

Remembering Viola Pratt

by Lila Laakso

Vic Report 13.2 (1984): 16-17.

Viola Whitney Pratt—teacher, writer, editor, wife of poet E.J. Pratt, and one of those special people whose names have become synonymous with Victoria University—died last September at the age of ninety-two. (For the facts on Mrs. Pratt's life, see Vic Report, Summer 1984). Mrs. Pratt is missed by the entire Victoria University community. Following, for the many alumni who remember well the diminutive woman with the strong, creative presence, are excerpts from the eulogy read at Mrs. Pratt's funeral by her friend Lila Laakso, a librarian in the E.J. Pratt Library.

The Nautilus, a mollusk, is a study in mathematical beauty. Its shell is representative of the Euclidean Divine Proportion. As the Nautilus grows, it moves forward into a new chamber in its shell house. Each room is larger as the animal grows but marvellously each is exactly unaltered in shape. Each angle is the same, each side is proportionately the same. The Nautilus, with its ever evolving complexity, was a wonder to Viola Whitney Pratt. Could this animal which for 400-million years has produced the identical, beautiful, equiangular, spiral structure be a clue to beauty? Does its growth development represent the life pattern?

Viola believed the positive to both these questions. She thought that a naturally manifested aesthetic might some day evolve from these mathematical studies of nature. Her own life represented the search for truth, beauty, knowledge, meaning in an ever evolving, deepening, continuing, development.

Viola Whitney Pratt lived a busy, fulfilled life. It was many times more complex than a Nautilus's because of the ingenuity of the human brain. The brain includes the open-ended possibility for knowledge and self-knowledge which Viola Pratt, till the very end, pursued. Her wonder never ceased. She never stopped being young. As she, herself, once said, "I don't feel any older than I did when I was twenty; the real you is immortal and always young. Your body lives in time and feels the ravages of the years. You know your body is getting older but your spirit doesn't."

Viola Pratt was an editor, a book reviewer, and the author of three books. She was a wife and helpmate to Professor Pratt, Canada's major poet. She was a mother and friend extraordinaire to [Claire](#), an artist. As the Pratt family was part of Toronto's cultural circle, their home welcomed not only friends, colleagues, and students but guests from all over the world. It was the scene of numerous receptions, dinners, and celebrations.

To the end, Viola Pratt was a participant in social groups concerned about peace, hunger in the world, pollution of our planet, human rights. Last winter she felt so helpless because she could not collect names for one of the petitions she was supporting and I was happy to be able to help her circulate the petition.

In Viola's diaries of the 1950s, there was only one recurring complaint: the boring house cleaning. However, she tackled it first thing in the morning and worked furiously to get through the drudgery as quickly as possible so that she could move on to her more interesting activities.

Friendship was important to Viola Pratt. No generation gap existed with her. She was equally at ease and able to put at ease a five year old, our twenty-four-year-old son, a person of fifty, as well as people of her own age group. Friendship meant laughter. There was never a telephone call or a visit of mine that did not include some good chuckles, despite her pain and ill-health. Laughter, she taught me, is the crown on the garland of friendship. She always maintained, "I have been so fortunate in my life to have had so many good friends."

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Published on E.J. Pratt Library (<https://library.vicu.utoronto.ca>)

Claire and Viola were devoted friends, with a loving, caring relationship: they understood each other, thought about each other, and often tackled projects together. They shared a rich intellectual and artistic life while also pursuing their individual interests.

Last March Mrs. Pratt, despite her illness, was determined to attend the Centenary Celebrations of the graduation of women at Victoria University. "I'm going to go if it kills me," she vowed. During those celebrations, the luncheon reminiscing with Mrs. Pratt and Claire (Vic grad of '44) was a great success. The special dinner to honour Victoria women, at which Viola Pratt was one of the honoured guests, was in fact her final social function.

Before she went to the hospital she took me aside and told me that she would be parting soon. Her philosophy had long before accepted death as part of life.

Even on my last visits to the hospital she still questioned me. "How are you? What have you been doing? What is new in your life? What's going on in the world?" I told her about the historic women's debate in the Canadian political campaign. She wanted to know about the Tall Ships I had seen, about the plays *Trafford Tanzi* and *The Dining Room*, which I had recently attended. I told her about Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens". Although we were never able to arrange it, because of the uncertainties of her condition, Mrs. Pratt wanted to treat Claire, Ernestine, Ray, and me to a symphony concert and wondered if I would arrange it for her.

She was inquisitive, considerate, participating and learning right to the end. Once, before I left her, she said, "I've been wondering when knowledge began." After another particularly painful, silent, long evening, "Thank you for sitting with me. I've been trying to think."

Viola had two special notebooks: she had her friends write their favourite words into one and their favourite quotations into the other. Even at the hospital, she still asked me if I had selected my favourite quotation and words. My favourite words are still unwritten. However, I have decided on words that will always bring Viola Whitney Pratt to my mind: peace, world, nature, humanity, children, beauty, language, knowledge, wisdom, generosity, courage, friendship, laughter, Nautilus.

Last updated: November 15, 2016

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