



**Out in Write Field**

**Upcoming Visit Sparks Special Memories**

By Bruce Stapley  
Stouffville Free Press

When I gave Herb Gale custodianship of my soul back in the mid to late 1980's, I had no idea he'd also help reshape my intellect, expand my emotions and tickle my funny bone.

Herb was the minister at St. James Presbyterian Church when I started attending while going through the mandatory two years required to work oneself through the dark valley of a difficult marriage breakup. His ability to inspire and reassure, while all the while capturing the imagination, respect and adoration of the faithful, was the stuff of which legends are made.

Herb came to Canada from his native North Carolina, bringing with him a profound humility, his characteristic drawl and a wonderful sense of humour. Not to mention a disdain for what he saw as the overbearing right wing stance so often taken by the American government.

When the first George Bush declared war on Iraq in 1991, Herb bristled. Back then, I was still of the opinion that the United States was the good cop the world needed to maintain order, a position I have since revised. We engaged in some rather lengthy debates. Herb was adamant and unswerving in his convictions, pointing to example after example of American heavy-handedness abroad, as well as at home.

But while Herb would argue with great passion, he always maintained his trademark humility. At one point I put my own Gulf War thoughts down on paper by way of a letter to the editor of the Presbyterian Record, the church's monthly magazine. In it I expressed my displeasure with the 'bleeding hearts' self righteousness in opposing the war against Iraq.

I received a call from Herb asking if he could see me. I said, "Sure, come on over for lunch."

After some small talk he finally got to what was on his mind. "Do you think I'm self righteous?" he asked, a look of genuine consternation on his face. I quickly reassured him that I was not referring to him in my letter, but to others not possessed of his unique ability to disagree strongly without compromising the integrity of a relationship.

When it came time for me to take my second trip to the altar with my Jewish bride, Herb presided over a memorable wedding ceremony that combined aspects of both faiths. He even came down to meet with a rabbi at the temple my wife-to-be attended when she was growing up in Toronto. This refreshingly original service drew the praise of people from both sides of the aisle.

The previous year we, along with many others from St. James, had attended Herb's own wedding to a fellow Presbyterian minister in Sarnia. It, too, was marked by Herb's penchant for meaningful originality. Herb and Shirley eventually headed off to Guelph to work as a ministry team, an arrangement that St. James was too small to accommodate. Packs of Kleenex were appropriately placed in the pews for Herb's St. James farewell. It was as if a part of each of us had been cut off when he left.

We kept in touch for a while but Herb was a busy man with responsibilities to a new flock. I hadn't spoken to him for almost a decade when I was informed recently that he had been named moderator to the 136th general assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Canada. I hope they appreciate the treasure they've been given.

I can't wait to congratulate him when he returns to Stouffville for a guest appearance at St. James in October.

And to tell him how much I still miss him.



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