

Back to the Future: A Personal Pilgrimage
by Charles Kight
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Everything was white. Outside the windshield of my bright red Honda Civic everything was white. The snow that had started during the night was still falling lightly, so every few seconds I had to use the wipers to keep the windshield clear. As I drove toward downtown Macon that Sunday in February 1979, I experienced many thoughts and feelings. I was apprehensive but hopeful. For the last couple of weeks there had been ads in the newspaper about a "Unitarian" meeting. I was going to check it out, hoping that it was not a cult. The first of the ads read:

UNITARIAN

You may be a Unitarian and not know it. Do you apply reason and modern knowledge to verify beliefs and sacrosanct dogmas? Meetings for adults and children both at 11:00 each Sunday.

It did not even have an address listed, but the second ad did--1495 Second Street. I did not know what a Unitarian was, but I had gone downtown that snowy morning to find out. You see, my father was a Baptist minister, and I almost was one; I needed religion, but for the last few years I had felt out of place and alienated in conventional churches; nothing met my needs. As I sat in the car outside the old wood frame house listed in the ad, I gradually felt disappointment. It seems that I was the only one that braved the snow that morning. That afternoon disappointment changed into distress when my cocker spaniel named Mr. Spock became lost in the snow. I searched and searched but he was nowhere to be found.

Well, two days later, after much searching, I found Mr. Spock. He was cold and wet and tired, but he was ok. In fact, his life became much better after that. Mr. Spock went from being a fenced-in yard dog, to a very pampered and loved house dog and family member. The next Sunday, my life changed as well. I decided to go to the Unitarian meeting again, and this time, there were people! The house was a warm and inviting old house with overstuffed chairs, large windows, high ceilings, and an old grand piano in the living room that was used for the meeting. There was also a large entry with double pocket doors leading into the living room. The living room was crowded with people. The overstuffed chairs were not enough; several people sat in folding chairs and some even sat on the floor. During that meeting, I discovered that Unitarianism, or more correctly, Unitarian-Universalism, was not a cult; the people there were like me, religious, but disenchanted with conventional religious institutions, and searching, not for someone else's answers, but their own. I left the meeting that morning feeling very warm inside; I had found a new home. I discovered that I had been a UU for some time and did not know it until that morning.

The next few weeks were intense. The Sunday meetings were like a kind of group therapy for religious misfits. The program that we followed was called "Building Your Own Theology." As part of this program, we each developed and clarified our own personal values and beliefs. I remember one of the things that each of us was asked to do was to create our own personal creed I had been pondering the problem for an entire week, it was very early Sunday morning, and I still had not completed it. I think better in the quiet of nature, so I went to Lake Knee-Deep at what was then Macon Junior College, and while sitting at the picnic table looking at the ducks on the lake, it all came together. I wrote my creed, shared it at the meeting, and even carried it around with me in my wallet for many years. It has since been lost, but I believe that this is what I wrote:

I believe in Love.

I believe in God.

At this point in my life I cannot see any difference between the two.
I was not born with my values, I acquired them.
My values are not static, they are changing as I grow.
I am not static, I am changing as I grow.

Well, our group was growing too. During the next few weeks, we applied to the UUA in Boston for a new charter, as the "Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Middle Georgia." I went to a Religious Education workshop at the UUCA in Atlanta where I discovered that there were a lot of us UUs. Each week, the living room of the "Friendship House", as it was called, was filled to overflowing, with many having to stand in the large entry next to the living room during the program. We had to move, and so with the help of Bob Berlin, we started meeting in the basement meeting room of what was then the Trust Company Bank building. The "Bank" was not as "warm" as the Friendship House; we had to sign in and out with the guard each Sunday, but it was roomy--and cheap--actually free.

We stayed at the bank for about nine years. Most services were lay led, although we did have several ministers to speak on occasion. We had coffee hour before the service, which often made it difficult to get everyone to come into the meeting on time. In September of 1985, a forum on the history of the Fellowship was held, and I discovered that it had roots going back as far as 1949. During the last few years of our time at the bank, I was in the unique position of seeing each Sunday service from the same vantage point that I normally have--the back of the room. Being the official "drop-the-needle" officer, I sat in the back of the room playing records--and watching. I watched as several successive ministers tried to get us to sing--a most frustrating experience for them. I watched as we had the memorial service for Kittie Rose. But mostly, I watched as we became a more mature and confident group, finally becoming willing and able to have our own building and our own full time minister.

While this change had its roots many years earlier, it started acquiring momentum in the summer and fall of 1987. We had been debating for some time whether we wanted to have a full time minister or a church building. Most of us wanted both, but we did not believe that we could afford to pay for both at the same time. My recollection is that we were so evenly divided in the importance of a building or a minister, that we decided to try for both and to take the first one that materialized. We applied for extension ministry. We looked at commercial buildings and houses. The congregation even voted to buy a house on Napier Avenue, but the sellers turned us down. Then we found this building.

[Deep slow inhale]

Do you smell that? This place smells like a church. When I walked into this building for the first time 18 years ago, I was moved by the beauty of the stained glass and the splendor of the vaulted ceiling . . . but it was the smell that I remember most. As the minister of the Central Church of Christ led us on the tour, I felt many things, including discomfort at his apparent lack of appreciation for this building and genuine admiration for his adherence to his beliefs concerning materialism. By the end of the tour, it was clear that this building needed a new steward--us.

While we started to look seriously at this building around the first of December 1987, it was not until late February 1988 that our congregational momentum would reach its maximum. At that time, we received acceptance into the Extension Ministry program. Building negotiations were not going as well as hoped for, so at the February board meeting, the board decided to recommend trying to obtain a full-time extension minister without a new building. Building negotiations soon improved, however, and in March the congregation unanimously voted to try to buy this building and go for a half-time extension minister. Within a week, the Central Church of Christ had approved our contract, and on April 3, 1988 our

congregation approved the final contract. Later that same week many of us met with Lucy Hitchcock as part of the Extension Ministry process.

On the following Sunday, April 10, 1988, after an exhausting and exciting period of decisions, uncertainty, and change, we had our first service in this building. At that service, I felt joy in the atmosphere that this building provided, apprehension at the thought of our congregation paying for both a building and an extension minister, and sorrow--our first service in this new building was also the last service for Susan Milnor, our part-time minister.

During the next 14 months we shared the building with the Central Church of Christ while they built their new building. We met at noon and they met earlier. I recall the coexistence to be very cordial, although we were anxious to take permanent possession so we could start making the building more what we wanted it to be. During this time of transition, Mary Katherine Morn became our "full time" minister, Sam Rose's challenge helped us to raise the money to pay for the building, and we as a congregation started to change again. We started to include more ritual and organization in our services--we were becoming a church. After we took total possession of the building in June of 1989, this change accelerated. I do not know how much of this change was due to Mary Katherine, the building, the new members we had attracted, or something else, but our metamorphosis was almost complete. In September of 1989, we voted to change the name of our congregation from the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Middle Georgia to the High Street Unitarian Universalist Church.

In November of 1989, as a church rather than a fellowship, we celebrated our new building with a service of dedication. This dedication was truly a congregational effort, with a majority of our members participating in its preparation in some way. In addition to community leaders, all of our former ministers and even William Shultz, then President of the UUA, participated in the service. It was then that I fully appreciated that this was our new home.

Much has happened since then. Mary Katherine got us to sing. Fern Stanley became our Interim Minister after Mary Katherine left--she instituted the chime that I ring at the start of every service. Our next minister, Yvonne Miller, helped to steer us on the path of Social Justice. Larry Smith, our next Interim Minister, helped us make the transition to a new minister and to our newly renovated building. While we undertook the renovation, we held services in Willingham Chapel at Mercer University. Our first service in our newly renovated building was a memorable Candlelight Christmas Eve service. Then we got Rhett! Wow, what energy!

A couple of months ago, I was asked to come up with 3 wishes for our church. My first wish was for growth--not just in numbers, but in substance. My second wish was for maintenance; perhaps sustenance would be a better word. I remember when there was not a UU church in Macon. The act of just maintaining or sustaining this church is a substantial and essential ministry to this community. Finally I wished for cooperation. There is much divisiveness in both our local and global communities, and we are in a unique position to help encourage cooperation.

"Ubuntu" is an ancient African word, meaning "humanity to others". Ubuntu also means "I am what I am because of who we all are." I would like to thank all those that have made this congregation what it is today. I am indeed what I am because of who we all are. We, as a congregation, are what we are because of each other. I believe that we need to encourage this spirit of Ubuntu in our community.

I teach high school physics. In physics, we use the concept of a vector. A vector is like an arrow. It has a starting point, and it has an ending point, represented by the arrowhead. A vector represents both intensity and direction. For me, the starting point was that snowy day in 1979, and the ending point is today. The direction and intensity of my personal pilgrimage has followed that vector. It is time to start a new vector, one with today as the starting point. As we move forward in our mission/vision work, let us not forget the past. Let us keep the past in mind as we move into the future.

This building with its people, history, beauty, and even its smell, encourages spirituality. We had a few rituals while we were at the bank, and we brought many of them with us to this building. One of those rituals was Hal Blackmarr's reading of "In Stillness Renewed" by Jacob Trapp. I had the privilege of continuing that tradition, first at the bank and then here, but this building has made it much more meaningful to me. As I read it again, I invite you to put yourself in the place of those who first heard it in this building almost 18 years ago as we started to make this our new home.

In Stillness Renewed
by Jacob Trapp (adapted)

Let this house be quiet.

Let our minds be quiet.

Let the quietness of the hills, the quietness of deep waters be also in us.

So quiet, that the noise of passing events and present anxieties of random recollections and wandering thoughts is stilled.

So quiet, that the marvelous stillness is like music.

So quiet, that we feel the very being which is the life of us all.

So quiet, that we are renewed; we feel at one with all others, at home in a tabernacle of stillness.

So quiet, that as we spend the next few moments in silence, we can sense the ripples of this pool of quietness and healing pass through us and out to the farthest star.