

Fourscore Years Dan Turns Eighty, and So Do I

First, let me say right up front that I don't know exactly where this essay is going.

It all began a few years ago when I was putting together a book to mark the 250th anniversary of the building of our old family house, still standing along the Connecticut River in Hadley, Massachusetts. The book, which I called *Hadley Memories*, was intended to capture some of the feelings about the old place, expressed by family members over several generations. In developing it, I picked up a copy of a book which had been written by my great-great-grandfather Dan Huntington, (1774-1865), when he reached eighty years old. He addressed it to his children and descendants, calling it *Memories, Counsels and Reflections by an Octogenary*. I found it a fascinating read, and I wanted to be sure that my descendants heard about it as well. It was then also that the thought came to me that perhaps, when I reached the august age of eighty, I should write something myself.

So here I am, within sight of my eightieth birthday, and coincidentally, looking for a way to continue the series of little stories that I have written during the last few years, chronicling a few adventures and misadventures of my past. Not all of them have been of great moment, to anyone but me, but they seem to have piqued the interest of my children and a few of my other relatives and friends. As I have said, like the reader who picks up this little story, I don't at this point know exactly where it will take me, but I hope it will turn out to be interesting to the reader, and fun for me to write.

Dan's book was published in 1857 by Metcalf and Company in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The copy which found its way to my library, was inscribed on the flyleaf by Theodore G. Huntington, who was one of Dan's sons. In all he had four daughters and seven sons, the youngest of whom was my great-grandfather, Frederic Dan Huntington, who was born in 1819.

It is a small book, with only 120 pages. The main text consists of two sermons, addressing his children largely on moral and spiritual grounds. It is in the following sixty pages or so – seven chapters - which he characterizes

as “Notes to Sermons,” that he deals with reminiscences of his life beginning with his early days in Lebanon, Connecticut where he was born, and his thoughts on various ecclesiastical matters, and among other things, genealogical notes about several strains of his family.

It is often assumed that Dan’s first name was really Daniel, but in the genealogical chapter he makes it clear that such is not the case. For several generations of his mother’s family – the Throops – the monosyllabic name had been preferred. It is used today by several of his descendants.

An odd thing occurs right at the beginning of Dan’s book. In the section called “Sermon First,” he tells about receiving as a birthday present “ a nice portfolio, with paper in one of the pockets,” and then writing out a sermon on that paper, which he intended to have ready on October 11, 1854. But, he says, he later realized that “ the date would be the beginning, and not the close, of my eightieth year, as I intended it should be.” I don’t like to think of my ancestor as either addled or not very quick at arithmetic, but the fact is he was born on October 11, 1774, and so, on that date in 1854, he would indeed have finished his eightieth year, not be starting it. In any event, he finished that sermon, and added another one as well.

Early in “Sermon First, ” Dan reminds his children that his father, William, lived until he was fourscore and four years old, and that his grandfather, Deacon Samuel Huntington, lasted until he was fourscore and fourteen. To bring this story up to date, let me add that my own father was eighty-four years old when he died, and that his father and grandfather, who died on the same day in 1906, were sixty and eighty-six respectively. And I, on December 18, 2006, successfully completed my eightieth year.

Much of the book has a religious focus, which is not surprising in view of the author’s vocation. Following the two sermons. he includes a chapter titled “Satan a Person,” in which he expands on his belief in the existence of a personal Devil, as an adversary to be constantly guarded against. In a chapter called “Creed” he gives a statement of his religious beliefs. In another called “ Ecclesiastical Intolerance,” he tells how his wife, in 1828, was essentially excommunicated by the church in Hadley when, on being tested by a special committee of church elders, she admitted uncertainty about the doctrine of the Trinity. The church leaders felt that they could not extend their fellowship to a Unitarian. Although it must have been a devastating blow to her, she soon transferred her church participation to one

in nearby Northampton, and maintained her lifelong reputation as a strong and devout Christian, never wavering in her faith. One hundred and forty years later, in 1968, the Hadley church rescinded its action.

Dan had married Elizabeth Whiting Phelps under the arch in the Long Room at her family's house in Hadley, in the evening of January 1, 1801, a date that was usually referred to in our family lore as "the first day of the first week of the first month of the nineteenth century." Born in 1779, she died in 1847 after a long illness.

Dan kept her portrait always by his bedside, and he refers to her frequently in his book. He describes a particularly touching episode that occurred not long after her death. In a family gathering, when they were discussing life after death, and the joy everyone felt awaited them when they met up again in reunion with the dear friends and relatives who had preceded them, Dan suggested that he was sure Elizabeth was in that joyful company, and further, perhaps was even so happy in her heavenly surroundings that she didn't think of him, still on earth. He recounts how that same night, in a very moving experience, she appeared to him vividly in a dream, and gave her fervent, and immensely comforting, assurance that he was not for a moment forgotten, and never would be.

He had determined at an early age that he wanted to become a minister, like his grandfather Deacon Samuel Huntington (1691-1785). But he says that he realized that if he were to accomplish that goal, he would have to be a very good boy, and he thought that might be difficult. He had been made aware that his mother, at the age of sixteen, had experienced a "born again" religious awakening, such as Dan had not yet felt. When he was naughty—and he admits to being a headstrong, troublesome child – his mother would evince despair, and say that she knew not what would become of him. He did not know either, and he was in no hurry to find out.

Having been warned of the eternal anguish which faced sinners, he had concluded that a "world of woe would be his awful portion," were he to die before he, too, had such a religious experience. So he figured out a unique and seemingly foolproof means of dealing with the prospect of dying. "Come what would," he writes, "I had made up my mind to draw one more breath, and so to live on, let it seem ever so hard to breathe, till I could get into the habit of breathing again, freely as ever, thus hoping for a space of

repentance.” In this way, he felt quite confident that, for all his naughtiness, he could continue to be successful in “ baffling the tempter.”

However he did it, and probably to no one’s surprise, Dan accomplished his goal of becoming a minister, like his grandfather, as would three of his sons, more grandsons, and great-grandsons, including my father, three generations later.

After graduating from Yale College in 1794, followed by two years as a tutor at Williams College and two more in a similar post at Yale, Dan entered the ministry in September of 1798, becoming pastor of the Congregational Church in Litchfield, Connecticut, where he was given a settlement of \$1,000, and an annual salary of \$400.

His stay in Litchfield was eventful for him, not only in church affairs, in which he was very active, but politically as well. He writes that party spirit was rampant and political gales, Federal and Democrat, were at their height. He became involved in a lawsuit. “ Though a decided Federalist in politics, I was not apprised of being a zealous partisan, but somehow I said something at the post-office, what I could not now tell, for my life. It was denounced as a lie. It was first observed in *The Mercury*, the mouth-piece of the Democratic party, printed in Hartford, and was going, as on the wings of the wind, to the ends of the earth, much to the annoyance of my good friends, the Federalists, and my parishioners. It must be known if the minister of Town Hill was a liar. How? The editor of *The Mercury* must be prosecuted forthwith.” In due course, the jury in the Superior Court found in Dan’s favor, and he was awarded \$1,000 in damages, surely a very handsome sum in those days.

In 1809 he moved to a similar position in Middletown, at double the salary, teaching school as well, to help support his growing family. He remained there until 1816, when, with his wife and their eight children, he moved to Hadley, Massachusetts, living in his wife’s family home which, with several hundred acres surrounding it, became their property when her mother died a year later. Although he had given up the parish ministry, and was not the pastor of the church in Hadley, he continued to be very active in church affairs, and was a popular preacher throughout the area. He lived and thrived in Hadley for the next fifty years, until he died in 1865, at the age of fourscore years and eleven.

He took great pride in their family home. In addressing his children he wrote: "We have a goodly heritage. Its inhabitants pass away, but the earth abideth. I hope that part of it which was the inheritance of your ancestors, will remain in the hands of their descendants for a great while yet to come. So long as I am here, you will find it one of your homes. As we occasionally meet and ramble over its grounds, objects innumerable present themselves. Here may be seen graves of the aborigines, with the implements of their tillage, their pestles, their arrow-heads, their flesh-pots, and other domestic utensils. Their war-whoop, I hope, will no more be heard. Indoors, and around the old mansion, you observe heirlooms in profusion of former times and former occupants, both pleasant and mournful to the Soul."

With a plea which must be nearly universal among us older ones, if not always so directly expressed, he says to his children, "While the world is opening around you, and other things innumerable invite your attention, it gives your aged father great pleasure to know, as he does, that he is not forgotten. Come and see us, as often as you can, all of you." To which I would add: just be patient with us, as our eyes dim, our hearing clouds, and our memories sometimes fail us. We may not always remember that we are no longer in charge of things. Opinions we will always have, about almost everything, and they may continue strong, even as, to you, they begin to lose their validity.

True to his hopes, the old house which he loved so much would remain in family hands for three more generations. Even now, when the property is owned by a non-profit foundation, no longer controlled by the family, and the house is operated as a museum available to the public, many of the "heirlooms in profusion," of which Dan spoke, may still be found in their accustomed places, with the family papers, the books, diaries and letters of many generations now safely secured in the archives at nearby Amherst College.

The last chapter in the book is called "Reminiscences of Lebanon." Dan was born in Lebanon, Connecticut, in 1774 and lived there until he went off to college in New Haven. Like almost everyone else in those days, his father was a farmer.

In his book, Dan deals with the physical aspects of the town of Lebanon sometimes a bit harshly. He describes the main street as "The broadest I ever saw, or heard of, three or four miles in length, with gentle elevations

and depressions, north and south, sloping a little east and west, with neat door-yard fences, handsome domiciles and home-lots on both sides, under good improvement for agriculture and horticulture, with beautiful streams at the bottom of the hill, right and left. And yet the same street, at the time I speak of, excepting a clearing here and there for a church, or school-house, or parade-ground, is deformed with immense craggy rocks, clay-pits, sluggish streams, and frog-ponds, and shapeless, tottering stone-walls, with crooks and angles innumerable every few rods, which rarely fail to attract the notice of the traveler unpleasantly. If our ancestors had gone to work in earnest, with a few barrels of powder, with their drills and crowbars, sledges and spades, with skillful hands to manage them, all these rocks, in short-time, might have been made to hide their heads in shame, quagmires might have been reduced to regular pools, with straight, square-faced, four-foot double walls, and Macadamized roads on both sides of the street, the whole distance, and thus acres, nobody knows how many, redeemed from waste to a tasteful and well-husbanded common. Recently this has been undertaken.”

His descriptions of some of Lebanon’s citizens, as well as eminent clergy in the region, are particularly colorful.

One of the tales he tells is about Simon Fitch, who had married Dan’s older sister, Wealthy Huntington, in 1783. It seems that Fitch was a portrait painter, and once had been employed by a class at Yale to do a portrait of the college president, Timothy Dwight. In fulfilling that assignment, “ he succeeded well in the main, but in finishing one of the hands, he could not suit himself; the more he worked upon it, the less he was satisfied till, in a state of hopeless frenzy, he mounted his horse, and without being blamed by anyone, or mentioning his trouble to others, he set his face homeward. Coming to Durham woods, he heard someone trying his skill upon a tin trumpet. Supposing it was intended for him. he leaped a fence into the forest, where he wandered about till morning, and the next day made his way safely home, but could never be persuaded to finish the portrait, or meddle in any way with his palette and brush. It must have been a temporary derangement, the effect of a keen sensibility peculiar to artistic genius.”

Dan adds that sometime later, when he was with Timothy Dwight, his mentor, looking at the portrait, Dwight commented that he thought the defect in the hand was hardly worth mentioning, and that he much admired the overall performance.

Another Lebanon town character is described thus: “ Captain Leech I well remember, a large well-proportioned personage, with a frank, expressive countenance, attractive in his manner; social in his address, his voice full and silver-toned; prominent and eloquent in company. I once saw a letter of his. The chirography was beautiful, the orthography of a more questionable character. It was notorious for unnecessary letters. Someone once rallied him for poor spelling. ‘Why, what was the matter with it?’ The answer was ‘ It had abundance of letters.’ Well, he said, that was just as he meant to have it. The alphabet was free to everybody, and he meant to put in enough letters for every word, to make out the sound he wished; and if others did not like his arrangement, they might suit themselves.”

Although the man’s name was Leech, to me he sounds very much like some of the Huntingtons I have known !

In my *Hadley Memories* book, I used a selection in which Dan exhorted his descendants to look ever upward and onward, focusing on things above, not on, the earth, and calling particular attention to the monument in the family burial lot in the old Hadley cemetery which reads “Excelsior.” He urges that motto on us all. I think he would be pleased to know that my brother and I, four generations down the line, occasionally use that word in concluding our letters and e-mail messages to each other. I should say that we probably do it more to give general encouragement than to suggest celestial aspirations.

As I was beginning to write this story, several months ago, I drafted the following paragraph, which I intended to include:

On December 16, my dog Molly – Irish Hilltop Molly – a Pembroke Welsh Corgi, will turn fourteen years old. In human lifespan terms, that probably gives her close to octogenarian status. What Molly yearns for today, tomorrow, and in the hereafter, is simply more food. I hope she finds it.

Not many days later, Molly began to slow down, most dramatically and uncharacteristically, by sniffing, but rejecting, food of any sort, regular meals and special treats. With the onset of renal failure, and no hope that she could be cured or given long-term relief, on November 27, just a few days before her fourteenth birthday, we sadly had to let her go. She was a fine animal and a faithful companion, and an integral part of our household throughout her lifetime.

I know not what happens to animals after they die, any more than I can be certain what happens to people, other than that some will last long and burn bright in our memories, as Molly surely will. I am grateful for that, and my wish for her still applies. I like to think of her running “through the fields of the Lord,” perhaps with a horse – she was born on a horse farm, and most of her siblings found homes in such places – and with an endless supply of good food waiting for her, at the end of her romp.

Well, there it is. As I set out to do, I’ve written a little something to mark my eightieth year. Aside from the bit about my dog, and a few other personal comments of mine along the way, this piece has dealt mostly with some of the more interesting words and deeds which my great-great-grandfather Dan Huntington, chose to reflect on, when he hit his eightieth birthday. I’ve always been particularly glad to have him as an ancestor. His book about his life and times deserves more scholarly attention, and I hope someday it will receive it.

As for me, I never intended to do a sermon, as he did, and other pieces that I have written earlier, tell more about who I am, and how I came to be this way.

So, on to eighty-one.

DMGH
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