

Cycle of life, interrupted, for bad and then good

It's been three weeks since a man with a grudge and a pump-action shotgun shot down the doorway to the Annapolis Capital and murdered five of its employees, among them two colleagues. Every one of those 21 days has been required to process the mysteries of life and what can only be described as survivor's guilt, albeit from a very safe distance.

Why not me, Lord?

Why am I still here, and Gerald Fischman, Rob Hiaasen, John McNamara, Rebecca Smith and Wendi Winters are gone?

That one, I may never figure out.

The week of June 24 began innocently enough, with a McMullen family reunion in Ocean Pines and an unexpected visit with my cousin, Paul, a hero from my childhood who's coming off a bigger medical scare than the one I faced Good Friday, when a **heart attack** led to quadruple bypass heart surgery. I've always looked up to "Nuck," and not just for the name we share. Neither of us was physically able to play golf with our brothers, sons and nephews the next day, but seeing him reminded me to count my many blessings.

That number increased June 25, when my wife, Mary, threw a surprise baby shower for our daughter, Kate, who is expecting her first child in October. As the women and girls increased the volume at a restaurant in West Ocean City, I enjoyed a quieter lunch and putt-putt with my son-in-law, Micah, and son, Don. The proverbial good time was had by all.

Both sides of my family tree include genealogy buffs and plenty of lore. Mary, conversely, was adopted as an infant. My Christmas gifts to her included an online DNA test through Ancestry.com, where she discovered a previously unknown to her half-sister. We had the pleasure of meeting over lunch the afternoon of June 28. You can imagine the high we were experiencing on our drive from the Eastern Shore

back to Sue Creek – until Mary read a text message from Don, alerting us to possible traffic delays in Annapolis, where there had been a mass shooting. Hearing the location on WBAL radio, my heart sank and mind raced.

The first paycheck I received for writing, 45 years ago this summer, was from the Capital-Gazette Newspapers. At the suggestion of Joe Gross, a great character of a sports columnist, I was given an opportunity right out of high school by sports editor Al Hopkins (whose passions included St. Mary's High School). Al tested my ability to file dispatches from a fast-pitch softball league at long-gone Joe's Oak Grove. I passed the audition, and spent the next four years shuttling between Towson University and Anne Arundel County, reporting on high school sports and learning more than I ever did on campus. In 1977, I went to work fulltime for Al and Joe, God rest their souls. (The Annapolis newsroom at the time was on West Street. Ad salesman John McIntyre shared that the Review was printed there for a stretch in the 1980s.)

That experience allowed me to join The Evening Sun in Baltimore in 1981. For the last 15 of my 26 years on Calvert Street, where the sports department adjoined features, Rob Hiaasen was a familiar face and a must-read. Rob was a jock at heart, and came to me for background on a couple of poignant features that had a sports hook. Rob, along with Kevin Cowherd, taught me to exhale. Big-city newsrooms are awash in egos, but Rob never took himself as seriously as his work.

I took a buyout when The Sun was reducing staff in 2007. Rob did the same a year later. Both of us transitioned from staff writer to managing editor. Taking in the reflections at a celebration of his life July 2 at the Irvine Nature Center, Rob was the better father, husband, brother, managing editor and teacher. In our 40s, I was the more dogged newspaperman, to the benefit of my employer and detriment of my family.

Reporting on University of Maryland athletics, I saw more of John McNamara than I did Rob. Like me, he answered to Mac. His loves included his alma mater, and writing about the Terps. I never saw the newsroom curmudgeon his friends described, just a gentle soul who prized accuracy, fairness and making deadline. He was not an enemy of the people. I doubt he had any enemies at all.

Plans to attend either a July 10 memorial for Mac in College Park or the memorial service for all five in Annapolis two days later were undone during a week in which our newsroom was, appropriately enough, short-handed. Instead I did what ink-stained wretches do, manned the reporter's desk and cranked out a couple of articles on a suddenly **newsworthy mission to Haiti**. It was the same instinct that web editor George Matysek followed on his day off June 29, when he gave the **Annapolis story a Catholic angle**.

Rob, Mac and I had all been married 33 years when they were murdered. (If you haven't read the **first-person** in the Washington Post from Andrea Chamblee, Mac's widow, do so).

On July 6, after visiting my parents at Crownsville Veterans Cemetery, I paid a visit to 888 Bestgate in Annapolis, and the makeshift memorial outside the office building where the five were murdered. I couldn't locate a prayer card; instead my addition was an old Sun button out of a junk drawer.

The tributes to Rob mention him commending a staffer with an email, or sharing a meal or a drink with a colleague who became a friend. Professional blinders used to keep me from doing the latter, but my recent brush with my own mortality and the deaths of Rob, Mac and the others has brought a reassessment of my priorities.

After paying my respects in Annapolis, I headed to Columbia for lunch with Jeff Zrebiec, one of the guys I mentored at The Sun. It was in his home, which is graced with a three-month-old son. Today, I'll break bread with Liz Lowe, a former staff writer with the Review. Next week's lunch date is with Mike Klingaman, the guy who got me a chance at The Evening Sun in 1981. The subject line in our email exchange reads "Time's a wasting."

Turns out, Rob Hiaasen isn't done teaching.