

Rainfield Yen (嚴雨田) Memorial Service

It is a great honor to have this chance to talk about Rainfield to his dear friends and family. You all know Rainfield well, so I don't need to tell you what a marvelous man he was. I don't need to tell you what a brilliant mind he had, what a great influence he had on so many people, how he touched so many lives, and what a special person he was. These things, you already know.

What I want to tell you today is what I think Rainfield would want me to tell you. I had the extraordinary privilege of working closely with Rainfield during the final year of his life to help him fulfill his old ambition of publishing his memoir. That old ambition took on new urgency when he was diagnosed with cancer, and especially when it became clear to him that his disease was incurable.

Rainfield was in some ways a pessimistic man. But he felt his family's history and the events of his life had great meaning, and he wanted to leave behind a record of those events for future generations. He wanted to explain his search for meaning in his life, how that search faltered, and then, in his final days, how he finally accepted himself, was thankful for the life he had led, and deeply grateful to all those who cared about him and loved him.

If I look back in history, the person who reminds me most of Rainfield is Ecclesiastes from the Old Testament Bible. Both men had searching, inquisitive minds. They both asked the big questions, those that have no easy answer, and they were not easily satisfied with conventional explanations.

Here's what Rainfield wrote: "I ask myself constantly, 'Why did I come into this world? What was the purpose of living? Would I care to live my life again? To ride again the swelling crests of those dizzying highs and plunge once more into the troughs of those desperate lows?' No, I'm not sure I would. One life, I suppose, is sufficient, one turn to walk this earth enough."

Here's Ecclesiastes: "What profit has a man from all his labor, in which he toils under the sun? I made my works great, I built myself houses, I planted myself vineyards, I had greater possessions of herds and flocks than all who were in Jerusalem before me. I

gathered for myself silver and gold and the special treasures of kings. Yet I hated life, for all is vanity and grasping for the wind.”

Rainfield did not easily accept conventional beliefs. He wrote: “I envy those who, in their final days, hold steadfast to their belief in God. How comforting that belief must be! My brother and his wife are devout Christians, and my condition makes me ripe for conversion. They have tried mightily, and I have tried along with them, to induce in me that leap of faith. Yes, I do want to believe! I want to believe that the universe has a permanent place for me, that the ‘I’ inside me—the special essence that is *me*—will outlast my fading corporeal body. The promise of eternal life—that life will carry on in some form after death—is a common thread that runs through all religions. Yet it is the very thread that eludes my grasp. Each time I bring myself to the brink of belief, skepticism and cold reason pull me back. I balk; I do not leap. I have tried to surrender, to give myself over to a belief in God and gain the comfort it would bring me. But the conclusion is always the same. I can find no cosmic reason why my existence ought to continue, why some essence of me—an ethereal, immortal soul—ought to persist or to reappear on Earth in another guise.”

Ecclesiastes and Rainfield both describe the ebb and flow of fortune. They accepted the role that randomness and chance impulses play in charting the course of our lives. “The race is not to the swift,” Ecclesiastes cautioned, “nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor favor to men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all.”

“When I began to write,” Rainfield said in his book, “I set out to tell my father’s story. But in telling his story, instead I have told my own. My father’s wild swings of fortune, his ungovernable, self-destructive impulses, his final crushing defeat: these stories stand in opposition to my own vicissitudes. In examining my father’s life, I reveal my own. Were I to relive my life, would those fateful moments repeat themselves, each time with the same inexorable result? Yes, I think they would. Because for those of a certain cast—men like my father and me—impulse and destiny are alike; one is the measure of the other.”

Both Ecclesiastes and Rainfield lived their final days alone, bereft of female companionship. Rainfield wrote, “After my second marriage failed, I knew in my heart I

would live out the rest of my days alone. At times I look on my brothers' lives—both are family men whose wives will forever be at their sides—with a certain envy. I know, though, that my temperament sets me apart from them. I am far too rigid and unyielding, and the women I have attracted are dangerously similar to me in those traits.”

Here's Ecclesiastes: “Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of your fleeting life, which God has given you under the sun, for that is your reward in this life.” But it was a reward that eluded him: “My soul still seeks but I cannot find,” he wrote, “One man among a thousand I have found, but a woman among all these I have not found.”

Yet despite his skeptical nature, and his acceptance of life's vicissitudes, Rainfield found much joy in his life. One of the last photos he took was of a rainbow he saw outside his window – a photo we included in his book. Even in his final days, even as he complained bitterly about his dim prospects, still he appreciated the rare beauty of a rainbow. He wrote, “My life, despite its ups and downs, has ended up all right. To repeat Chaucer's Wife of Bath, my father and I both could say, with accuracy, ‘I have had my world, as in my tyme.’ We were, in our time, men of intelligence and reason; these qualities guided us.”

In his final days, Rainfield finally found the peace of mind that had eluded him for so long. He wrote, “A year ago, I feared death. But now, as it draws ever nearer, I seem to fear it no more. I have fully accepted its inevitability, the finality of the world's continuation without my presence. I do not want a funeral of any sort. I ask only that my body be cremated and my ashes sprinkled into the ocean. At friends' request, I have agreed to a simple memorial service. I have made a list of attendees whom I wish to invite.”

“Speaking of good friends, Peter Chao, Jack Li, Tom Chien, and Ta-Ching Liu have been so good to me throughout this difficult time, giving boundless support and encouragement. They would even leave work during office hours to take care of me, to accompany me to the hospital, or to play short mahjong games to relax me and help me kill time. They are my high-school classmates; our friendships date back fifty years. I do

not know what I have done to deserve such dear friendships. I sincerely thank them from the bottom of my heart.”

“Many other dear friends, here in Taiwan and overseas, have extended great help, concern, and support since the day, four years ago, I learned I had contracted this demonic, merciless disease. My friends sensed my mounting fear as my fate loomed; now, that fear has faded. I want them to know I depart this world in peace. I am fearful no more.”

Here is a final quote from Ecclesiastes:

One generation passes away, and another generation comes, but the earth abides forever.

The sun also rises, and the sun sets.

The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course.

All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again.

Thank you.

David Allan

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