

Zachary Conn

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A Eulogy for Nathaniel Conn

“He loved people. He seemed to live his whole life believing completely in people. He didn’t want to judge other people, and he didn’t want to condemn anyone. And everyone loved this young man, wherever he went.”

Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote those words about Alyosha, the hero of his novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. But they could have just as easily been written about my brother Nate. He was an extraordinary person. I fear I am not up to task of telling you what you need to know about him. My grief is too raw, his beauty too vast. But I will try. Thank you for being here to listen. My family and I could not get through this without you.

At the very end of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Alyosha addresses a group of boys who have just had to bury one of their number. “You should know,” he tells them, “that there is nothing nobler, better, or more powerful and useful for your future life than some good memory, especially one carried from your childhood, from the time you lived in your parents’ house...Some beautiful and sacred memory preserved from childhood may be the best education. If a person keeps hold of many memories like this in his life, that person is kept safe his whole life.”

Nate and I had the kind of childhood that imparts much safety in later life. We came into this world, and took our first steps within it, swaddled by love from every direction. There is a Hebrew phrase favored even by rather non-traditional Jews like us: “*l’dor vador*.” From generation to generation. In our family, on both sides, doting, committed love of children is passed from generation to generation.

When our paternal grandmother, Ellie Conn, was taken from us far too soon in the Spring of 1996, our dad's brother, David, said that "She always made the extra effort for the people she cared about, but most importantly for her family. A lot of mothers pack lunch for their kids in school, but how many times did Larry or I open our lunchbags to find a corny little handwritten note from her? "No dessert until you eat your whole sandwich!" or "We love you – we're proud of you!"

Ten months later, at the unveiling of Grandma Ellie's headstone, her widowed husband, our late Grandpa Andy, told a story about a recent Tuesday afternoon when he had been taking care of Nate and me. "I was in their kitchen, looking for a piece of paper to take down a phone message – when – what did I discover? A pile of notes, from Mommie Barbara – to her recently-learned-to-read son, Zachary. There they were, the same kind of notes that Zachary's Daddy and Uncle David got from their Mommy in their lunch bags—not that many years ago!"

"Doting" is actually not a strong enough word to describe the care, sensitivity, and enthusiasm with which our parents, Larry and Barbara, raised us. Everything was for "the boys." In preparation for my birth in 1990, our Mom and Dad moved from their chic townhouse in the happenin' Baltimore neighborhood of Federal Hill to a much less cool, but more nurturing, neighborhood in suburban Reisterstown called "The Village of Timbergrove." They were so excited to create a home for their future children that they visited the neighborhood when only one of the eventual 8 or 10 courts had even been built—a preliminary court of model homes. They happily chose the red brick design that would become 8 Chancery Court.

Nate came into the world two years after the move to Reisterstown, and just 20 months after my birth. "THIS is the big brother?" said Grandma Ellie, pointing incredulously at the chaotic, food-throwing, not-yet-even-toddler who bore my name, upon learning our Mom was pregnant

again. When the boy we originally called “Natie” was born six months later, I was not the biggest fan. “Put the baby down in the grass and leave him there,” I instructed Mom. An eternal optimist—and devoted reading teacher—she chose to focus on the precocious complexity of my sentence, predicting that my sentiments toward my attention-stealing new brother would change. She was, of course, right. A couple years into Nate’s life, we were looking at a photo of him from only a few months after his birth. “That’s when I fell in love with him,” I said, pointing at the picture.

I am proud to say that the feeling lasted, and will as long as I breathe. And that it was reciprocated. “You guys were so close and from my view such great friends even though he was your brother,” says Steve Chupnick, our wonderful babysitter for a decade. “Sibling rivalry never came out.” Perhaps an exaggeration—what pair of siblings, especially close in age and of the same gender, never fights? But it’s true that I remember much more amity than friction.

We loved to play just the two of us, and in larger gaggles of kids living on Chancery and the surrounding Village of Timbergrove courts. Still, when the sun was setting, and it was time for dinner, we were happy to come home the first time our Mom called out our names. “Zachary! Natie!” “Your kids are so good!” the other mothers on the court would say. “They come as soon as you call them!” But we knew the difference between afternoons and evenings. There was no better place to be once the sun went down than inside with our parents.

When we got a little older, and spent more time interacting with the larger group of peers at school than running wild with the smaller neighborhood crew, I still felt peace and contentment at home, but began to struggle socially outside it. A few years ago, Saturday Night Live ran a commercial parody in which Fisher Price was advertising a new toy line called “Wells for Sensitive Boys.” “He’ll enjoy running his little fingers around the edge of the well. On days

when he's had too much, he'll lean on it and contemplate his reflection. Some kids like to play. Others just sort of wait for adulthood." I wish Toys 'R Us carried that well in 1997!

Nate was just as bright, just as precocious a student as I. (I favored reading and social studies; he preferred math and science.) But when the school bell rang for recess or dismissal, Nate was not the sort to run his fingers around the edge of a well. He was the life of the party. When we traded the Village of Timbergrove for the better school district and tree-filled beauty of Harmony Woods, Nate quickly won a circle of friends at our new school, Fort Garrison Elementary. Many was the Friday night I spent at home with Nate and his best friend without a sleepover pal of my own. The three of us invented an indoor ball game called "King of the Box." The two younger boys were the players. I did color commentary in my best John Madden impression. It's true: even at the age of ten, my ultimate athletic fantasy was to be a TV announcer. How could I not feel that way, when my brother was Nathaniel Conn, speed demon and deadly striker on the soccer field?

Yes, by the time he started elementary school "Natie" been promoted to "Nathaniel," a name he did not know was on his birth certificate until the first day of kindergarten; this was still a few years before most people would call him "Nate." "WHY didn't you TELL me my NAME was NaTHANiel?" his little voice inquired of our parents with righteous fury when the bus brought him back home later that afternoon. He always had a strong sense of justice, no doubt learned from our father, the crusading public housing lawyer for the state government who switched over to the private sector for the same reason that he and our mother moved out to the suburbs. On at least one occasion, that sense of justice enhanced young Nathaniel's already impressive popularity with his peers. One day, his fourth-grade teacher, Mr. Schmiel, made the mistake of imposing extra homework on the entire class as a penalty for misbehavior by only a minority

thereof. With utter self-confidence and command, Nate lawyered him out of it. Everyone cheered.

Just how good Nate was at being a kid is brought home by a poem he wrote for Sixth Grade English class named after the Alice Cooper song “School’s Out for the Summer”:

running away in delight
 when dismissed from the year
 time to start something incredible
 sleepaway camp and [Rehoboth]
 instead of tests and homework
 watching TV and playing videogames
 the ocean is a wonder
 big and blue, nice and cool
 eating pizza everyday
 duh, that’s better than packed food
 [Camp] Airy is a blast
 all fun instead of all boring
 24/7, even my dreams are more happier and relaxed
 playing rock instead of band tunes
 summer is the season
 of relaxation and fun

For my Bar Mitzvah party, I chose a black tie optional, near-wedding style event where I played guitar with my band Graffiti and my Dad. A well for sensitive boys in the form of a dinner with dancing in the Bonnie View Country Club ballroom. Nate chose a more age-appropriate kids’ party: shorts, t-shirts, games. It was a lovely if mischievous evening, and perhaps the last time Nate felt like he was moving in sync with his age mates.

In eighth grade, Nate started having trouble with the other kids at school. Terrible trouble. Terrible cruelty directed at my poor innocent brother. His moods began to darken. He began seeing a therapist and was diagnosed with Anxiety and Depression.

This was the beginning of the Illness. There is little point in reciting the details of its oncoming. Specific events seemed to incite it, but, if they had not transpired, others would no doubt have done the job.

With the start of the Illness came the birth of the Resistance, with my brother and parents in the lead and me helping to the extent that a callow, self-absorbed tenth-grader could. As Nate moved from middle school to high school, the Illness grew fiercer, but so did the Resistance.

The day Nate passed away, our Mom said, several times, heartbreakingly, “I would have done anything for him.” You and Dad did do anything for him, I tried to tell her then, and will attempt to do now, and for the rest of the time we share. Anything and everything. Even to say you did everything you could is inaccurate. You guys went beyond your capabilities or those of anyone else, stretching your capacities till they snapped and broke, after which you glued them back together as best as you could, and kept on fighting to keep your boy alive.

On June 6, 2007, I wrote in my journal that the school year that was ending—Grade 9 for Nate, 11 for me—would always be defined by my brother’s first brush with death and ensuing first psychiatric hospitalization. “The hard fact of this trumps anything I can do with mere words,” I said. “Like the characters in *The Things They Carried*, Tim O’Brien’s book about Vietnam Soldiers, I am scarred by frequent uncertain terror that also makes me view the world with a certain wide-eyed, smiling surprise, and builds fierce love for the people with whom I fight.”

Teenagers are absorbent beings, their movements and attitudes shaped by the cultures around them. Here the culture molding me was not, as it might otherwise have been, my peers at school, but my family at home. I was a pretentious little fool, but not so far gone that I couldn’t draw upon the example of the remarkable courage of my brother and our parents as they battled an enemy with many names but none that we felt comfortable pronouncing outside the walls of our home and Nate’s many doctors’ offices. Such was the cruel stigma around mental illness in the United States of America just two decades ago.

Sadly, things got worse for Nate before they got better (they did get better at a later date, I assure you—this is no simple story of decline and fall). Until the summer of 2008, we thought he was suffering mainly from Clinical Depression—hopefully Unipolar, perhaps Bipolar. Then, as Nate was moving toward his junior year and I toward college, we learned that he was hearing voices no one else could hear, and entertaining paranoid delusions no logic could dispel. That August, I received a terrifying voicemail from Nate. “Zach,” he said breathlessly. “Did you know that Molly is really Alyssa in disguise?” Molly was my girlfriend at the time, Alyssa a girl in Nate’s class at a different school.

Eventually, he was diagnosed with Schizoaffective Disorder, meaning that his struggles combined a mood disorder with some of the characteristics of Schizophrenia, particularly the set of symptoms that go under the name “psychosis,” including the auditory hallucinations that tormented Nate. Later, I learned that my favorite brother shared his condition with one of my favorite musicians, Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys—another man who created great beauty in the face of great pain, and brought a child’s trusting guilelessness into adult life.

For some time after Nate began visibly suffering from psychotic symptoms, his doctors did not quite know what to make of his condition, and continued treating him more for his mood than for the voices and delusions. These were dark days—the only era in which he did not trust us, and we risked losing him in both senses of the term. Once, I walked out of a dining hall in Chicago and received a phone call from Johns Hopkins Hospital. “Zach,” a very sick boy said to his brother. “You’ve got to help me. I’m being held prisoner in the hospital.”

Is it possible that there is a God, after all? Not one who controls everything, but who helps out now and then, around the edges? In 2011, things began to turn around. Nate started taking the antipsychotic drugs that bring those who suffer from Schizophrenia and

Schizoaffective Disorder into closer contact with what we non-sufferers somewhat arrogantly term “reality.” Like many of the medications we use today for cancer, those we direct at psychosis are crude. Brutal. With devastating side effects. Side effects that, in Nate’s case, likely burdened his heart until it stopped, and he left us at the age of 33. We must, nonetheless, be grateful for the drugs. They did not eliminate the voices—how I wish they had done so!—but they did lower the volume and make room for other thoughts. Also deserving of our gratitude is Spring Lake Ranch, the rehabilitative non-hospital setting in Vermont where Nate adjusted to the new meds, bonded with fellow residents, and helped keep a working farm running. Most of all, it is our parents who deserve the credit for making Nate’s life from 2011 onward so different from when his condition was at its very worst. If you embrace them later at the shiva house, you will be hugging a hero.

Very rare is the sufferer of psychosis who completes college. And yet there is a diploma on the wall showing that Nathaniel Conn earned a Bachelor’s in History from McDaniel College in 2015. Nate spent his freshman year commuting from Harmony Woods to Westminster; the rest, he lived with his peers in the dorms or off campus. I cherish my brother’s good buddy Max Siegel’s words about the energy Nate gave off at McDaniel, beginning when the two met in 2013. “By happenstance,” Max says, Nate was “sitting at the Pub, focused intently on his beloved Ravens playing the Broncos. I didn’t quite understand it then, but I now know why an 18-year-old bashful kid was drawn to sit beside him. Nate had a gentle soul and a calming presence that made people feel safe without needing to say a word.” The same year, I learned that a group of friends had thrown Nate a 21st birthday party at a restaurant off campus. I sobbed.

Nate loved studying history. It was my major, too, but I don’t consider him a copycat—just a fellow appreciator of what is obviously the most intriguing of all forms of inquiry.

Sadly, as I certainly know all too well, an intriguing form of inquiry doesn't necessarily lead to a viable career path. But fortunately, Nate was also fascinated by technology. In later years, he devoted much energy to learning the trade of the IT professional. After much hard work, he passed the difficult CompTIA A+ exam. His smile in the picture where he proudly displays his hard-won certificate would melt glaciers.

Nate's education, broadly defined, also included travel. He fell in love with Israel after spending ten days there on a Birthright Trip, inspiring him to later take a longer organized trip of several months. There, Nate lived in Tel Aviv, traveled throughout the country, ate his weight in shawarma, and played pickup soccer with athletes perhaps a little more aggressive than those he passed the ball to at Patterson Park in Baltimore.

Always there in the foreground or background providing support were our beloved parents. We have traveled some distance away from the stultifying silence around mental health issues of our high school years. But the culture is not set up to help someone who hears voices feel confident he can travel the world and contribute to society. And yet Nate did so, again and again. Without our Mom and Dad's love and care, that would not have been possible.

In the final decade of Nate's life, his blue moods, hallucinations, and delusions waxed and waned. Sometimes he lived away, other times at home. Progress would be followed by regression that would then yield to further progress. In that way, his song was like anyone else's, though played in a very specific key. Often, the cruel voices were mere background noise, overpowered by other, better sounds.

In the good times and the not-so-good, there were certain important constants.

One of these, of course, was soccer. A highlight of Nate's week was always his weekend game of pickup soccer, played for the sake of the game itself, by teams that did not keep score.

My brother never bragged about his performance on the soccer field, but, if pressed for the facts, he would usually admit that he scored a goal or two. Nate's love of soccer also extended to his fandom of Chelsea Football Club, the London-based English Premier League team he fell in love with as a teenager and supported through times of feast and times of famine. I am heartbroken to lose my brother. But since, apparently, I had to, I am glad that it happened within a year of Chelsea's stunning underdog victory over Paris St. Germain in the 2025 FIFA Club World Cup.

While Nate agreed with most of the human race that the superior form of football is the kind actually played primarily with the feet, he was still a Baltimorean to his core. He loved the old Ravens teams led by Ray Lewis and Ed Reed, and the new ones headlined by Lamar Jackson and Kyle Hamilton.

But there was something even more important to Nate, in good times and bad, than the two footballs: giving off the kind, gentle energy his college friend Max Siegel says he put into the world the whole time he knew him. Many was the mental health professional who noted the exceptional sweetness of the young man who soon became their favorite patient. I was not surprised to learn that Nate's longtime psychiatrist wept to my mother on the phone earlier this week. My brother's loved ones grew used to hearing a common refrain when he returned home from the outside world.

“How was pickup soccer?”

“The people were nice.”

“How was your cybersecurity class?”

“The people were nice.”

“How was the DMV?”

“The people were nice.”

Look, there's no way that, wherever Nate went, the people were nice, in the classic sense. I think it's safe to say his perceptions were often dominated by the faith in the goodness of his fellow human beings he shared with Dostoevsky's Alyosha Karamazov. My hope—rather, my expectation—is that Nate's loving affect actually brought out the latent sweetness of otherwise sour souls.

Strangers were hardly the only beneficiaries of my brother's goodwill toward humankind. In 2012, I began dating Nate's future sister-in-law, Amelia Hawkins. Amelia was, understandably, a bit nervous about her first time joining us on the sacred annual Conn Family Rehoboth Beach Trip. But right away Nate put her at ease. Made her feel accepted just as she was.

When I married Amelia in Chicago in 2019, Nate proudly stood beside me under the chuppah as my best man. A couple hours before the ceremony, my brother, my groomsmen, and I were posing for pictures. That's when it hit me. My brother is alive to be the best man at my wedding! Once again, I sobbed.

As my life has taken a more conventional shape than Nate's, I have often been troubled by survivor's guilt. The same sources of DNA. The same upbringing. Why him, and not me?

But there was no bitterness to Nate. He just cheered me on.

Coupled with Nate's faith in people was his ability to find joy in life's simple pleasures even when the bigger picture was cloudy. I have long been aware of this admirable, life-sustaining quality. It was hard to miss. But I gained a new appreciation of Nate's profound access to moments of pleasure and joy amid his suffering when I discovered, a few days ago, that he kept a diary for a period in 2018 and '19, in a notebook bound by a recreation of Van Gough's

“Starry Night.” It’s with some of Nate’s own words from this journal that I would like to close. I don’t think he would mind. He was, after all, as generous as a person could be.

“December 5, 2018. Today was a good day. I am getting ready for my [trip to] Tel Aviv. I ate great Chinese food at Wegman’s. I worked very hard to remove the leaves and soil from the basement grate. Unfortunately, Chelsea lost 2-1 to the Wolves. Now Chelsea has a very slim chance to win the [Premier League]. They can still win the Champion’s Cup and League Cup. Now I’m going to sleep.

“December 12, 2018. I feel horrible. The voices are worse than ever. Maybe tomorrow I’ll be better. I wouldn’t suffer anymore if I killed myself. Suicide is still not the answer. Now [I’m going] to sleep

“December 21, 2018. Today was a good day. I saw the great classic movie It’s a Wonderful Life. I ate delicious Indian food. I had a good run with Frodo. I had nice conversations with my parents. My Dad is going to build a home movie theater. Tomorrow will be a great day. I’m going to hang with Max and Alex. I’m going to watch the Ravens and Chelsea. My family is safe.

“Now I’m going to sleep.”

Thank you.