

# Living a Dream:

## *Back to School at Age 75*



*By Esther Pearce*

**I**n 1986, when my husband of fifty-three years died, I was devastated. I had been a member of several clubs and groups but after his death, nothing mattered. I just wanted to be by myself, to sit and mourn. I missed him so. For the last six years of his life, he had been a paraplegic and we had grown very close. I had felt really needed while caring for him. Suddenly this was gone and a terrible feeling of aloneness developed — not so much loneliness, because friends and family were caring and supportive, but an aloneness. There was no longer anyone just for me. For years he was mine and I was his; each was the most important person to the other. Now that was gone. When my mother's brother died, she was 72 and had been widowed for many years. She kept repeating over and over "I'm all alone now." My sister and I tried to comfort her by telling her she had us and our families who all loved her dearly. Now I can understand how she felt.

My family is kind and loving but they have their own busyness and problems within their homes and lives. We visit and chat but it isn't the same. When I go home, there is no one there to tell things to. I don't know if this feeling of aloneness will ever leave me but I try to combat it by keeping busy and interested in friends and activities.

As I grew older — and especially after my husband died — a desire that had been buried within me ever since I was a teenager kept on forcing its way up to the surface. I found myself continually think-

ing about going to university. I was tormented with the idea. Each fall, the feeling was particularly strong. I had always wanted to continue my education. My father died when I was only six. After his death my mother found herself, at the age of thirty-four, having to raise two children on her own. After I had finished only one year of high school, I had to leave school to help bring in money for the family.

Not only did I know that I wanted to go to university, I knew just which university I wanted to attend. I belong to the United Church; for years I had heard through Church bulletins and various committees about Mount Alison University in Sackville, New Brunswick. In 1988 I wrote Mount Alison to see if they would accept me; to my surprise, they did. This meant that I had a lot of organizing to do before I could leave my home in Quebec to head off to New Brunswick. The summer before I left, I was up at 5:30 each morning to prepare the house for rental while I was away. I now live in the university student residence. The vacuum cleaning takes about three minutes. I eat in the cafeteria — not having to shop, plan or cook meals or wash up afterwards makes this part of university life like a prolonged holiday.

The hard part is the courses. My memory is a problem. I study the material but when I get to the test, my mind goes blank. I don't know if it is age or if it is a normal reaction. Last year wasn't as bad as the year before. So, I hope this year will be better as far as the test taking is concerned. I'm in my third year and taking five

courses: Hinduism, Bible Theology, English, Anthropology, and Canadian Studies. I don't know what my degree will be in. At this point it is a toss-up between Religious Studies and Anthropology. I am taking it one year at a time. I like the Anthropology, but I do have a hard time remembering the names of places, chiefs and rituals.

As well, I do have some lonely moments. I'm older than everyone else, including the professors. I wondered if I would be accepted. It is like having your grandmother hanging around. When I see the young people in the cafeteria, I don't want to intrude, but they are all very friendly and often include me.

Some of the professors' reactions to aging are interesting. One day one of my professors said she dreaded getting old. She did not want to look old or become so sick that she would have to be continually cared for. I made her laugh when I said that there was not much she could do about it, life marches on.

But there is a funny side, too. When I go to bed I laugh at myself. I put my teeth in water, my glasses and hearing aid on a table. At one time I wore a wig and that went onto a mannequin head. Then the rest of me goes to bed!

I find that I am learning about myself and how I see the world. Before I started at Mount Alison, I would sometimes be impatient and critical of other people in my heart. Now I am more tolerant. I see this change as good. I am also realizing that everything is an opinion. Before, when

I read material, I couldn't understand why people had different opinions and why they didn't agree with each other. Now I realize that they just have different opinions.

My only regret is that I didn't think to urge my husband to go back to school when he retired. He was a real brain. For enjoyment he used to read the dictionary and the encyclopedia. I wish I had persuaded him to come to Mount Alison with

me. I do know that I wouldn't have gone to university by myself if he were still alive. I would have stayed and taken care of him.

Even though I enjoy school, I do get depressed every once in a while. I feel sorry for myself, get really "down" and start thinking that no one *really* cares about what *I* think, say or do. I feel really bad until I give myself a good talking to: I tell myself to be thankful for what I *have*

got — a loving family, kind friends and fairly good health. At least I can get myself up in the morning. I am able to wash, dress and feed myself. I can still count out my own pills. I can think, read and write. So stop complaining!

If I have made wise or unwise decisions, it is all in the past. Today is what really counts, so I may as well enjoy it as best I can — with a joyous spirit and a positive attitude.

## PATIENCE WHEATLEY

### Sleet

Sleet falling  
and all the  
sugar huts steaming  
along the road to Rawdon  
suddenly hilly  
with falls  
lake, cottages, and  
Heather Hospital.

It looks like  
a country hotel  
beside the river  
where the sleet rests  
on mica-thin ice.

The friendly door  
of Heather Hospital opens easily  
clicks shut.

Nurses in blue and pink  
nylon dresses, white shoes,  
bustle about  
between thick  
walker-pushing women  
in pearly sweaters (buttoned wrongly)  
who smile graciously  
with wide eyes like kittens:  
"Is someone looking after you?  
Won't you come in?"

I see her far away  
in the dark  
at the end of the hall

shuffling off the elevator

holding  
her shoulders high  
head sideways and down  
as always  
through seventy years  
as if to apologize  
for having weighed  
one-and-a-half pounds at birth  
and lain beside the  
wood stove in Murray Bay  
for three weeks in a padded box  
expected to die.

She shambles  
foot by foot  
towards us as

time creeps by  
like smothering sleet  
*Can we go out for tea?*  
low voice and trembling lips

and I wrench the latch of  
the white-painted  
friendly door,  
the door perhaps  
of a summer hotel,

from the inside  
it won't open.