical information about affective, important or critical events, experiences or happenings in a non-verbal, visual way. As soon as the lifeline has been drawn, the interviewee is asked to label each peak and each dip by chronological age and to tell what happened at a certain moment or during an indicated period; in short, to tell his life story. At the same time, the interviewer makes a verbatim report of what the subject views as the most important events in his or her life. Figure 3 shows the lifeline and abbreviated life story of Mrs. K., a depressed 81-year-old-Dutch widow, who expected to die at the age of 86 (Schroots, 1996).

The Lifeline Interview Method proved to be a practical instrument for the clinical study of individual lives and also a very useful tool for the investigation of autobiographical memory.<sup>2</sup> In 1995 the first wave of the Amsterdam Longitudinal Study of Autobiographical

Memory (ALSAM) was started. Another three waves would follow in 1997, 2000, and 2010, which produced more data than one researcher can handle. With the help of students, however, data from the first three waves have been documented, analyzed, and reported in a special



*Past* (0 yr): I had a very happy childhood, that's for sure. When I was 16, I had to leave school (1). I suppose I was fortunate in being able to stay on even for that long, but I would have liked to have been a teacher like my eldest sister. She was allowed to continue her studies because the family didn't consider her suitable enough to help at home as I, being more practical, was made to do. My mother wasn't very strong, she had a weak heart, and therefore needed help. Because of her bad health, we were advised to move to the country side. I continued helping at home, until I was 22, when I married (2) etc etc. ....

*Future* (81 yr): .....I haven't much faith in the future. I'm constantly afraid of my failing health. I also think of the end of the world. When I look around me and see what is happening to people: for money they seem to do everything. Apart from that, all they do is complain. And all those unemployed.....No, I don't want to sound like a pessimist, but I hope that I, nor my children, will have to live through it all over again (86 yr).

Figure 3. LIM: Lifeline (top) and abbreviated life story (bottom) of Mrs. K. (Schroots, 1986; Birren & Schroots, 1984).

volume (Assink & Schroots, 2010), which includes the translated manual of the LIM.<sup>3</sup> Data from the fourth wave (2010) is in progress.

## Autobiographical Memory (AM)

While Jim was teaching and writing about *Guided Autobiography* with the emphasis on the narrative self in groups (Birren & Cochran, 2001), I continued with exploring the LIM data, i.e., the memories (past) and expectations (future) of individuals over the course of life, which are usually labeled with the generic term of life events. Life events are the building blocks of life stories. The sampling of autobiographical memory (AM) in terms of life events without restrictions on time of occurrence or type of event produces some remarkable patterns (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000): (a) *Forgetting* or retention curve

<sup>2</sup> A simplified version of the LIM, adapted for groups, is included in the 'Branching points' theme of 'Guiding autobiography groups for older adults' (Birren & Deutchman, 1991; Schroots & van Dongen, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> The manual of the LIM has been translated (2011) from English into Swedish by Monica Vester, PhD., under the supervision of Cheryl Svensson, PhD. For information contact the author: [jjf.schroots@senesco.nl](mailto:jjf.schroots@senesco.nl)

in the form of a mathematical power function. The pattern of this curve shows a steep drop in the beginning of the retention period (the so-called 'recency' effect) and a slower decline as retention time increases; (b) *Childhood amnesia*. This pattern reflects the reduction or absence of memories coming from the first years of life; and (c) *Reminiscence* or *Autobiographical Memory Bump* (fig.4). The 'bump' pattern is only found for people over the age of 40. The distribution of memories departs from a simple forgetting function and turns into a roughly bimodal distribution of memories with a concentration of memories from the recent past (recency effect) and another between 10 and 30 years of age, called the 'bump.'

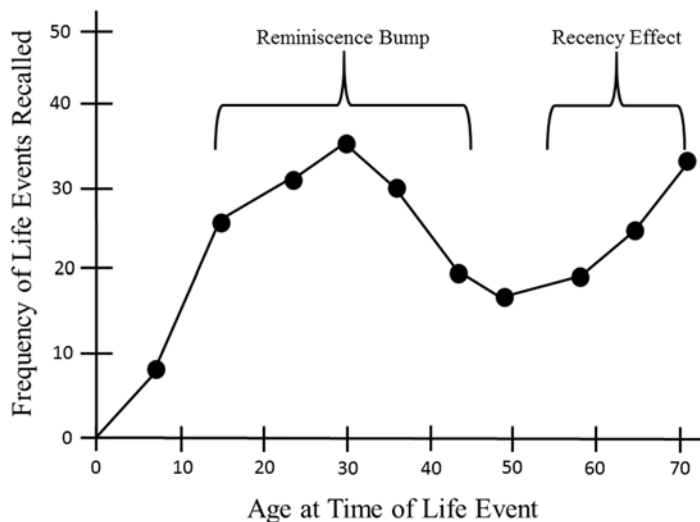


Figure 4. AM bump or reminiscence bump

The AM bump of life events is a universal phenomenon and has been empirically demonstrated with widely divergent techniques, including the LIM (Schroots & Assink, 2005). Many interpretations have been proposed regarding this complex, bimodal pattern, for which Rubin, Rahhal, and Poon (1998) have produced conclusive evidence: "... for older adults the period from 10 to 30 years of age produces recall of the most autobiographical memories, the most vivid memories, and the most important memories. It is the period in which are developed peoples' favorite films, music, and books, and the period from which they judge the most important world events to have originated" (p.3). It is not difficult to see that the life stories, as told in Jim's guided autobiography groups, show a remarkable similarity with the life story as produced by the lifeline interview method. Once again and along different roads, Jim and I worked together on the same subject: *'Autobiographical memory and the narrative self over the lifespan'* (Birren & Schroots, 2006), and it was published in the 6th edition of the *'Handbook of the Psychology of Aging'* (Birren & Schaie, 2006). But a satisfactory explanation for the emergence of the AM bump, representing the disproportional concentration of memories between ages 10 and 30, was not presented.

## From Metaphor to Model

The terms model and metaphor are often used interchangeably in the research literature. Their relative significance, however, is expressed by the phrase that models are more general, extended, and systematic metaphors. A recent trend is for systematic metaphors to be formalized in mathematical terms. The question then becomes how, for example, the metaphors of development and aging can be turned into a mathematical model, fit for computer simulation of their dynamics.

First of all, the widely interpretable terms and processes of development and aging (Figure 1) should be reduced to the more elementary form of one-dimensional growth, which follows an S-shaped power curve in which there is a limit to growth, i.e. the logistic or limited growth curve. Mathematically, the logistic curve can be expressed in a differential equation in terms of either negative or positive growth. Coupling of the two (negative and positive) equations results in a bell-shaped 'growth and decline' curve, which might be interpreted as the product of synchronic developmental and aging processes, or as the life-trajectory of some vital system ( $V$ ). By using algebra, I finally succeeded in answering my question of twenty years ago "How are the processes of development and aging related to each other."

Rates of growth and decline, as well as the emerging curve, may vary across the lifespan. The mathematical formula of bell-shaped curve  $V$  with variables  $x$  (growth/development) and  $y$  (decline/aging) has been extended, therefore, with two parameters,  $p$  and  $q$ , according to the following formula:  $V = pxqy / (px + qy)$ , which is at the basis of a mathematical model, called *Janus* after the Roman god with two faces—one face looking into the future and one into the past. Computer simulation of this model over a period of 100 years shows that the relative peak of the (a) symmetrical bell might move up and down, and from left to right across the lifespan, dependent on the rates of growth and decline (Schroots, 2008).

Again, by using algebra, I succeeded in solving a second problem of twenty years ago, when I wondered what the mechanism was behind the transition point or peak, which varies across the lifespan from function to function, from system to system, and from individual to individual. It is the action of *'simultaneous'* growth & decline curves, from birth to death, which produces the two-phase life-trajectory of *'sequential'* development & aging processes, with the transition or peak in-between. The relatively simple Janus model turned out to be of universal importance, and the key question is 'how this model can shed light on the emergence of the reminiscence bump at older age'.



## Two Memory Systems Behind the Bump

Our memory can be characterized roughly by two neural systems: (a) speed of information processing, and (b) storage of information. Most neural systems reach their optimum between 15 and 30 years (bump period). Superficially, speed and storage operate as one and the same memory system, but basic research has shown that speed rides piggyback on storage; that is, the information processing of life events occurs before the storage of events in long-term memory. Consequently, if neural speed decreases after age 30 (Birren & Fisher, 1995), less and less information will be stored in memory, while the information already stored in long-term memory is retained. In other words, as people grow older they will have disproportionately more life events stored in memory for the age period of 15–30 years than at a later age. This memory phenomenon is explored more fully in Schroots, van Dijkum, & Assink (2004).

### Janus Model

The relatively simple Janus model of one vital system ( $V$ ) with only one transition or peak needs to be extended with an extra term to cover the bimodal event distribution of two systems with two peaks or transitions<sup>4</sup>. The extended, more complex Janus model ( $J = V_1 + V_2$ ) of two vital systems,  $V_1$  and  $V_2$  (with two transitions or peaks), which in the present case represent the memory systems of 'speed' and 'storage', might cover then the composed pattern of forgetting and the reminiscence bump (Figure 4). Computer simulation of the observed memory patterns from the *Amsterdam Longitudinal Study of Autobiographical Memory* (ALSAM), using the complex Janus model, provides convincing evidence for the bump (Schroots & van Dijkum, 2004; Schroots & Assink, 2005).

Figure 5 shows the dynamics of autobiographical memory for life-events as simulated with the complex Janus model (Schroots & Pierce, 2012). In the present case the idealized event-distributions (memories) from the ALSAM study are simulated for three age groups: Young (age = 25 yr), Middle (age = 50 yr) and Older (75 yr).

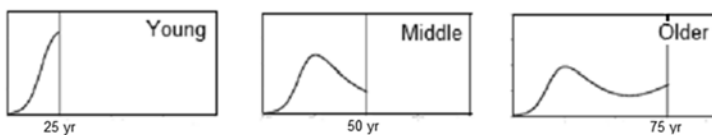


Figure 5. Simulation of the reminiscence bump

As expected, the memory curve  $J$  of the *Young* age group shows a steep drop in the beginning of the retention period ('recency' effect) and a slower decline as retention time increases, which is typical for the classic forgetting curve. Notice that the frequency distribution of memories

has a much higher peak than the middle and older age groups. Both speed & storage systems reach their maximum in young adults with the effect that the maximum of the speed system ( $V_1$ ) is added to the maximum of the storage system ( $V_2$ ) or long term memory.

The memory curve  $J$  of the *Middle* age group is the result of an (imaginary) young age group, who has grown older till the age of 50 years. This means that their speed of information processing is decreasing (neural slowing), while the storage system continues to function more or less normally, as it is less susceptible to neural slowing. What we see in the middle-age group is a different frequency distribution with a lower peak and no forgetting curve. The question is how we should interpret this distribution.

The memory curve  $J$  of the *Older* age group contains the solution. As people grow older, the frequency distribution of life-events (memories), which according to tradition should follow the classic forgetting curve, gets slowly divided in two latent distributions of life-events, one for forgetting and one for the bump, which—added together—form the manifest 'bump' pattern of memories. During the 'bump' period of 10-30 years, when neural systems as speed of information processing and storage of information reach their maximum capacity, the events of life are stored firmly in long term memory and will not be forgotten. In other words, if people grow older than 40 they will lose some capacity for the storage of recent memories because of neural slowing (decreasing speed), but the storage of memories from the age period of 10-30 remains intact, relatively speaking. It is not surprising, therefore, that middle-aged and older people, when they are reminiscing about life produce a disproportionately high number of memories from young adulthood.

### In Retrospect

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote about life history when he stated that "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards." Looking back to my first visit to Jim Birren in 1966, I could not imagine that this would be perhaps the most important turning point in my life. I was an ambitious young student, not interested at all in aging or gerontology. The behavioral study of rats or older people, was all the same to me. More than fifty years later, I know better, due to the profound influence of Jim as mentor and colleague, but above all as friend. I still miss him every day, but from somewhere I hear his voice telling me "Hans, we can't spend all our time living in the past, we have to take what we have learned from our experiences and use it to make new decisions in the future." These are the words of a wise man, *in memoriam James E. Birren*.

<sup>4</sup> Formulas and details are presented in Schroots (2008).

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

## James Birren – Mentor, Colleague, and Friend

Harvey L. Sterns

*University of Akron*

*Northeast Ohio Medical University*

I first met James Birren when he was a visiting faculty member at West Virginia University in 1968. This was my first year as a doctoral student in Life-Span Developmental Psychology. There was a tradition of having a graduate student serve as host to visiting professors, and there was a reception in our apartment. My wife Ronni and I served as hosts, and it just so happened that my mother was visiting from Maine. She helped with the food, and Jim would ask me for a number of years if I could arrange for more of my mother's chopped liver.

In the summer of 1969, I was selected to participate in the Summer Graduate Student Program in Gerontology with students from all around the U.S. at the University of Southern California. There, I had Jim as one of my professors in a team taught course and had classes with Warner Schaie (who came from West Virginia to give the course), Larry Thompson, and Jasek Szafaran. Jim hosted a number of social events involving students and faculty where I further developed my relationship with him. This summer experience served as a foundation for my strong orientation to a multidisciplinary approach to gerontology and a desire to work with colleagues from different disciplines.

The 1972 West Virginia Life-Span Conference on Personality and Socialization was an important time of interaction. Jim and Diana Woodruff presented Human Development over the Life-Span through Education. The content of this chapter became a manifesto for my work with adult and older adult education.

At the 1981 White House Conference on Aging, I was appointed to the Research Committee. With the guidance of Jim and Robert Butler, I introduced the resolutions in support of NIA, NIMH and AOA. These resolutions were in support of important governmental units for funding in support of education, research, and community services and programs.

In 1981, Jim invited me to become a fellow of the Andrew Norman Institute for Advanced Study in

Gerontology. It was not until 1982 that I could arrange to spend a year at USC. I was invited to teach a Summer Graduate Course on Industrial Gerontology and later in the year I taught the graduate Psychology of Adulthood and Aging course. The 1982-83 year was devoted to Aging, Work and Health leading to the 1986 book. I did the chapter on Training Adult and Older Workers. Each week we would have guest speakers and a group meeting of Fellows. There were social get togethers, including events at the Birrens' home.

That same year I wrote with colleagues at Akron the chapter on Accidents and the Aging Individual for the 1985 Handbook on the Psychology of Aging. That same year I worked with Jim, Victor Renier, and Arnold Small as a committee to help organize the 1984 NATO Conference on Aging and Technology. This led to a chapter titled "Technology and the Aging Adult: Career Development and Training" for the book based on this conference. At my suggestion, Jim choose my aunt, Ida Russakoff Hoos, Sociologist on Technology, NASA Research Center at UC Berkley as the key note speaker for the conference.

It was also my pleasure to work for many years with Betty Birren on the Executive Committee of Division 20 Adult Development and Aging of the American Psychological Association. I would often spend time with Jim and Betty at the American Psychological Association, Gerontological Society of America, and the American Society on Aging conferences over many years.

My wife and I had a special time visiting with Jim at a conference on Aging and Fitness held in Yjvaskula, Finland. The next year, 1993 we organized a symposium on the Media and Aging involving Jim for the International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics meeting in Budapest.

One of the real highlights for me of our relationship was having Jim and Betty come to Akron in 2001. Jim was the Keynote Speaker for a joint 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Event celebrating the Institute for Life-Span Development and Gerontology and the Ohio Association for Gerontology and Education. On this trip I was able to have them visit the Center for the History of American Psychology. The Birrens' photo and scrapbook albums are now part of the collection. It was our pleasure to host the Birrens in our home.

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Another great memory for my wife and me was having lunch in Pacific Palisades with Jim and Betty a month or so before they moved. It was great to spend time in Jim's study visiting and discussing their plans for the future.

When I became President of Division 20 for the second time, I received an email from Jim congratulating

me on my election. Later, there was a phone call.

This relationship came to a close when I was asked to write Jim's obituary for the American Psychologist. I asked Warner Schaie a long-time colleague of Jim and one of my mentors to join me in this tribute. As I stated at the beginning, Jim was a mentor, colleague, and friend.

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

# Who Was James Emmett Birren?

Cheryl M. Svensson

Guest Editor for the Special Issue  
Birren Center for Autobiographical Studies

Jim Birren was a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional, multi-talented man. He was a professor, mentor, colleague, and friend to many. All of us knew and related to a different facet of Jim Birren. We all know that Jim was one of the first gerontologists and that he devoted his entire professional life to the study of aging. He created the Davis School of Gerontology at USC, the first university in the nation to offer a Master of Science degree in gerontology (MSG), in 1975. He stayed as founding dean until 1989 when he left for UCLA to work with his good friend, Dave Solomon, and to set up the Center on Aging. As his wife Betty often quipped, "Jim knows how to spell retirement, but he does not know what it means."

Jim Birren held positions of leadership in all the major gerontological organizations; he was Past President of the Gerontological Society of America, the American Society of Aging, the California Council on Gerontology and Geriatrics, and the Division on Adult Development and Aging of the American Psychological Association. In addition, he received numerous awards and accolades from both American and international organizations. He was a prodigious writer and published more than 250 journal articles and wrote several books. These are some of Jim's many accomplishments that are in the public record; we all know this about him. But what about some things you may not know about Jim Birren? Here are a few things that stand out in my mind.

*Jim was Guided Autobiography.* Jim created Guided Autobiography (GAB) in the mid-1970's as a method to write one's life story using sensitizing questions based on life themes in a small group format. As time went on, GAB became his passion and his legacy. Jim often said he learned more from his GAB groups than he had from all his many years of education. By the mid-1990's, while Jim was at UCLA, it was his main focus. A group of students, friends and colleagues formed around Jim and GAB. We became the Birren Disciples. Our group met monthly, first at UCLA and then at the Birren Palisades' home. We planned research projects, applied for grants and awards,

created a DVD to commemorate Jim as he introduced five of the GAB themes, supported Jim and Kathryn Cochran as they published the GAB manual, *Telling the Stories of Life Through Guided Autobiography Groups*, and we presented at conferences and conducted workshops, always with Jim's overriding wish propelling us forward to, 'Launch GAB.'

*Jim connected with students.* Students were a core component of Jim's social network. He loved to chat with them and to learn new things. He was open to new ways and did not want to get stuck in 'old ways of thinking.' He read widely and voraciously and would sometimes come across a study that used new technical methods to measure changes in the human organism. One was studying changes in the brain with fMRIs, and Jim was excited to think a day would come when measurable changes could be seen in the brains of people who participated in GAB classes.

*Jim was a man of moderation.* Nutrition, along with exercise, were pillars in Jim's life. After his heart surgery while still at USC, he completely changed his relationship to food. He always made the 'healthy choice'. His breakfast fare was a half-cup of cereal with nonfat milk, a glass of juice, and slices of cantaloupe. Never coffee but always green tea. Lunch was always a salad, no derivations. Once while traveling to a conference, we had a layover at an airport and stopped for lunch. Along with our sandwiches, we were offered a choice of an apple or chips. Jim chose the apple and I chose chips. His only downfall was dark chocolate...brownies, cookies, Sees candy... he loved them all.

*Jim was a friend.* Professorship slipped naturally into friendships, as his former students became colleagues and friends. One group from Jim's early days at USC continued to meet annually with Jim and Betty. At this gathering, there would be food, drink and always questions, laughter, and stories. At the end of the gathering, each person wrote a prediction for the following year on a slip of paper, folded it and tucked it into a special box. The next year, the box was opened and the predictions read aloud to much laughter and surprise.

*Jim was a man of nature.* Jim loved the outdoors: hiking-fishing-camping under the stars. He was well known for his Saturday morning hikes in the Santa Monica Mountains. A group of fellow hikers gathered at the Birren Palisades home at 8 am each Saturday and set out for a

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hike. The configuration of the group changed over the years, but the schedule was in place until the Birrens moved away to Thousand Oaks. Jim loved all living things. His pastimes included gardening and tending his plants and flowers. He took pride in his Palisades garden filled with orange, lime, tangerine, fig, and persimmon trees as well as many flowers. Even after the move to University Village, Jim kept a 'container garden' on his balcony.

*Jim's life contained rituals.* Rituals were a part of Jim's life. Close friends knew that on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July there would be a gathering at the Birrens to first watch the parade in Pacific Palisades and then join in a backyard barbecue with Jim as head chef. Also, every New Year's Eve a ringing in of the new year and a 'burning of the bad' would take place at the Birrens' home. The friends who joined them were asked to write down whatever bad thing the year had held for them on a slip of paper. The paper was then burned ceremoniously in the fireplace.

*Jim loved to learn and question.* Jim loved games that challenged his mind and kept him alert. A visit with Jim was not complete without a final game of Scrabble. I was a distracted player and teamed up with Betty whenever possible. Jim was a master, checking his scrabble dictionary for spellings and coming up with words seldom heard of to score triple points. He kept score meticulously. Learning extended to keeping up with all the scientific journals and the psychological and gerontological associations where he had once been an active member. He loved stimulating conversations and was known for throwing out the Big Question at the most unexpected times. What do you think is the meaning of life? If you got to know him well enough, he would share his understanding of the Virgin birth with you.

*Jim was a pool shark.* Jim loved to play pool. For many years, his good friends, RZ, the Lutheran minister, and Ed 'Mike' Aleks, would meet and walk from their Palisades' homes every Thursday night to the pool hall. There they would play a few rounds of pool, then their spouses would pick them up, and they would all go out for dinner. Jim played his last pool game just four days before he died. His son Jeff stopped off with him in the poolroom at University Village prior to dinner to shoot a few holes. Jim was not a quitter.

*Jim loved Betty.* Jim and Betty were an entity. The Jim Birren I knew was devoted to Betty. During her final years when she suffered from mild cognitive impairment and could not be left alone, Jim dedicated himself to her care. He never left her side, and she traveled, as able, with him wherever he went. Jim often said that the last years of their marriage were some of the best. They renewed their wedding vows on their 60<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. Jim wore the same tux he wore when they married! They were married for 72 years until Betty died the day before Jim's birthday on April 3, 2013. They were special.

*Jim was family.* All of his family was an essential part of Jim's life. His three children, Barbara, Jeff, and Bruce, their spouses, and his five grandchildren were a source of love and pride for him. However, Jim was stubbornly independent. His primary reason for moving to a

Continuing Care Retirement Community (CCRC) was because he did not want to become dependent upon his children. He did not want to impose on them for care if the need arose. However, after Jim gave up driving and became increasingly frail, the need did arise and the family stepped in to help. Bruce flew in frequently from Boston and never missed a Sunday night phone call. Jeff made regular trips from Oakland and took over the administrative details, working with the home health agency that provided the 24/7 care for Jim in his home, as well as all personal financial matters. Barbara returned as often as possible from the UK to stay with her father. The family all worked together on the sidelines to allow Jim to live in his own home until the end.

*Jim had a big heart.* There was simply so very much to Jim. Even trying to piece it all together now I come up with more questions I should have asked him: What was the occasion in 1943 when he had his photo taken with Helen Keller and Ann Sullivan? I'll never know. But there are also some coded, hidden, perplexing aspects of Jim that he left in his handwritten poems dating back to the 60s. Most are written on small scraps of paper, possibly on long flights. A few have been typed up and reworked, even edited by Betty. They all reveal ever-deeper aspects of Jim Birren.

### *Weighing In*

James Birren (1992)

My thoughts led to the question, with uncertain answer,  
What am I worth?

What scales, yardsticks, values can be placed upon my  
life?

Yours, mine, the other person's?

There are friends I think about.

Have I served them well?

The students I thought I taught

When they were teaching me.

A mentoring role is companionship

To those in difficult passage.

All those have been my service

But where is the gauge to judge my quality?

There are many things I have done and thought.

A few rocks along the path show the marks of my being  
here.

Putting it all together and finding a number of

My worth eludes me still.

I think I must be worth

What you think I am.

Jim's sense of 'humility' is revealed time and again. Jim was never proud or vain, rather always the one to question if he was enough...good enough...doing enough...helping others enough... He always kept trying to do more.

Reading through all the submissions for this special edition dedicated to Jim Birren, one can't help but be impressed by the breadth and depth of his connections with a vast array of people, such as students, colleagues, friends, and some, like me, who happened to be blessed to 'stumble upon' Jim Birren at just the right time in life. Jim has left an indelible mark on each and every one of us. Through all the papers, there are underlying traits that emerge to paint a fuller picture of him. Jim was funny and quick to make a quip. Once I read an article to him, which referred to Jim as an icon in the field of aging. Jim, true to form, quickly retorted, 'As long as they don't call me a relic!' On Jim's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, his close friend, Jim Thornton, sent him an e-mail: "Jim, You told me age is only a number but many numbers have great stories. Thank you for sharing the numbers with me." Jim replied: "I am now working on 100. It may be harder work!"

I was blessed to work closely with Jim and to get to know him on a deep and personal level. We became not only colleagues but also good friends, the type of friend whom Jim could ask, 'Cheryl, have you noticed if I am repeating myself? Or, 'Do you think my memory is slipping?' He knew he could trust me, and that I would be honest with him. Through the years of my close encounters with Jim, I have been fortunate to see so many sides of his multidimensional self. His one regret was that he did not complete his magnum opus, the article he intended to write titled, "Age Doesn't Cause Anything."

Jim has now been gone for two years and I miss him still. He liked to have the 'last word' and I'll give it to him in this essay. I think he would enjoy that. This is what Jim often declared when ending meetings, and so should we: "Onward!"

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

## Reflections on James E. and Betty Birren: Events Shaping Gerontological Studies at the University of British Columbia and My Life Review

James E. Thornton  
*University of British Columbia*

It is my hope that my thoughts, briefly sketched here, will fully express my thanks to both Jim and Betty Birren for the many enormously engaging experiences since our first meeting in 1979 at the University of British Columbia (UBC). Jim and Betty Birren entered my life as a “team and partners” as recipients of the Cecil and Ida Green Visiting Professorship, UBC. They returned to UBC during the 1980-90s for conferences and symposia, and Jim consulted with the Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies, on the prospects of a Centre on Aging at UBC. I visited Jim and Betty often prior to his retirement from the University of Southern California (USC) and during his subsequent affiliation at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), staying in “my bedroom” in their home in Pacific Palisades on most of these visits.

Jim and Betty Birren have been so influential in my understanding of living a full and productive life. We exchanged our thoughts on Jim’s views on “aging as a counterpart of development”; on learning in later life as an essential factor in the development-aging processes that shape our lives; my educational views on the essential nature of learning in adult development and aging; and shared our experiences in guided autobiography groups through the landscape of reminiscence and life review.

In Birren and Deutchman’s 1991 book, *Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults: Exploring the Fabric of Life*, they wrote the following:

You can help older adults build greater understanding and self-worth by leading guided autobiography groups. From the viewpoint of human development, there is little of greater importance to each of us than gaining a perspective on our own life story, to find, clarify and deepen meaning in the accumulated experience of a lifetime. .... Particularly in the later years, a person needs to believe that his or her life has mattered, that it has had a purpose or an impact on the world. Guided autobiography

enhances these feelings, promotes successful adaptation to old age, and assists positive choices by a person at a crossroad in life. A grasp of the fabric of one’s life can make a significant contribution to well-being in later life. .... Guided autobiography is based on a number of concepts about how people develop understanding of themselves and their lives and how memory, personal reflection, and present perceptions interact. It evokes and guides reminiscence, that is, the recall of events from the past, and directs the individual to examine their memories from the perspective of the present. It is a form of semi-structured life review, bringing review of events and emotions over the life course one step further—into a group context wherein different members’ perceptions and histories can evoke further reflection and challenge earlier views of the self. (Birren & Deutchman, 1991, p 1).

Below, I have briefly sketched Jim and Betty Birren’s activities at the University of British Columbia that contributed to the emergence of educational programs of later life learning in the Department of Adult Education, Faculty of Education, and studies in gerontology in other UBC faculties and departments. But first, I need to outline my initial activities at UBC that led to these events.

In 1969, I started teaching in the Department of Adult Education, Faculty of Education, UBC, at the age of 42, a two-year appointment as assistant professor working on my doctorate in adult education at the University of Michigan. I was surrounded by colleagues 15-20 years younger than I. The developing field of academic studies in adult education covered early adulthood to retirement. My educational interests and teaching began to focus on mid-life and older adults as learners—more were entering university programs and attending workshop and summer courses in continuing education on life-long learning. By 1976, my interests took shape—I was 49 years old, an “older learner” exploring the emerging literature of life-long learning and formal adult education courses about older adults as learners, the emerging field of andragogy. I began to lay out a graduate program in education and aging, a sequence of adult education courses and seminars

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leading to a Masters Degree (MEd or MA) in Educational Gerontology, which was approved by Graduate Studies. To launch this new program, Dr. William Griffith, Department Head, Adult Education, suggested that I contact Dr. James E. Birren as a possible nominee for a Cecil and Ida Green Visiting Professorship.

I called Dr. Birren, who was the Dean, Leonard Davis School of Gerontology, Ethel Percy Andrus Gerontology Center, University of Southern California, and introduced myself. After a brief social chat outlining the department's interests in education and gerontology, I asked, "If we submitted your name for the Cecil and Ida Green Visiting Professorship—would that be OK and would you accept and come to UBC?" Dr. Birren agreed, with a provision that Betty Birren be included in the submission. The *Dr. James E. Birren and Mrs. Betty Birren* nomination was submitted for the Cecil and Ida Green Visiting Professorship and awarded for summer 1979. Dr. Robert Havighurst, Committee on Human Development, University of Chicago, was invited to offer a Summer *Seminar for Educators in Gerontology: Developmental Tasks in Later Life* that same summer, 1979. These events inaugurated the graduate program in Educational Gerontology that would evolve over the next 10 years into a series of seminars, public lectures, summer institutes and conferences.

Several years later, I asked Jim Birren: "Why did it seem so easy then (1979) to get you nominated and for you to accept the Cecil and Ida Green Visiting Professorship?" Birren said that it wasn't his first visit to UBC, as in the mid-1960s he was a possible candidate for Dean, Department of Psychology. At the same time, he was considering an appointment at the University of Southern California and the establishment of the Ethel Percy Andrus Gerontology Center. My thought when Jim said this was: "How fortunate for the many disciplines and programs in the study of aging everywhere that you accepted USC." At the time, UBC was unprepared for the cross-inter-disciplinary approaches and studies of gerontology (development and aging) that Jim nurtured at USC.

After the very successful Summer Institute of 1979, I attended a Gerontology Society of America conference in San Diego and had an opportunity to renew my relationship with Jim and Betty Birren. Over breakfast, Jim shared his thoughts on "metaphors of aging" to explore the essence and scope of aging. We discussed the possibilities for a symposium or conference on the topic. I jumped at the opportunity to develop this with him. At the time, I was a member of the UBC President's Committee on Gerontology and thought this potential symposium was an ideal project for the committee in developing educational gerontology at UBC.

In 1982, UBC funded and hosted *Metaphors of Aging in the Social Sciences and Humanities: An International Symposium*. The symposium brought together over 50 scholars from North America, Europe, and Japan and was an outstanding success. Ideas from papers presented and explored at this symposium were not accepted for publication in 1983 but were subsequently collected and published by Kenyon, Birren, and Schroots in 1991.

UBC hosted another symposium in 1984—the *Ethics and Aging Symposium and Conference*. Papers presented at this symposium were published in the book, *Ethics and Aging: The Right to Live, the Right to Die*, edited by Thornton and Winkler (1988). In the book, Jim Birren and Candace Stacey's paper on *Paradigms of Aging: Growth versus Decline* provided this conclusive thought: "The thesis of this paper is that our aging is a product of many complex forces. Our wisdom and meta-strategies can be brought to bear directly on the issue of how we want to grow old. Only through the examination of our scientific metaphors and through interdisciplinary exchange between humanists and scientists can theory in aging progress. Only through these can our ethical behavior in caring for the dependent elderly and caring about the circumstances of their death develop (p. 69)." For me this became an essential element in the foundation and scope of educational gerontology.

In the years 1984-85 I attended seminars at the Andrew Norman Institute for Advanced Studies in Gerontology and Geriatrics, Andrus Gerontology Center, USC. These seminars resulted in the book *Education and Aging*, edited by Peterson, Thornton and Birren (1986). The *Education and Aging Symposium* and the published papers that resulted from it were vital to the development of the Educational Gerontology graduate studies in Adult Education at UBC and the founding of the Educational Gerontology Division, Canadian Association of Gerontology in 1990.

In 1986, I participated in the Summer Institute in Gerontology *Guided Autobiography* seminar course with Jim and Betty Birren. Brian de Vries attended this seminar and completed his UBC doctoral degree in 1988 and, subsequently, post-doctoral studies with Jim Birren at the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1989-1990. This seminar was shaped by theories, methods, and themes being developed since 1975 by Jim Birren that would be outlined and published in the J. E. Birren and D. E. Deutchman, *Guiding Autobiography Groups for Older Adults: Exploring the Fabric of Life* (1991). A second book was published by J. E. Birren and K. N. Cochran, *Telling the Stories of Life through Guided Autobiography Groups* (2001), that provided procedures and themes for organized workshop groups' activities.

During the early 1980s, I began an initiative at the annual meetings of the Canadian Association of Gerontology (CAG) to activate an Educational Gerontology Interest Group. Several members of CAG were now submitting papers on education and aging, and educational gerontology was being explored in England. I helped form the interest group of about 30 people in 1984. As head of that group, I submitted James E. Birren in nomination for a *CAG Award in 1989*, for his contributions to gerontology in Canada. Jim's CAG Award detailed the contributions he had made to the study of aging in Canada and his involvement at many Canadian universities. The award was presented at the 1989 CAG meeting in Victoria, BC. The Educational Gerontology Interest Group sponsored a luncheon and Jim was the featured speaker and

over 200 people attended. The Division of Educational Gerontology in the Canadian Association of Gerontology was formally established in 1992.

Throughout 1988 to 1991 there were many consultations with the Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies, and meetings with members of the Graduate Committee on Gerontology, which I chaired, about the possibilities and potential for a Centre for Gerontology Studies and interdisciplinary programs of aging and gerontology at UBC. Birren also was involved in consulting with the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, and the University of Victoria on gerontology studies (of which I was not informed at the time). During this four-year period, all the possibilities were “tabled”, but no action. In 1991, I resigned as chairman of the Committee, which was subsequently terminated.

After Brian de Vries completed his doctorate at UBC (1988), he pursued post-doctoral studies at USC with Jim Birren. During his studies with Jim, he co-authored a paper in 1990 titled, *Adult Development Through Guided Autobiography: The Family Context*, published in the journal *Family Relations*. Brian returned to UBC in 1991 with an appointment in the Department of Family Studies.

In 1992, Jim and Betty Birren visited UBC for a Summer Institute with the School of Family and Nutritional Sciences, in collaboration with Brian de Vries. Brian had this to say about Jim and Betty’s visit: “Jim and Betty came to Vancouver during this summer for two weeks to teach a course on Aging and the Family through the School of Family and Nutritional Sciences. They stayed at my condo (on Pacific Street) for the two weeks they were there. And, their grandson John was with them for at least part (and perhaps all) of their stay. We spent a weekend on Pender Island during that time. I recall that Jim was to have his working permit papers stamped while crossing the border; they failed to do so and so he had to return to the border by car to have them signed. I recall him saying that he walked across the border to the US to come through the border again with his papers so that they could be signed and he could be compensated for his teaching.”

I retired in January 1993 and relocated in Vernon, BC. I remained active in the Canadian Association of Gerontology initiatives and conferences, and I taught summer courses in Educational Gerontology at UBC in 1993 and 1994. During these initial years of retirement, I also visited Jim and Betty, attending events at USC and later at UCLA, and stayed in “my bedroom” in their home in the Pacific Palisades on most of these visits. In home chats, we had extensive reflections on emerging studies and themes for ‘use it or lose it’ and ‘learning for later life.’

In 2003, Jim Birren and Cheryl Svensson presented a symposium on Guided Autobiography at the annual meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, held in San Diego. This provided the opportunity for me to begin a series of workshops (2003-2010) that resulted in a number of published articles with John B. Collins on guided autobiography as a learning experience. Subsequently, we initiated a research project and published a report titled *Adult Learning and Meaning-Making in*

*Community-based Guided Autobiography Workshops (2010)*.

My post-retirement life continued to be enriched by my relationship with Jim Birren. In 2004, the American Society on Aging, through the MetLife Award, sponsored a workshop presented by Jim Birren and Cheryl Svensson in Guided Autobiography for the Senior’s Learning in Retirement Program at the Okanagan Community College in Kelowna, BC. Jim also presented a public lecture on: *Gerontology – Past, Present and Future – The Agequake*.

These events helped launch my first community based workshops beginning in 2003 and expanded my social experiences through travel to Mexico in 2005 and 2007, and a reunion group in 2009. I organized a workshop series with the Centre on Aging, University of Victoria, BC in 2007, 2008, 2009; a workshop series in Arbutus Ridge Strata, Cobble Hill, BC in 2007 and 2009; and most recently a Wisdom Exchange Workshop in 2015 and 2016 based on GAB workshop methods sponsored by the Hillside Wellness Centre and the Greater Victoria Elder Care Foundation, Victoria, BC.

During all the early activities from 2003 to 2008, I began to review and organize my own life-story in a series of storyboard outlines and written vignettes I had shared with workshop participants as a teacher-facilitator. Subsequently, beginning in 2008, I worked on my own life stories and transcribed my grandparents’ letters of 1883-84. In 2012, I wrote my autobiography and, in 2014, a family memoir of my descendants. These documents were self-published and passed on to my family, relatives, and several community social societies, historic libraries and archives in Ohio and Michigan, and the archives of UBC Library.

Now, as I reflect on events with Jim and Betty Birren over the past 37 plus years, I view them as more than friends—they were significant mentors and my extended family. I know I am not the only person who has experienced and cherished their lives. They made enormous contributions to many individuals, programs, and institutions worldwide in the academic studies of aging, mentoring students and colleagues in educational programs of numerous disciplines—guiding collaborators in research and published papers, and nurturing organizations regionally, nationally, and internationally. They were open, candid, and understanding participants in all that they did and offered their skills and insights to those ‘exploring the fabric of their lives.’ Jim and Betty Birren never wavered in their unique abilities to guide, inspire, and listen, or their willingness to explore and share. They were consummate mentors, collaborators, and professionals, and dear friends to us all.

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

## The Wisdom of James Birren

Jeffrey Dean Webster  
Langara College

Wisdom is, and has been, considered a major virtue and powerful psychosocial strength both trans-historically and cross-culturally. Despite its benign neglect in the social sciences, the last 30 years has witnessed a burgeoning interest in the area with resulting advancements in theory, methodology, and empirical findings (Staudinger & Gluck, 2011). When we think of wise persons in our lives, we think of those traits and characteristics that demonstrate not only personal strengths but also generative concern for immediate family, friends, and ever-expanding circles of community and humankind.

For me, Jim Birren is associated with wisdom in at least two ways. First, Jim was a pioneer in the empirical revival of wisdom scholarship. Second, to my mind, he represents a prototypically wise person. Indeed, Jim reflects all of the elements described in one contemporary model of wisdom. In this article, I use the five dimensions of the H.E.R.O.(E.) model (Webster, 2014) to illustrate how Jim manifested elements of wisdom in his own life. I start with a very brief description of Jim's academic contribution to wisdom scholarship and then devote the majority of my discussion to ways in which Jim exemplified wisdom in his own life and career.

Jim was a pioneer in the field of wisdom research, co-authoring a seminal article with Vivian Clayton in 1980 (Clayton & Birren, 1980). In this article, Jim and Vivian conceptualized wisdom as an integration of conative, cognitive, and affective components. Wise persons have the cognitive and emotional skills to adaptively confront the exigencies of life, and are motivated to engage in actions, which bring personal goals to fruition in ways which also benefit others. Jim followed this article with a chapter (Birren & Fisher, 1990) in Robert Sternberg's highly influential edited volume on wisdom. Here, Jim and his co-author synthesized extant knowledge on wisdom conceptualization, measurement, and outcomes. Many of the identified elements in his review featured prominently in subsequent models of wisdom such as Ardel's (1997) and in my own H.E.R.O.(E.) model (Webster, 2014).

Very briefly, in the H.E.R.O.(E.) model of wisdom, five interdependent characteristics are synthesized to

produce a wise person. These five characteristics are operationalized in the Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale (SAWS; Webster, 2010; Webster, Bohlmeijer, & Westerhof, 2014). Following the H.E.R.O.(E.) acronym, the first element of wisdom is a particular type of *humor*. Wise persons are humble, and use a gentle form of humor which reflects humility, a sense of irony in life, a way of coping with difficult situations, and as a means of affiliation with others. Second, wise persons have *experienced* many challenging and difficult life events. These often involve difficult life choices, moral conflicts, and highly stressful life events. Wise persons are able to learn and grow from such adversity. Third, wise persons are highly reflective and use *reminiscence* to understand themselves and the world around them. Non-ruminative, autobiographical reflection helps wise persons gain perspective, contributes to increased well-being, and facilitates future goal-setting and pursuit. Fourth, wise persons seek out, and are *open* to, myriad life experiences. They are growth oriented and search for and find meaning in various life domains. They seek novelty and are willing to entertain (although not necessarily agree with) discordant views. Wise persons are the antithesis of close-minded bigots. Finally, the fifth element is *emotional* regulation. In part as a consequence of the other elements (e.g., being open to new experiences of a difficult nature; reminiscing about affectively charged life events), wise persons need an ability to manage, and effectively employ, the full range of emotions. Intensifying certain emotions (happiness) in the service of increasing motivation and moderating other emotions (e.g., sadness) in order to enhance coping responses, are examples of emotional regulation. Wise persons are adept at managing the full spectrum of emotional reactions within themselves as well as identifying affective responses from those around them.

These five key components of wisdom serve as a convenient framework for discussing the qualities exhibited by Jim over his long and distinguished career and life. I'm sure most people will recognize many of these wise characteristics from their individual relationships with Jim over the years. I was not as privileged as most contributors to this special issue in terms of the frequency nor intimacy of the relationship I had with Jim. These were limited to a few conferences, workshops, and minor collaborations (e.g., Jim was kind enough to write the Forward for the edited volume on reminiscence by myself and Barbara Haight: *Critical Advances in Reminiscence*

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*Work.* In what follows, therefore, I have taken the liberty to speculate and infer. Perhaps readers will be able to fill in some details based upon their own reflections.

### Humor

One of my few personal anecdotes concerning Jim illustrates nicely two elements of wise humor. Happening upon Jim and Betty between sessions at a Gerontology conference as they waited for an elevator, I asked whether he was returning to his room to get some papers or get organized for his next session. “No”, he replied, “I’m going up to take a nap.” This was said with a smile and represents the type of gently deprecating humor detailed in the SAWS. Not taking oneself too seriously, and admitting some fatigue after morning sessions, was a way of letting me know that, despite his deserved reputation as a giant in the field, he was a mere mortal, an approachable colleague who valued egalitarian interactions rather than sycophantic subservience.

Riding up in the elevator with Jim and Betty, I prevailed upon Jim to accept a manuscript of mine that detailed some findings from my wisdom research and identified the five components. He graciously accepted the draft, and I assumed that was the end of the road and that he might come across the paper months later buried under others on his office desk back home. I was not actually expecting to hear back from him, but was tickled nevertheless that he seemed genuinely interested in the paper. A few hours later I met up with Jim and Betty again. To my surprised delight, he said he enjoyed reading the paper and then proceeded to rate himself on the five dimensions. Alas, he rated himself low on the humor element!

### Experience

We were fortunate to have Jim with us for 97 years. Jim often used his own life experiences in Guided Autobiography (GAB) groups to illustrate certain points or to model a productive type of open and reflective discussion of earlier life experiences. Personally, I always liked the story of the horse-drawn milk truck which made the rounds in the Chicago neighborhood of Jim’s childhood. Jim amassed myriad accolades and awards over his distinguished career, and these are testaments to life experiences with breadth and depth. From his first job as part owner of a gas station in his teens to his continuing work on GAB until his death, Jim experienced a life replete with challenging and rewarding experiences.

Jim’s longevity illustrates an important point about wisdom development. One of the relatively few positive stereotypes of growing older is the putative increase in wisdom as we age. Unfortunately, this optimistic characterization lacks strong empirical support. Indeed, certain models and several studies have shown that wisdom shows some small decline from midlife, although younger and older adults score at approximately the same level when

global wisdom scores are used. For instance, my colleagues and I (Webster, Bohlmeijer, & Westerhof, 2014) found such a curvilinear pattern when assessing total SAWS scores; however, interesting patterns occurred when we investigated the factor scores. For instance, consistent with longitudinal studies in the personality domain, openness to experience was somewhat lower in our oldest participants relative to younger and midlife adults. This could be a cohort, rather than an age effect, of course. The point here is that a long life, in and of itself, is not a guarantee of wisdom. Imagine people who are very privileged and sheltered from the basic slings and arrows of life. Such persons might live a long time but become increasingly narcissistic or feel increasingly entitled, rather than wise. In the H.E.R.O.(E.), and other models of wisdom, rich and varied life experiences require reflection, evaluation, and ongoing integration in order for persons to benefit from their accumulated years.

### Reminiscence/Reflectiveness

Of course, the reminiscence/reflectiveness element of wisdom is the most obvious connection with Jim and this special edition. Jim was a pioneer in the study of autobiographical memory, and the profound role reminiscence could play in the mental well-being and social health of both individuals and groups of persons. Jim clearly modeled effective reminiscence processes as part of his Guided Autobiography groups. His illustrations of key life events from his own life story provided clear guidelines and examples for others to emulate. Jim, with his collaborators, formalized many aspects of the life review process in the GAB workshops, eventually culminating in a well-received guidebook on the topic (Birren & Cochrane, 2001).

Many of the insights derived from years of GAB groups served as invaluable heuristic prompts for reminiscence work, both theoretical and applied. For instance, Jim often said that although GAB groups were not therapy, they could be very therapeutic. Comments such as these resonated with researchers (e.g., Webster & Haight, 2002) trying to disentangle different forms of reminiscence processes and outcomes. Westerhof, Bohlmeijer, and Webster (2010) for instance, described the similarities and differences among what they termed, simple reminiscence, life review, and life review therapy. Basic taxonomies such as these help focus attention on possible precursors, consequences, and modifiers of reminiscence processes with potential implications for both clinical interventions and theory development. For instance, Kotre, Westerhof, and Bohlmeijer (2012) documented that both a sense of meaning in life and mastery mediated the relationship between negative forms of reminiscence and distress among mildly depressed older adults.

## Openness

Perhaps one of the ways in which Jim exemplified openness was his willingness to go against the dominant *behaviorism* model of the times which eschewed “soft” approaches to gerontological science. Behaviorism is primarily concerned with observable behavior, as opposed to internal events like thinking and emotion. Despite his founding membership and strong influence in the Gerontological Society of America, Jim willingly risked potential censure when he began to seriously consider approaching important gerontological questions from an autobiographical or narrative perspective. By being open to new orientations and pursuing ways to investigate what Randall and Kenyon term the “inside of aging,” Jim lent his considerable academic gravitas to a creative and promising avenue of investigation.

Going against the grain takes courage and so we can consider Jim’s evolving shift in research perspective and empirical investigation as H.E.R.O.(E.)ic. Such path-breaking behavior was inspiring for many. If luminaries such as Robert Butler and Jim Birren were championing reminiscence and life review, then it felt as though they were legitimizing this domain in the eyes of many. Attending the early International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review (IIRLR) conferences, I always felt galvanized when Robert and Jim were in attendance and felt as though my investment in the area was validated.

## Emotional Regulation

In terms of describing Jim’s emotional regulation abilities I am on much shakier ground. I knew Jim only during his later years and, as stated, only in the context of academic conferences and workshops. I cannot attest to his level of emotional maturity or intelligence outside of these settings. Nevertheless, within this restrictive sample, in my experience Jim did evince a type of Yoda-like equanimity. I never saw him flustered or upset. This calmness, I would argue, is in part a consequence of some of the other elements of wisdom described previously. For instance, reflecting on a rich life in an open and humble way enables a person to cope with daily stressors and unanticipated obstacles in a detached manner, recognizing in the grand scheme of things that these problems are resolvable in adaptive ways. Hence, there is no reason to become overly angry, frustrated, or frightened. Remaining involved, yet somehow detached, is a hallmark of wisdom.

## Wisdom and Psychosocial Strengths

Wisdom is considered a virtue, in part because it is associated with so many positive human attributes. Research with the SAWS illustrates that wisdom is correlated in expected directions with generativity, ego integrity, forgiveness, attributional complexity, mental

health, and a balanced time perspective, to name just a few. We might safely consider Jim Birren to embody most of these types of traits as well. Certainly, his generative concern for younger colleagues is well-documented. His willingness to have his and Betty’s name used as a major award in the International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review is a further example of the kind of generativity which Kotre notes will “outlive the self” (Kotre, 1984).

At a more prosaic level, Jim was just a decent human being. I remember wandering around a large eating area with a tray of food at the British Gerontological Society meeting many years ago; Jim and Betty were seated at a table and waved me over to join them for lunch. This small gesture of kindness from Jim and Betty exemplifies their humble and compassionate nature. But my intent is not to write a hagiography. Wise persons are not saints and, I suspect, neither was Jim. Nevertheless, like other wise persons, Jim recognized his limitations and faults and had the skills and motivation to work towards improving them. All of us can benefit from Jim’s example, for after all, “...wisdom is not simply for wise people or curious psychologists: it is for all people and the future of the world” (Birren & Fisher, 1990, p. 332).

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

## Jim Birren's Role in the Development of Educational Programs in Gerontology

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Jim Birren's contributions to the development of educational approaches and programs in Gerontology are often overlooked. Jim accepted the offer from the University of Southern California (USC) to lead a research institute, the Andrus Gerontology Center, but many of the efforts of the center soon focused on education, including an extensive summer program for faculty and students from across the globe and innovative doctoral programs that incorporated aging in the Departments of Psychology and Sociology. Most of all, Jim found himself thrust into the role of Dean of the new Leonard Davis School of Gerontology, which offered Certificates, Bachelor's degrees, Master's degrees and eventually Ph.D.s in Gerontology.

Jim played an important role in the success of those programs. He did not involve himself much in day-to-day activities that led to development and implementation of the new programs. He only gave an occasional lecture or taught the occasional graduate seminar, and he delegated curriculum development of the new school largely to Al Feldman, Ruth Weg, Paul Kerschner, and, subsequently, to the junior faculty who were hired in the school. Nonetheless, Jim made valuable contributions that were critical ultimately to the school's success.

First, Jim provided through his writings a strong theoretical foundation for the field. Beginning with his early chapter, "Principles of Research on Aging," which appeared in the 1959 *Handbook of Aging and the Individual*, Jim articulated a model that still guides the field today. He believed that aging should be studied from multiple disciplinary perspectives, sometimes working together and sometimes informing one another on new insights into the aging process. Jim was an eclectic and broad thinker. He looked for the best ideas, not just those which reinforced his ideas or derived from a particular discipline or methodology. He had big dreams and wanted research to go forward beyond what existed.

This breadth of vision, combined with the efforts of other faculty and researchers at Andrus and the Davis

School, helped build what a former faculty member, Mark Hayward, called the "Gerontological Imagination." It was a perspective shared by faculty and students that viewed both the problems and possibilities of later life. As reflected in his autobiographical studies, Jim always understood that older people were not just a problem or illness, but that they had things they could do well and contribute to their families and society. He also understood that aging involved losses, but that it would be possible to find ways to delay or compensate for these losses. The research at the Andrus Center and the educational content was optimistic—and included many pioneering studies of how to reduce or prevent problems in aging—such things as strength training (deVries, 1970), memory enhancement (e.g., Zarit, Gallagher, & Kramer, 1981), and so on. However, Jim never lost sight of the problems and threats to a good old age.

This perspective was attractive to students because it went beyond a listing of facts or research findings. They gained a larger vision that helped them understand the problems facing older people and the possibilities for enhancing later life. Students learned about the broader context of older people's lives and how factors ranging from ageism to health care to Social Security and other programs, affected older people. This training fostered a sense of social responsibility, in that the goal of our efforts was ultimately to improve the lives of older people through undertakings at both the individual level and through social change.

Jim communicated this combination of scientific understanding and optimism for applying science to solve problems of aging through his writings (e.g., Birren, 1974), his lectures, and his many informal conversations with students, faculty, and guests who came to the Center. Jim's articles began with a big picture of the issues. He could draw on a wide literature from multiple fields. And he didn't limit himself to what was published in the last 5 years, as is often the case now. It's a loss to the field that journals have imposed word limits that do not permit development of theory or more than a cursory examination of the ideas behind a study. It's also a loss that book chapters are devalued, because they are not peer reviewed in the same way as journal articles, and they are not available online. Yet it was in book chapters that Jim and the other major figures from his generation did some of

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their best work. Jim's chapters were integrative and always carried the field forward.

Jim's second contribution was his style of administration. His approach was to bring people together and let them work things out in their own way. He did not try to implant specific approaches or ideas. This created a lively and creative environment in the Andrus Center and Davis School. It could also be frustrating, because Jim was reluctant to step in to address problems of the inevitable conflict between strong personalities. In the end, however, the experiments in education proved successful.

Third, Jim gave credibility to Gerontology education through his leadership in the wider field. It was by no means certain that the Davis School would be successful. Much of the gerontological research field, which was then and still is now based in traditional academic departments, was skeptical and thought that things should go on as they always had; that is, that graduate students took a course or two on aging in their discipline and then did research in a lab that continued that discipline-focused training. Jim actively engaged people throughout the field to foster a sense of being gerontologists, which meant taking the big picture, looking at perspectives from multiple disciplines, and having a responsibility to address the important practical issues affecting older peoples' lives by training specialists in gerontology. He was the right person to make these arguments because he had an eminent career as a researcher and could therefore be persuasive about the need for this new applied field.

Jim loved getting together with scholars from dif-

ferent fields and talking about ideas. Instead of just focusing on the next project, he wanted to look ahead to where the field might go and how we could bring in new ideas, rather than just doing the same things over and over. He loved introducing new ideas and learning new perspectives from other disciplines as well as going outside gerontology altogether. For many people science is a means to an end, leading to fame and fortune. For Jim, science was the goal. Unlike the faster pace of things today, Jim wanted to take time to think, explore, and listen to ideas from other people.

In conclusion, Jim was a gentleman in an older sense of the word. He took time to talk and reflect with people. He made time for people. Moreover, he welcomed people from throughout the world to the Andrus Center and was instrumental in building gerontology as an international field. We should remember Jim for all these contributions.

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