

Cheryl Svensson

*Remembering Jim*

February 20, 2016

Good afternoon. Jim would be so happy to see all of you here. I see Jim's children, Barbara, Jeff, and Bruce, the grandchildren he was so proud of, his family, colleagues, students, co-authors, longtime friends, neighbors, and caregivers (Salvador, Virgilio, Kelly, Savi, and Joanna). Jim was multifaceted and the diversity here today reflects his vast range of friends and connections. Each and every one of you has your own unique relationship with him. I'm blessed to have known him because of *Guided Autobiography*.

So just what is Guided Autobiography, this tongue-twisting concept that's been Jim's passion (except for Betty) for the past 40 years? Let me try to explain.

All of you know Jim as a *pioneer* in the field of gerontology. When Jim first heard this he said, "Just as long as they don't call me a relic!" He was a leading researcher, a scientific explorer of aging, interested only in evidence based findings. He conducted experiments that measured the conduction velocity in the sciatic nerve of rats in relationship to age. Jim attended the first GSA meeting in New York in 1949 and later quipped, "The hotel where the conference was held has been torn down, but I'm still standing." Jim was a preeminent leader in the emerging field of aging. He wrote the very first *Psychology of Aging* textbook in 1964. In the 1960's he left Maryland and the NIMH for CA and a new career opportunity at USC. There he founded the first ever school of gerontology in the nation. With Jim as dean the school and gerontology center flourished and attracted the best scholars and researchers from around the world.

One summer in the early 70's, Jim took a sabbatical and taught a Psychology of Aging class at the University of Hawaii. The class consisted of for-credit students and older retirees who were part of the extended learning program on campus. As Jim told the story, the class was 'flat', dull and not engaging. One day in frustration, he threw up his hands, told everyone to go home, write two pages on a 'branching point' in their lives and then be prepared to read it in class the next day. This was an 'ungraded' assignment. Jim said that

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the next day, after they had all read their stories, the class came alive. The older people were talking with the younger students; they were making connections with one another that lasted throughout the remainder of the class sessions. Jim knew he was onto something but not sure what it was. He returned to USC, gathered grad students (including his son Jeff) into a seminar class to research and study the history of autobiography, expressive writing, small group process, etc. From this he created Guided Autobiography, a small group process method to help people write their life stories. Guided by a facilitator with priming questions based on life themes, the students write two pages at home, return to class, and read them in their small group. The reading and sharing life stories in the small group is where the magic of GAB takes place. Jim Birren, the scientist, made a sharp turn in his own career path, a new branching point. His colleagues and peers must have looked at Jim who changed from respected scientific aging researcher to soft academic interested in writing, life stories, group process and wondered what happened? Jim was unfazed.

Over the past 40 years, Jim has written three books on GAB, conducted many research projects beginning as early as 1980, and written countless articles. In the late 90s, a group of friends and colleagues of Jim's gathered around him at UCLA, by then he had retired from USC (a word Betty always said Jim knew how to spell but didn't know what it meant.) We formed the GAB workgroup (or Birren disciples when there were actually 12 of us) and sought to find ways to develop and extend GAB into new venues. We met as a group frequently and became best of friends. We created spinoff classes such as GAB II, Life Portfolio, Family History and even an online e-GAB writing class. We built a Website. We created a DVD legacy to Jim, we won the ASA award for most "Innovative Older Adult Learning Program," and Jim and I presented GAB workshops across the nation. We followed Jim's command to, "Launch GAB!"

I've tried to think of how to describe my relationship with Jim. He was so much more than my friend, colleague, and mentor. I read an article about the attributes of 'highly successful people' (HSP) and found that they all 'share their dreams'. They all have a 'co-dreamer,' someone who supports, understands and provides perspective for the shared dream. It was

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a light bulb moment for me. That's what Jim and I have been, co-dreamers about GAB and because of this, Jim is irreplaceable for me.

A friend asked me years ago what I would do when Jim died? I was floored. I could not even begin to imagine that Jim would die. I still have a problem speaking of him in the past tense. But now I have to face the future ahead without Jim. What will I do? I think I'll keep on promoting GAB because I believe that is what Jim would want me to do. I have been using an online interactive, Internet program and have trained nearly 300 GAB instructors worldwide. Many of them met Jim in an online question/answer session and have never forgotten it. Picture this, Jim on his amplified phone, logging into the meeting on my computer to answer questions from six students from all over the world. Afterwards Jim would just shake his head, amazed at technology. When I told the GAB instructors on our ListServ of Jim's death, many wrote to express their condolences and testimonials to me and the family. Reading over the e-mails, I see that Jim's legacy will live on with every student who is fortunate enough to take a GAB class.

Here is just one example from Dawn in Iowa: "I'm sorry for your loss, his family's loss, and the loss to the entire GAB community. I'm sure there are many who feel a hole in their hearts today. And that said, what a legacy he has left. Few people have given so much or touched so many as he did. He will be remembered with respect and fondness by those who knew him or knew of him. . . and for generations to come, his work will inspire and touch thousands, if not millions. All I can say is "Godspeed, Jim Birren, and thank you." I could not have said it better.

I thought after working all these years with Jim that I knew everything about him since we talked about everything. You all know the kinds of questions Jim would ask while on a simple walk: What do you think the meaning of life is? How do you feel about God and religion? Did I ever tell you my theory of the virgin birth? I was so wrong. I just got the tip of the Jim Birren iceberg. Shortly before Christmas, Jim gave me a heavy folder filled with poems he had written over the years from as early as 1959 and asked me to type them up for him. There were hundreds of them, many written on scraps of paper and the back of hotel envelopes. Some had Betty's neatly inscribed comments and corrections in the

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margins. Some of the writing was indecipherable to me so I took the sheaf of poems with me on my last visit JA 9. Barbara was there and with Jim, we began to go through the poems to get some of the words correct. Among the poems, I came across this one that Jim wrote on a scrap of yellow paper titled 'An Autobiography'. I feel it should be titled, *My Autobiography* by James Emmett Birren.

### My Autobiography

I am going to fly back on soft, gliding wings

To where I have been.

To see what is in my past, places, people.

To feel what I felt.

To know again what I believed.

I must be quiet and cast no shadows to  
Startle old friends and the less than friendly.

A *now* look at *then* is not always welcomed.

Go back I will as far as I can,

Slowly turn and return to today.

Then sleep well and be ready for tomorrow,

And to learn the new is built upon the past.

You don't know where you are going,

Unless you know where you have been.

It has been a blessing to work alongside Jim. And just as Jim ended every meeting with these words: Onward!