

A Father's Reflections

By Martin Rabenhorst

Upon the Occasion of the Memorial Service of His 23 Year Old Son
Daniel Capell Rabenhorst (March 11, 1982 - May 14, 2005)
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Thank you for coming this evening. And thank you so much for you calls, your notes, your hugs, and the hundred other ways that you have shown us your love and support this week. Some of you will think I'm a bit crazy for trying to speak tonight. But I couldn't not do it. But you can relax. If I get started and cannot finish, [pastor] Stephen [Clark] has agreed to finish reading these comments for me. But I intend to get through. And if I ramble on a bit long, please indulge me.

What can a father say at a time like this? I loved this young man with my heart and soul. Our hearts were knit together through times of joy and times of challenge. He was named after my father, who died when Daniel was 7. But he was so much like Judy - and her father - That winsome Childress personality that was so disarming, encouraging and affirming. He made people feel good about themselves and had just the way with words and just the right humor, that he made friends wherever he went. People loved him. You loved him.

He was mostly his mother's son. As Judy's father would have said "they were scratched by the same cat." But there were a few ways that Daniel was a bit like me. He and I shared a love for wild things and for the outdoors. Judy's dad loved to ask Daniel "how's the snake and lizzard business?" Though not to her liking, yet much to her credit, Judy shared a house with many a snake and other wild creature because a boy and his father found them so intriguing. Daniel and I also shared a love for fishing, which began for him around the age of 5 or 6. I always felt that life needed balance. And if seizing the opportunity for good fishing meant he occasionally missed a little school, well that was simply the way it had to be. I always wrote him a note for an excused absence because, of course, he and I had been on a field trip together (I just left out the details). Judy wasn't so sure about it, but I thought the rightness of these priorities was self evident. As I dropped Daniel off at University Park Elementary School one morning about an hour and a half late, I even remember [PE Teacher] Dennis Combs asking Daniel as he arrived "did you catch anything?"

At about the same time that Daniel was transitioning from elementary school to middle school, he also began that other significant transition in a young man's life – from bait fishing, into the art of fly fishing. He was a natural. I have tried to teach a number of people how to fly cast over the years (usually not very successfully). But Daniel could sense the rhythm, and he picked it up immediately.

Somewhere during those days, "A River Runs Through It" became our family movie (at least for the men in our household), and we loved to quote lines back and forth from the film. It was clear that I was the slightly stodgy Presbyterian father who according to the narrator "in a typical week gave as much instruction in fly fishing as he did in all other spiritual matters", and Daniel

was the younger son, Paul, free spirited, and living out on the edge. It's a beautiful film, that shows the grandeur of Montana and a family seeking to love one another. But, if you know this film, then you will know that it has proven to be more like our family than we wanted.

Now golf, on the other hand, was something Daniel discovered and into which he grew, entirely on his own. If you knew Daniel, you know it was his passion and his gift. I was never much of a golfer. In fact I probably went 30 years without golfing until I took it up again in order to be with him. I loved to play golf with Daniel, because 1) he always found a way to make me feel good about some part of my game, and 2) his caddying advice always saved me at least 10 strokes per round. It wasn't until he was 16 that he began to play golf. And right away it became clear that he wanted to play more golf than he could afford, so I told him he better find a job at a golf course. In the summer before his junior year of high school, he started working on the grounds crew over at Paint Branch [golf course]. He would get himself up to be at work by 5 am, and worked until 1:30 or 2:00. Then he would play golf until dark, and then go over to the lighted driving range until they kicked him out. He bought his first set of clubs at Sports Authority and after a month, he noticed that the heads of several of his irons were beginning to crack. I didn't know that could happen! The folks at the store were pretty nice about replacing them, but when the second set of heads also began to crack he decided he needed a better set of clubs. He worked and golfed all summer and into the school year, when he traded in varsity wrestling for varsity golf. By the end of his second summer at Paint Branch he was gunning for the course record. He never quite made that, but there were a couple of times he was within a stroke of doing so.

As Daniel's interests grew from fishing into golf, he of course spent less time on the water and more time on the links. In the last few years, when we occasionally fished together, I would play the guide. And when we golfed together, he would play the caddy - no really, the pro. The last time we fished together was up on Morgans run and the trout were rising to really teeny #24 midges. I could hardly see them - in fact I really couldn't see the fish rising to the fly, but Daniel could. And in his signature teasing way, he loved to remind me how he outfished the old man hands down that day.

As I have tried to grasp what has happened this past week, I have thought about the things I had hoped for, for Daniel, the things we wanted to do. After taking a few years off, he decided that he wanted to go to school. He just completed his 3rd semester on the Deans List at Anne Arundel Community College, and had been accepted to start at UMD in the Fall. He and I bought tickets for a trip to Montana in July. I wanted to show him the Rocky Mountains and I wanted to fish together on the Madison River, and to see his eyes when he hooked a 20" rainbow that ran him into the backing.

One difference between Daniel and the film character Paul MacLane after whom he sometimes styled himself, was that Daniel, especially earlier, had a tender heart toward the gospel, and the things of Christ. During the last two years that Daniel lived at home, I would often wait up for him to come home in the evening (that is, if I thought he would be in by 12 or 1). Sometimes we shared only a few moments together, if he had to be up early for class or work. Sometimes we

would talk for an hour or more, usually about golf, or school or work, or about the things ahead in the week. Sometimes we would talk of weightier matters. We had a wonderful relationship and spoke openly together. We didn't always agree and I am aware of his questionings, his doubts, and his wanderings. I am a realist and I wear no blinders. I am as aware of his failings as I am of my own.

I am tempted to ask a hundred questions and to pummel myself with thoughts of "if only...." or "what if....." But that is pointless. As I have struggled to make sense of things this week, I simply have not been able. I have wept. I have been angry – angry with death, because death is an intrusion into this broken and fallen world; but God is good, and this was His timing for Daniel. God has taken him home at the tender age of 23. I cannot fathom this mystery, but I trust Him in whom such mysteries dwell.

I believe that in God's mercy and grace, Daniel has been welcomed into the arms of Christ. Three or four times a week, I would hug that boy, and kiss him, and tell him I loved him. I will do that no more. But now he is in the arms of a Father who never is harsh, never selfish or impatient, never unjust, and always perfectly loving. Daniel has definitely traded up. We needn't weep for him, because *"being away from this body he is home with the Lord"* [2 Cor 5:8]. But still we grieve and weep for ourselves and for each other because we miss him. And that's ok.

But then always there lingering, gnawing, prodding is the question "Why has this happened?" No doubt, God could answer. But I doubt my finite mind could grasp it. So it seems to me, that trying to ponder "Why?" is a dead end road, and the answers to that question must remain for a while, hidden. But one thing is a clear reality – we are here, dealing with all of this right now. We sit here stunned and grieving today over the death of a young man.

I think maybe we should ask a different question. One to which we may actually hope for an answer. So I ask, not "Why has this happened?" but rather, "Why am I here today?", or maybe asked in a different way "What am I to do with this?" How is it that the path of my life came to cross that of Daniel Rabenhorst? And how is it that knowing him has dragged me into this swirling current of sorrow and pain? Some of you knew Daniel a long time. Others of you, only a short while. And some of you really didn't know Daniel at all, but you know us, and are here because you care about us. So here we are. But why? – for what purposes? "What am I to do with this?" One answer is that we are here to reflect and remember what we loved about this young man who touched us – and to comfort one another in our grief. As far as it goes, that is fair and true, and you know – I am really so glad for that. You have been wonderful for us. But this surely cannot be the only purpose. It must be only a secondary purpose. There must be something stronger, more powerful and weighty. So what is the larger purpose? I hesitate, but let me try an answer?

We are here today with two realities screaming at us. 1) Death is certain. My death and yours are as certain as the death of my son Daniel. Most of the time, we successfully avoid this reality, but today it is in our face! 2) Life is so uncertain. We mostly don't treat it this way. We think we

will live 70 years, or with the marvels of medicine, maybe 80 or 90 years. I am sure last Friday Daniel thought he would be alive today, caddying, making frappachinos, going to the University of Maryland. And so did I. But really, life is fragile, and it hangs by a thread. At 23 you feel invincible, but we are not. So what is this other purpose - this larger purpose? "Why am I here today?" "What am I to do with this?"

This is what I think. That facing the uncertainty of life, we might seek God who holds all things securely in His hands. And facing the rude ugly reality of death, we might seek Jesus Christ who after suffering death, triumphed over death as the Victor.

*Death cannot destroy forever;
From our fears, cares, and tears – It will us deliver.
It will close life's mournful story,
Make a way That we may Enter heavenly glory.*

Paul Gerhardt, 1653. *Why Should Cross and Trial Grieve Me?*