

Life Report

Daniel H. Levine, Class of 1964

My life has turned out to be full of surprises, mostly gratifying but in any case surprises given what I expected as I prepared to graduate in the spring of 1964. I was married while at Dartmouth, to my high school sweetheart. After she died (in late 1997, of cancer) I found among her papers a letter she had written to her parents saying that I had been accepted to Harvard and Yale Law Schools so “we know what we will be doing”. But we did something very different. I received a Reynolds Fellowship for Foreign Study, and we spent the year in London, where I studied at the London School of Economics while she worked as a child care officer for London County Council, a governmental organization that no longer exists. During this time, we became friends with a couple from Wales, a friendship that has endured to this day. When we returned to the US, it was not to study law, but rather to graduate school—me in Political Science at Yale, she in Social Work at Connecticut. Then in 1967 we headed off to Latin America (Venezuela) beginning an involvement with the culture, society, and politics of the region that enriched our lives immeasurably over the years.

On that first trip we remained in Venezuela almost two and a half years, and when we came back to the US, it was to Ann Arbor Michigan where I accepted an appointment in the Department of Political Science. Ann Arbor remained our base, and we built personal and professional lives here, with a continuing involvement with Latin America that has meant travel and residence in Venezuela, Colombia, Guatemala, Peru, Brazil, and Argentina. We also spent time in Spain, where my wife’s cancer manifested itself in early 1997. At the time we had planned to be in Spain for more than two years, but came back after a week, and she died at the end of the year.

I recently retired from the University of Michigan where I spent my entire career. Retirement had made me reflect on what I have achieved in this life. The answers are that my wife and I created a family that endures with three children and their children. We had independent and enriching professional lives, that developed the ties to Latin America very strongly. She was a psychiatric social worker, very interested in community mental health care, and she was able to take those interests to Latin America and do important work with colleagues in Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, and Spain.

As for me, I did what academics do, I published and published extensively—nine books and many articles and chapters in English and Spanish, with one each in French and German. My academic work has been centered on issues of democracy and democratization, religion and politics, and civil society and social movements.

The way I approached all of these issues came out of work I did at Dartmouth. I was a Senior Fellow at Dartmouth, which meant I was free to do independent study throughout that last year. No courses, no examinations, no requirements of any kind. That year changed my life and gave me the intellectual agenda for my whole career. I spent the year taking a bath in great ideas, with particular interest in the sociology of knowledge, the

question of why ideas arise and find an audience at some times and places and not others. Most of my subsequent research and publication has pursued these interests whether interviewing politicians about the origins of democracy, Catholic leaders and activists about what religion's place in contemporary society and politics is and ought to be, or members of social movements about their goals and how they went about achieving them.

If anyone had asked me in 1964 if it seemed likely or possible that I would work extensively in and on Latin America, that I would write nine books, with six of them on religion, society, and politics, I would likely have told them to dream on. But I became fascinated with religion and how it works in society, and began research on Catholicism in Latin America when that was mostly the concern of historians or perhaps anthropologists. At the time, most academics were still under the influence of a simplified version of theories of secularization and modernization according to which religion would inevitably fade and disappear as science and progress advanced. So my colleagues wanted to know why I would want to waste my time on an issue like that instead of, for example, politics and economics. But as things have turned out, religion has not faded away, not in Latin America, and of course, not in the United States either. What we see in Latin America is not the disappearance of religion but something much more interesting and dynamic—the pluralization of religion and the flourishing of innovation with new forms of involvement by religious people and groups in society and politics.

It has been a privilege to work on such important and exciting topics as democracy and democratization and religion, society and politics, and I like to think that my work has had some impact on thinking about these issues. My professional work on religion also ended up changing my personal take on religion and changing my personal life. I began my studies from a position that is common in the social sciences—neutral, skeptical, and careful to maintain “objectivity” and emotional distance. But my research brought me into contact with people who deeply impressed me. I was struck and moved by the way their faith led them to make and sustain commitments in ordinary life and in politics as well, often under the most difficult circumstances. Their example had an impact on my life and slowly I moved from skepticism to sympathy, from sympathy to empathy, and finally to belief.

Friends and colleague often ask me how I like being retired. The answer is so far, so very good. Retirement for academics is a lot like ordinary life but without committees, grading, or students. I no longer teach on a regular basis, although I do undertake short courses, give lectures, and attend conferences on occasion if the topic is interesting and the opportunity takes me some place I want to be, mostly Latin America or Spain. I remain active in research and I continue to write and publish.

In 2003 I had the very good fortune to meet a wonderful woman who has now just recently retired from a great career as a producer for network television news. We have now joined forces in Chicago and plan spend the rest of our lives together.

That is my story. Daniel H. Levine, Class of 1964

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