

# Septembers to Remember...The Healing Power of Memory

By Neil Earle

There is no doubt about it, there is something about September as the great year turns that lends itself to subdued, vintage reflections. It's like that Sixties song by the Fantasticks:

*"Try to remember, the kind of September...when you were a tender and callow fellow..."*

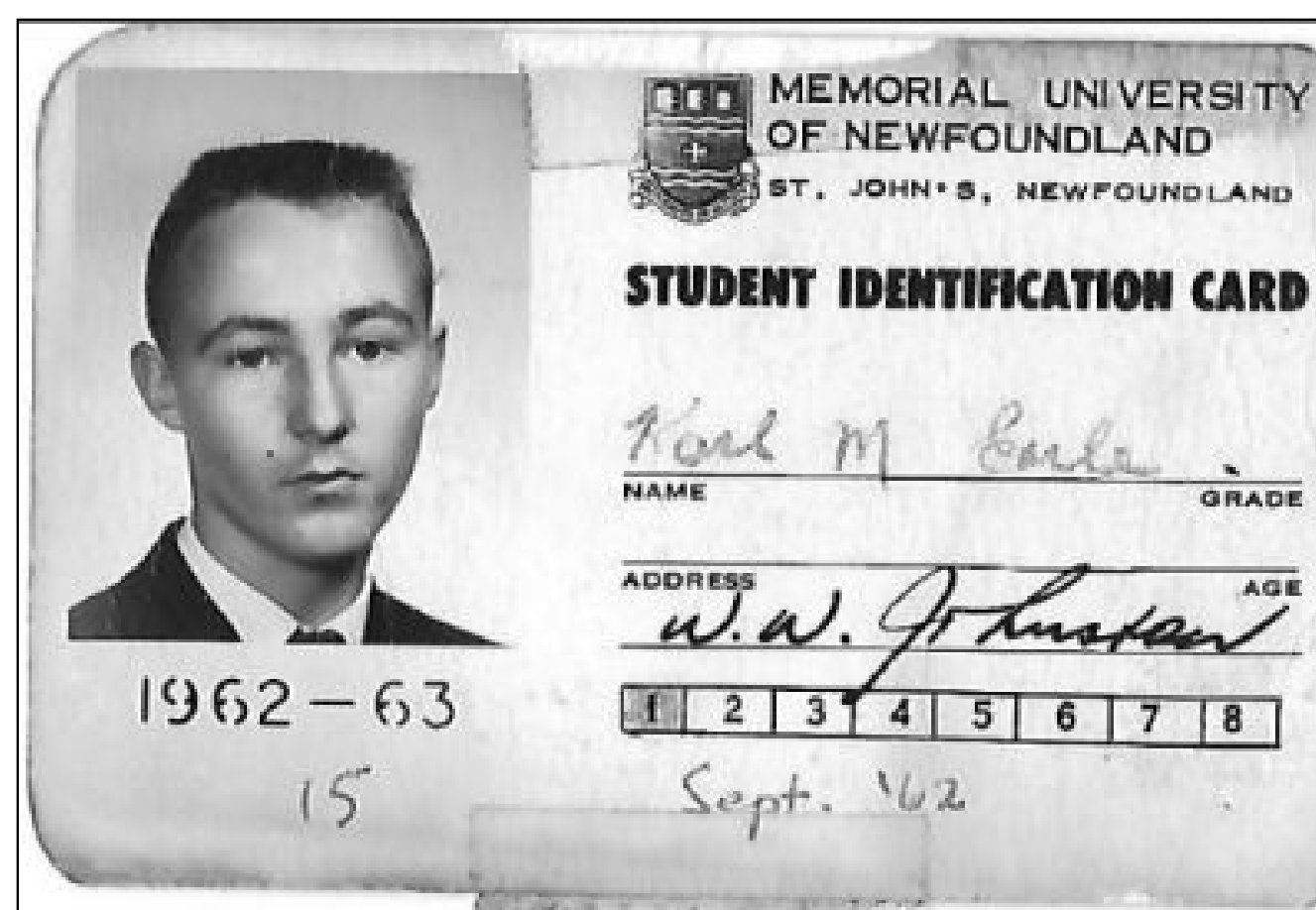
It's September and classes are starting all around us in the Western world and directly for those of us at GCS, our church's online seminary. All this makes me think of two things: enrolling at two colleges that have loomed large in my life. One in September, 1962 and the other in September, 1968. The death of a lovely lady named Shirley Jones over in England makes it doubly compelling to take to the typewriter.

This reminiscence comes in two dimensions – enrolling at university in St. John's, Newfoundland, in 1962 and Ambassador College at Bricket Wood, England in 1968.

## "The Great Adventure"

I was still a callow young teen in 1962 and my mother made sure she accompanied me to St. John's for the five year stint at Memorial University in St. John's, Newfoundland.. She lined up a ride with Doug Chubbs of Carbonear, a cool guy now deceased who drove a 1961 Volkswagen Beetle.

The Volkswagens ("the pregnant roller skates") were all the rage then. Funny thing is, my mother forgot this story last time I mentioned it to her back in Canada (she passed on in 2017 at age 90).



Shirley Jones, Ambassador Librarian, 1962.

Coming from a Newfoundland fishing town – Carbonear, population 4500 – to the capital in St. John's was indeed what my cousin Ron called "the great adventure." Leaving home for the first time at age 15 was bound to be a marker event. No wonder I have emblazoned on my mind another song that seems to bring that September back. It was Carole King's "It might as well rain until September."

There were five people in my graduating class from venerable old St. James School in Carbonear so...the lineups for registration at Memorial (1500 of us!) were the biggest crowds I'd ever seen since Queen Elizabeth's visit to St. John's in 1953. Mom had the sense to leave me to fend for myself and my blood sugar must have dipped waiting in that enormous line for three hours as my ID photo showed. But I came through eventually and met friends I still cherish.

## "Marker Events"

I thought I was the youngest Freshman at 15. But life teaches you how your perspective can always be enlarged as you pass through this shifting kaleidoscope called Life. There were others my age and from my home-town too – notably Rex Murphy for one, who went on to achieve fame as an insightful and puckish commentator on "The National" newscast in Canada.

This was a big part of my induction into growing up – *marker events* the psychologists call them.

Then came September 1968 and a pivotal event in my life. Acceptance to Ambassador College in England fulfilled a 3-year dream and launched me on a career of developing whatever talents I possessed in music and journalism. A key figure in that development was an effervescent clearly dynamic Englishman named Robin Jones, who, by dint of fortune or divine intervention, had managed to enchant the college librarian, Shirley Englebart to become Mrs. Shirley Jones.

They made a great team, he restless and creative and she stable and intelligent and possessor of a homespun warmth and wisdom from her native Oklahoma.

## Midwestern Commonsense

They raised two strong children and influenced the lives of countless students passing through the Ambassador College experience in those years. Seeing Robin Jones in action was – according to his good friend Pastor Carn Catherwood – enough to forever scuttle the stereotype of the reticent, monocled Englishmen in bowler hat. The year I showed up in England, 1968, was the year Robin Jones took over the annual school fall talent show where it seemed every one in the student body had a part to play. We attempted everything from Gilbert and Sullivan to Roger Miller and paid tribute to Broadway musicals and Irish folk songs.



Ambassador UK Library 1960s.



STIR TO ACTION: Robin Jones encourages Ambassador UK Talent Show team – emcee Neil seated center next to mentor Peter Butler (looking at camera). Click photo to enlarge.

All told, the output was tremendous and Robin Jones had to leave the campus many times in the wee small hours. Standing beside and behind him in this all-out effort to infuse young lives with class and purpose was his wife, Shirley. In one of those "great" marriages she seemed as entranced by the fascinating Jones personality as most of the rest of the student body.

But she had her own nimble mind and brimming Midwestern commonsense to bring to the relationship. She served as the pioneering librarian at the College and later as a capable minister's wife, warm and supportive wherever the demands of ministry took them.

It seems like a big empty spot has occupied the emotional center of our remembrances now that Shirley Jones has departed. I noted to myself how often I kept repeating the word "warm" when talking

about her to friends on both sides of the Atlantic.

We will really miss her and her life and service again adds to the many strands of testimony that form a solid cord with the past, what Lincoln called "those mystic chords of memory." "The righteous are in everlasting remembrance" (Psalm 112:6). No one can say it any better than that.

Yes, try to remember, and see if it doesn't work some strange uplifting alchemy.