

Saturday, January 6, 2018

## My First LIFE STORY WRITING Class

Based on the theory and practical applications of Dr. James Birren's [\*Guided Autobiography\*](#), I recently completed leading and facilitating my first Life Story Writing class in the Community Education program at the College of San Mateo. And what a joyful experience it was - a great beginning to what I hope will be a regular class offering of mine.



Who says the fun of Show and Tell is limited to primary school children? In one of our classes, each student from the class brought in a special object that was in some way related to their life story. Can you tell what the object is in the picture to the left? (answer at the end of this post)

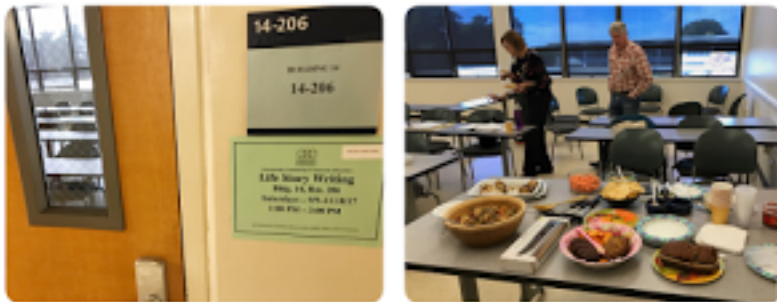
The Show and Tell activity was just one of the many exercises done in class to help students jog their memories of meaningful experiences that could become writing topics for their life stories. Each week, a different theme is presented and students are given sensitizing questions as writing prompts, if needed, to get them going. With the theme of Career and Work, one of the sensitizing questions is: *what events or persons influenced your path?*



Other life artifacts shared in class.

There is real time value for individuals to write their life stories. On day one, students were asked what motivation they had to take the class. Mike said that he wanted to write about his life and in the process reveal some underlying themes of meaning.

Meaning is really a key point about autobiography writing and the end result provides benefits not only for the family one leaves behind but also for the writer himself or herself in the present day. Julie Beck, a writer for *The Atlantic* refers to the value of life story writing in this way: “A life story doesn’t just say what happened, it says why it was important, what it means for who the person is, for who they’ll become, and for what happens next.”



The basic components of James Birren's format are the creation of stories using themes and sensitizing questions, and sharing those stories each week in a friendly, supportive, social small group setting. As the weeks go on, there is a definite bonding experience that occurs as the writers get to know one another more and more on a personal level.

In the closing comments from the class evaluations, almost every student made a comment about the importance of the sharing. One student said that the folks in the class became like an extended family.

A culminated experience on the last day of the class was a shared potluck. Good food and great people~! Lastly, the object shown above is a toaster brought into class by Steve. He offers this description: *I lived in a Ranger residence without electricity or telephone for 13 years, and my nearest year-round neighbor was 6.5 miles away. The bread was heated on top of a propane burner or on top of a wood cook stove.*

**There is no better time than *now* to start writing *your* life story! Soon, I**

**will be offering this class to an online audience. Please contact me at the email provided below for details.**

**Note:** Anita Reyes, a colleague and friend of the late Dr. James Birren, was very supportive to me in getting my first class up and running.

**References:**

1. More information on Dr. James Birren and

GAB: <http://guidedautobiography.com/>

2. Source of Julie Beck's

quote: <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/08/life-stories-narrative-psychology-redemption-mental-health/400796/>

3. Anita Reye's website for teaching GAB

instructors: <http://learnonlineacademy.com/gabtraining-2/>

4. Craig's contact email: [sharinglegacies@gmail.com](mailto:sharinglegacies@gmail.com)