

The Story of Robert Begg and Gordon Ritchie

By Christine Mowat

And how on earth did these two greatly loved and talented Unitarian men get together? Robert didn't beg and Gordon wasn't rich. And, their story is a sheer delight to relate.

When they finally *did* get together, they had not seen each other or spoken for 17 years. Gordon was then an Edmontonian and Robert, still a Winnipegger.

So let's go back.

Robert's Life Before and After Gordon

In 1949, Robert was born in Selkirk, Manitoba, a Métis town and named after Lord Selkirk, north of Winnipeg. He was the first child, three sisters followed, of John and Estelle Begg (ne Taylor). Robert's dad was also born in Selkirk. His mom Estelle, had Irish and English heritage. His great, great grandfather Charles, arrived from Scotland in 1830 to work with the Hudson's Bay Company, trading into the Red River. He married a Cree woman (Katherine) from the Red River Settlement. The family lived in this area for four generations. Robert's grandfather Reuben Begg, married Sarah Favel who had First Nations, English, and French in her background. Robert, who qualifies for Métis status, is blessed with a fascinating and diverse historical background.

Robert's grandmother Sarah, was very important to him. He remembers her as pious, devout, kind, and a magnificent human being. As children, Grannie made sure that he and his three sisters regularly attended Sunday school in the St. Clements Anglican Church hall nearby. He remembers baptisms, confirmations, and Sunday services in the old stone church on the River Road near Selkirk. Robert used to spend many hours each week with his grandparents, sitting quietly listening to the coco-clock, talking and eating together, that is, when Grandpa didn't have a job waiting for him.

His beloved mother, now in a personal care home in Selkirk, after what might have been a small stroke, stayed home until all four of her children were in school. Robert returns home to Manitoba three times every year to visit with his mother, dad, sisters, and other dear family and friends. When he moved to Edmonton in July 2002 to be with Gordon, he made a promise to his parents to return three times a year to visit and has kept that promise these past fourteen years. His mother loves that he has honoured that commitment to them. His father, John, died 11 years ago but as long as his Mom is alive, he'll keep that promise, he emphasized. Robert had thought his father to be

somewhat distant. He was a sportsman, an out-drinking-with-the-boys' kind of guy, a real man's man. His shy son was probably an anomaly to him, but Bob, or Bobbie (so called by family and others to this day), knew his father loved him and there were some rare and wonderful times together over the years. Both his parents were good, hard working people, and well loved.

Soon after high school, Robert started working at the *Winnipeg Tribune* newspaper, and then, when he was in his early twenties, he moved to Winnipeg to attend the University of Winnipeg, continuing to work at the *Tribune* on weekends. He very occasionally attended church, and, as he said, his belief in God remains steadfast. He plans to write a paper on the how and why of this belief someday. He was just two courses short of completing his General Arts degree (he had dropped too many courses) when he started working for the City of Winnipeg. He began as a Clerk A and over the years worked through the clerical levels to Senior Clerk. The deletion of one city department in 2002 allowed Robert the option of taking an early retirement package at age 53.

He had been working for the City for 28 years. Gordon had come back into his life in late 2001 after absolutely no contact for 17 years. Gordon had decided to move back to Winnipeg, so that he and Robert could be together. By now, they knew that they were in love. However, this early retirement package option came at the same time and Robert decided that it was now possible, and easier, for him to move to Edmonton. This is a decision he has never, for one moment, regretted. These last 14 years living in Edmonton with Gordon, have been his happiest. Soon after he moved to Edmonton, he met Christine Mowat who was looking for an administrative assistant in her Wordsmith Associates Company. He enjoyed seven happy years working alongside Christine at Wordsmith.

To flash back to when this happy couple's story started, it was 1980. Robert was 31 and living in an old apartment building in Winnipeg's Fort Rouge, when a 20-year old Gordon Ritchie moved into the same building. Being neighbours, they soon met and became friends. They talked about everything but particularly, English Country dancing, music, and theatre. Robert was persuaded to join Gordon at some English Country dance classes. Robert loved it! They became good friends with many in the class. One couple in particular, Bob and Cheryl Butler, became in time, a second family to Robert, and to their two children, he was Uncle Bob. The other Bob, became the brother Robert had always wanted.

For many years, Robert was in a kind of denial about his homosexuality. He didn't embrace it, was somewhat fearful. He hadn't been in love with another man until Gordon came into his life. He found Gordon to be multi-faceted, talented, and great to talk to while spending time together. When all renters were forced to move out of the old apartment building, Robert and Gordon decided to share a two-bedroom apartment in a high rise in Osborne Village. At that time, Gordon did not wish to be anything but heterosexual. He was dismayed and upset when he learned that Robert had fallen in love with him. Gordon eventually moved out. They would see each other because they moved in the same circles. Gordon later went off to Banff to study music and eventually ended up in Edmonton. Robert still held a torch for Gordon, but as the years passed that light faded, although, not the memories.

Robert joined the University of Manitoba's Bison Men's Chorus, where he started developing his singing voice and learning to read music. Like his Dad, he had studied piano as a child. Music had been a big part of his growing up years, with Dad and his two sisters on piano and Grandpa on the old time fiddle, there were many musical evenings in the old Begg home. Even growing up, Robert loved all the performing arts, from opera, to ballet, to theatre, a passion not shared entirely by his family. It was always somewhat of a fight to watch 'great performances' on the old black and white TV. The first thing he bought when out on his own was a television.

Most of Robert's friends did not share his passion for the arts, so, it was usually a single ticket to the Concert Hall and the Manitoba Theatre Center. He became what was called a "super" with the Manitoba Opera for many years. Robert was cast as everything from a priest to a demon, a soldier to a dandy. He envied those who sang in the opera chorus.

Robert got into theatre as an adult as he had been too shy in high school. He took acting classes. He loved being on stage and did some children's theater with Actor's Showcase. He remembers that, 'In the Land of Cascading Waters', his first theatrical stage appearance, he played Rom, King of the Gypsies. It was written by a Winnipeg playwright and performed only once.

His involvement in the Bison Men's Chorus was followed by amateur musicals and even Rainbow Stage in Kildonan Park. He was a late bloomer as he so described himself but, once motivated and with opportunities available, he jumped in with both feet. He had begun yet another stage in his life with the emphasis on stage.

He joined the Shoestring Players, an amateur theatre company in Winnipeg and was part of that ensemble of passionate actors for fifteen years. They worked on one major

play each year for the Act Festival, held each spring in Act (Association of Community Theatres) member towns and cities around Manitoba. There were four older ladies in Shoestring Players who Robert called his “golden girls”, and all but one are now, as he said, “together on a far distant but heavenly stage”. He loved them dearly. He had lost touch with most of his Shoestring friends after moving to Edmonton, but on a recent trip to Manitoba, he discovered that the company was still going strong. As is his love of Gordon, he added, and the great life they share in wonderful Edmonton. Their association with the Unitarian Church of Edmonton also is an important part of that life.

Gordon’s Life Before Robert

Unlike Robert, Gordon was the last born in his family, after his older brother and sister, all in Winnipeg. But like Robert, he was brought up in the Anglican church. His mother was a fourth generation Canadian with decades of Anglicanism on her side of the family and she was the organist in the church. He was always very close to his mother. In summer, Gordon took over playing of the organ for her and threw himself into Anglican traditions. In grade 12, he even thought about going into the ministry. But his father (from Scottish parents and probably Presbyterian) told him that he had the gifts of singing and playing music, so he studied Music and Fine Arts in Manitoba, instead of “ministering”.

In 1978, Gordon was 18 when his parents went to Germany and his mother came home after one year—their marriage ended shortly after. He was closer to his mother and was the first child to be named after his mother’s side of the family. Harold, his maternal grandfather’s name is Gordon’s middle name.

Gordon has lovely emotional memories of stories his mother told him about his birth. Doctors and medical students were near her to watch another woman’s twin babies being born. When his mother started to give birth before the twins, they watched Gordon’s birth first and then they were called to the twins’ births. His mother and newly born Gordon were left alone and she had fond memories of turning to him as he arrived, chanting, “You’re my baby; you’re my boy!”

It was his mom who introduced him to music that he enjoyed very early in his life. She got him into a boys’ choir and took him to his first rehearsal with the Winnipeg Boys Junior Choir when he was 10. His mom said he had a huge grin on his face then and it turned out to be the beginning of his career. She loved telling that story, said Gordon.

He demonstrated a variety of activities in his early learning and working years, and they included:

- 1 year in Fine Arts and Music at the University of Manitoba
- a 4-year job working at the Manitoba Theatre Centre making props for the Properties Department. As he said, “ It was a *fantastic* time in my life!” He enjoyed the creativity, the differing levels of learning, and the magic of the theatre.
- 2.5 years at the Banff Centre for Fine Arts where he studied “performance” as a singer, actor, and dancer.

Between his years at Banff, Gordon returned to Winnipeg for the summer. After he reconnected with a friend and instrument maker, he bought a harp and taught himself to play. He read and researched about playing the harp and then studied with harp players later in Edmonton. Two weeks after moving here, he did his first gig, and then continued to be hired for gigs. To this day, he still is doing so. He had a very fine CD of his singing and harp playing made as well.

In 1978, Gordon moved from the Banff Centre to Edmonton where his Mom and her twin sister were living. His Dad was still living in Winnipeg. Gordon was hired by Edmonton theatre companies and also got involved in choirs, of which Pro Coro Canada was one.

After arriving, Gordon told his Mom that he needed to find somewhere to sing. His Mom had suggested All Saints Anglican Cathedral but then Gordon met people in the field he had become interested in, holistic medicine, and where he eventually began working. Then, over years, he became manager of Optimum Health Vitamins where he works to this day. But the people he had met in the holistic medicine field were Unitarians and went to Westwood Unitarian Congregation. That was at a point when Gordon had had the need to ask questions of an Anglican bishop and someone put him down by saying that he shouldn’t talk about non-Christian matters. He had felt a strong need to get answers and the Anglican faith began to become tarnished for him. Then, when he went to the Unitarian Church and became exposed to our beliefs, he learned that the Church professed the right to search for truth and meaning. Gordon found Unitarian Universalism to be more a way of life, and he needed to focus on that in his life. “My actions are my spirituality,” he said.

Early on, Gordon asked his mother if she would like to go to a Winter Solstice service at Westwood Unitarian Congregation with him. She *loved* it and eventually retired as a church organist. Her spirituality was similar to Unitarianism.

Gordon thought back to the period in Winnipeg when he and Robert were in the same apartment building. He said he had been too busy to get involved with anyone and “. . . girlfriends were a non-issue”. He was still involved in the Anglican Church, singing in the choir and playing the organ. At that time, sexuality was irrelevant and a significant reason was that he had been sexually abused in his late teens.

None of Gordon’s other siblings had been involved in the Anglican Church as he had been. When the congregation dwindled, they decided to renovate the church as it was a huge expensive building and too difficult to maintain. Only a third of the building was kept and, as Gordon’s Dad was sentimental, he thought Gordon would love some of what was being taken down. The whole high alter was dismantled and pieces from a big window taken. Gordon showed me the exquisite stained glass piece on his wall that he has loved living with ever since.

Gordon and Robert’s Life Together

In the late 1990s, as part of Gordon’s healing process from the sexual abuse, and accepting of his homosexuality, he felt a need to reconnect with old Winnipeg friends that he felt he had hurt. Robert was one of these. He phoned their mutual friends, Bob and Cheryl, and asked them to give Robert his telephone number. The two of them talked and then sent emails back and forth for months.

Finally, Gordon decided to go to Winnipeg and he told his father that Robert was going to meet him at the airport.

On New Years Eve, 2001, Gordon arrived at the Winnipeg airport. When he got inside the terminal, he came to the top of a long, steep set of stairs and looked way down. There at the bottom was Robert, grinning joyfully. It had been 17 years since they had seen each other.

They went out for a lovely dinner and talked and talked. Gordon was not the same person and the relationship was beginning anew. Later, Robert wrote a poem about their meeting after 17 years, knowing they were in love and wanting to be together. “It was meant to be,” Robert intoned.

At first, Gordon prepared to move to Winnipeg. But then a happy coincidence occurred: the deletion of one Winnipeg city department in 2002 allowed Robert the option of taking an early retirement package at age 53. He had worked for the City for 28 years. Robert decided that it was now possible for him to move to Edmonton. He said he has never had one moment of regret about this decision and the last 14 years have been his happiest. Soon after he moved to Edmonton, he met Christine Mowat who was looking for an administrative assistant in her Wordsmith Associates Communications company. He enjoyed seven happy years working with Christine.

Gordon was a member of the Unitarian Church of Edmonton (UCE) by the time they were reunited, and he and Karen Mills had become the two church pianists and choir leaders. And, at the time of writing, Robert has been a member of the UCE choir for 14 years.

On arrival in Edmonton, Robert was introduced as Gordon's partner. Yet Robert's family had never discussed his sexuality. It was so new for Robert to be introduced as a gay man—and liberating for him. As Gordon said, "I could right away walk into UCE and introduce my partner, Robert. It is an incredible gift to be part of a community that is so embracing of homosexuals."

Robert and Gordon have been involved in many, many activities in UCE. Besides years of participation in the choir, one as leader and piano player and one as a singer, they have worked on the building aesthetics. This includes seasonally changing all hangings, painting the church and adding more green. They join the UCE's group to march in the Pride Parade. In the last one, Gordon carried the UCE's banner. He said the cheering and yelling from onlookers was overwhelmingly emotional.

If we go back to the days when young Gordon was considering studying to become a minister, we note that he has come full circle. In fact, he now leads services at UCE as he thought he might do as a teenager. Gordon likes the term "music ministry". Even in choir practices, members say how fulfilling the rehearsals are. Gordon calls his choir members "musical angels". Through dark times, especially through and after his mother's death, his time in the church gave and gives him strength.

Finally, not only do Robert and Gordon share friends, family, their love of music and drama, holidays and choir trips in Europe, but Robert now works part-time at Gordon's Optimum Health Vitamins. And the two of them are on the verge of their 15th anniversary of being together. What a story from you two!!

Note from the author

I am honoured to write this history on Robert Begg's and Gordon Ritchie's fascinating story about their relationship to each other and to the Unitarian Church of Edmonton. I must admit, however, that we have been friends for years. I met Robert shortly after he arrived and we were all, Gordon, Robert, and I, at a UCE wedding party. I liked Robert so much that, when I heard about his qualifications, I hired him to be the administrative coordinator for my business. He worked for me for 7 years until I sold my 30-year old Wordsmith Associates. And in 2006, Gordon played his exquisitely beautiful harp music for my husband, Lorne Pendleton, and me at our UCE wedding.

I have included short UCE descriptions about the Unitarian Church of Edmonton's welcoming attitude towards gays, lesbians, transsexuals and bisexuals in Canada below.

The UCE website includes the following as one of UCE's connections:

[Gender and Sexual Diversity Monitoring Group](#) (Canadian UU group supporting gender and sexual minorities which have been identified with many labels, such as bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender [abbreviated as B/G/L/T], transsexual, intersex, two-spirited, third gender, questioning, and other such terms)

And the website also includes these principles:

Principles:

We, the member congregations of the Canadian Unitarian Council, affirm and promote:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all;

- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Both above demonstrate why our church is home to Gordon and Robert. And we are so *blessed* to have them as friends and part of our community.

(Picture taken by Christine Mowat on the next page of Robert (left) and Gordon (right) taken at “The Cross”, woods at Spring Lake, that had had its horizontal section broken by teenagers. It has Latin, English and Ukrainian words carved into it. Gordon and Robert completed the cross.)

Note: Shortly after finishing this profile, I received this information from Robert, who wanted it included here:

Robert received a call from his sister Sharon in Winnipeg on December 19th, 2016 that his mother who had gone into the hospital in Selkirk a few days earlier, was not expected to live through the day. He booked a flight that afternoon but did not arrive in time to say goodbye. The fear he had harboured for the last 60 years had become a reality. For Robert and his sisters, she was the best mother in the world. When he was a child, and came to realize what death meant, his mother found him crying one day and asked, ‘Bobbie, why are you crying? He replied through tears, ‘I don’t want you to ever die!’ She comforted him by saying, ‘I’m not going to die for a long time!’ And it was a long time. But still, the grief of this loss will be with him always.

