Bill Zeller, Princeton Grad Student And 'Brilliant' Programmer, Dies In Apparent Suicide [(from the Huffington Post)](#)

Bill Zeller, a Princeton Ph.D candidate and renowned internet programmer, died Wednesday from injuries sustained in a suicide attempt. He was 27.

Zeller stunned the programming community with a 4,000-word suicide note detailing a childhood of physical and sexual abuse, which he had never before disclosed to anyone.

"I've never been able to stop thinking about what happened to me and this hampered my social interactions," Zeller wrote. "... I wondered what it would be like to take to other people without what happened constantly on my mind, and I wondered if other people had similar experiences that they were better able to mask."

According to the *Daily Princetonian*, Zeller posted the note on his website and e-mailed it to friends before taking his own life. The note in full can be seen below.

Zeller was a programming whiz kid, responsible for creating applications such as Graph Your Inbox, which visualizes Gmail use over time, and myTunes, which enables users to download others' iTunes music. Zeller made the latter program while an undergraduate at Trinity College.

Bill Zeller

Zeller's death has prompted an outpouring of grief on the internet, from those who knew him and those who didn't.

"I'd first encountered Bill online years ago when he made a blog posting app, and then re-meeting him at a Princeton event last year, he'd begun by saying, 'You probably don't remember...,'" One user wrote on MetaFilter. "But we immediately reconnected about the cool project he'd done back then. More amazingly, he was doing super, super brilliant work at Princeton, which I found really inspiring and was so excited to see how far this young guy had come from such promising roots."

BILL'S NOTE

I have the urge to declare my sanity and justify my actions, but I assume I'll never be able to convince anyone that this was the right decision. Maybe it's true that anyone who does this is insane by definition, but I can at least explain my reasoning. I considered not writing any of this because of how personal it is, but I like tying up loose ends and don't want people to wonder why I did this. Since I've never spoken to anyone about what happened to me, people would likely draw the wrong conclusions.

My first memories as a child are of being raped, repeatedly. This has affected every aspect of my life. This darkness, which is the only way I can describe it, has followed me like a fog, but at times intensified and overwhelmed me, usually triggered by a distinct situation. In kindergarten I couldn't use the bathroom and would stand petrified whenever I needed to, which started a trend of awkward and unexplained social behavior. The damage that was done to my body still prevents me from using the bathroom normally, but now it's less of a physical impediment than a daily reminder of what was done to me.

This darkness followed me as I grew up. I remember spending hours playing with Legos, having my world consist of me and a box of cold, plastic blocks. Just waiting for everything to end. It's the same thing I do now, but instead of Legos it's surfing the web or reading or listening to a baseball game. Most of my life has been spent feeling dead inside, waiting for my body to catch up.

At times growing up I would feel inconsolable rage, but I never connected this to what happened until puberty. I was able to keep the darkness at bay for a few hours at a time by doing things that required intense concentration, but it would always come back. Programming appealed to me for this reason. I was never particularly fond of computers or mathematically inclined, but the temporary peace it would provide was like a drug. But the darkness always returned and built up something like a tolerance, because programming has become less and less of a refuge.

The darkness is with me nearly every time I wake up. I feel like a grime is covering me. I feel like I'm trapped in a contaminated body that no amount of washing will clean. Whenever I think about what happened I feel manic and itchy and can't concentrate on anything else. It manifests itself in hours of eating or staying up for days at a time or sleeping for sixteen hours straight or week long programming binges or constantly going to the gym. I'm exhausted from feeling like this every hour of every day.

Three to four nights a week I have nightmares about what happened. It makes me avoid sleep and con-

stantly tired, because sleeping with what feels like hours of nightmares is not restful. I wake up sweaty and furious. I'm reminded every morning of what was done to me and the control it has over my life.

I've never been able to stop thinking about what happened to me and this hampered my social interactions. I would be angry and lost in thought and then be interrupted by someone saying "Hi" or making small talk, unable to understand why I seemed cold and distant. I walked around, viewing the outside world from a distant portal behind my eyes, unable to perform normal human niceties. I wondered what it would be like to take to other people without what happened constantly on my mind, and I wondered if other people had similar experiences that they were better able to mask.

Alcohol was also something that let me escape the darkness. It would always find me later, though, and it was always angry that I managed to escape and it made me pay. Many of the irresponsible things I did were the result of the darkness. Obviously I'm responsible for every decision and action, including this one, but there are reasons why things happen the way they do.

Alcohol and other drugs provided a way to ignore the realities of my situation. It was easy to spend the night drinking and forget that I had no future to look forward to. I never liked what alcohol did to me, but it was better than facing my existence honestly. I haven't touched alcohol or any other drug in over seven months (and no drugs or alcohol will be involved when I do this) and this has forced me to evaluate my life in an honest and clear way. There's no future here. The darkness will always be with me.

I used to think if I solved some problem or achieved some goal, maybe he would leave. It was comforting to identify tangible issues as the source of my problems instead of something that I'll never be able to change. I thought that if I got into to a good college, or a good grad school, or lost weight, or went to the gym nearly every day for a year, or created programs that millions of people used, or spent a summer or California or New York or published papers that I was proud of, then maybe I would feel some peace and not be constantly haunted and unhappy. But nothing I did made a dent in how depressed I was on a daily basis and nothing was in any way fulfilling. I'm not sure why I ever thought that would change anything.

I didn't realize how deep a hold he had on me and my life until my first relationship. I stupidly assumed that no matter how the darkness affected me personally, my romantic relationships would somehow be separated and protected. Growing up I viewed my future relationships as a possible escape from this thing that haunts me every day, but I began to realize how entangled it was with every aspect of my life and how it is never going to release me. Instead of being an escape, relationships and romantic contact with other people only intensified everything about him that I couldn't stand. I will never be able to have a relationship in which he is not the focus, affecting every aspect of my romantic interactions.

Relationships always started out fine and I'd be able to ignore him for a few weeks. But as we got closer emotionally the darkness would return and every night it'd be me, her and the darkness in a black and gruesome threesome. He would surround me and penetrate me and the more we did the more intense it became. It made me hate being touched, because as long as we were separated I could view her like an outsider viewing something good and kind and untainted. Once we touched, the darkness would envelope her too and take her over and the evil inside me would surround her. I always felt like I was infecting anyone I was with.

Relationships didn't work. No one I dated was the right match, and I thought that maybe if I found the right person it would overwhelm him. Part of me knew that finding the right person wouldn't help, so I became interested in girls who obviously had no interest in me. For a while I thought I was gay. I convinced myself that it wasn't the darkness at all, but rather my orientation, because this would give me control over why things didn't feel "right". The fact that the darkness affected sexual matters most

intensely made this idea make some sense and I convinced myself of this for a number of years, starting in college after my first relationship ended. I told people I was gay (at Trinity, not at Princeton), even though I wasn't attracted to men and kept finding myself interested in girls. Because if being gay wasn't the answer, then what was? People thought I was avoiding my orientation, but I was actually avoiding the truth, which is that while I'm straight, I will never be content with anyone. I know now that the darkness will never leave.

Last spring I met someone who was unlike anyone else I'd ever met. Someone who showed me just how well two people could get along and how much I could care about another human being. Someone I know I could be with and love for the rest of my life, if I weren't so fucked up. Amazingly, she liked me. She liked the shell of the man the darkness had left behind. But it didn't matter because I couldn't be alone with her. It was never just the two of us, it was always the three of us: her, me and the darkness. The closer we got, the more intensely I'd feel the darkness, like some evil mirror of my emotions. All the closeness we had and I loved was complemented by agony that I couldn't stand, from him. I realized that I would never be able to give her, or anyone, all of me or only me. She could never have me without the darkness and evil inside me. I could never have just her, without the darkness being a part of all of our interactions. I will never be able to be at peace or content or in a healthy relationship. I realized the futility of the romantic part of my life. If I had never met her, I would have realized this as soon as I met someone else who I meshed similarly well with. It's likely that things wouldn't have worked out with her and we would have broken up (with our relationship ending, like the majority of relationships do) even if I didn't have this problem, since we only dated for a short time. But I will face exactly the same problems with the darkness with anyone else. Despite my hopes, love and compatibility is not enough. Nothing is enough. There's no way I can fix this or even push the darkness down far enough to make a relationship or any type of intimacy feasible.

So I watched as things fell apart between us. I had put an explicit time limit on our relationship, since I knew it couldn't last because of the darkness and didn't want to hold her back, and this caused a variety of problems. She was put in an unnatural situation that she never should have been a part of. It must have been very hard for her, not knowing what was actually going on with me, but this is not something I've ever been able to talk about with anyone. Losing her was very hard for me as well. Not because of her (I got over our relationship relatively quickly), but because of the realization that I would never have another relationship and because it signified the last true, exclusive personal connection I could ever have. This wasn't apparent to other people, because I could never talk about the real reasons for my sadness. I was very sad in the summer and fall, but it was not because of her, it was because I will never escape the darkness with anyone. She was so loving and kind to me and gave me everything I could have asked for under the circumstances. I'll never forget how much happiness she brought me in those briefs moments when I could ignore the darkness. I had originally planned to kill myself last winter but never got around to it. (Parts of this letter were written over a year ago, other parts days before doing this.) It was wrong of me to involve myself in her life if this were a possibility and I should have just left her alone, even though we only dated for a few months and things ended a long time ago. She's just one more person in a long list of people I've hurt.

I could spend pages talking about the other relationships I've had that were ruined because of my problems and my confusion related to the darkness. I've hurt so many great people because of who I am and my inability to experience what needs to be experienced. All I can say is that I tried to be honest with people about what I thought was true.

I've spent my life hurting people. Today will be the last time.

I've told different people a lot of things, but I've never told anyone about what happened to me, ever, for obvious reasons. It took me a while to realize that no matter how close you are to someone or how much they claim to love you, people simply cannot keep secrets. I learned this a few years ago when I thought I was gay and told people. The more harmful the secret, the juicier the gossip and the more likely you are to be betrayed. People don't care about their word or what they've promised, they just do whatever the fuck they want and justify it later. It feels incredibly lonely to realize you can never share something with someone and have it be between just the two of you. I don't blame anyone in particular, I guess it's just how people are. Even if I felt like this is something I could have shared, I have no interest in being part of a friendship or relationship where the other person views me as the damaged and contaminated person that I am. So even if I were able to trust someone, I probably would not have told them about what happened to me. At this point I simply don't care who knows.

I feel an evil inside me. An evil that makes me want to end life. I need to stop this. I need to make sure I don't kill someone, which is not something that can be easily undone. I don't know if this is related to what happened to me or something different. I recognize the irony of killing myself to prevent myself from killing someone else, but this decision should indicate what I'm capable of.

So I've realized I will never escape the darkness or misery associated with it and I have a responsibility to stop myself from physically harming others.

I'm just a broken, miserable shell of a human being. Being molested has defined me as a person and shaped me as a human being and it has made me the monster I am and there's nothing I can do to escape it. I don't know any other existence. I don't know what life feels like where I'm apart from any of this. I actively despise the person I am. I just feel fundamentally broken, almost non-human. I feel like an animal that woke up one day in a human body, trying to make sense of a foreign world, living among creatures it doesn't understand and can't connect with.

I have accepted that the darkness will never allow me to be in a relationship. I will never go to sleep with someone in my arms, feeling the comfort of their hands around me. I will never know what uncontaminated intimacy is like. I will never have an exclusive bond with someone, someone who can be the recipient of all the love I have to give. I will never have children, and I wanted to be a father so badly. I think I would have made a good dad. And even if I had fought through the darkness and married and had children all while being unable to feel intimacy, I could have never done that if suicide were a possibility. I did try to minimize pain, although I know that this decision will hurt many of you. If this hurts you, I hope that you can at least forget about me quickly.

There's no point in identifying who molested me, so I'm just going to leave it at that. I doubt the word of a dead guy with no evidence about something that happened over twenty years ago would have much sway.

You may wonder why I didn't just talk to a professional about this. I've seen a number of doctors since I was a teenager to talk about other issues and I'm positive that another doctor would not have helped. I was never given one piece of actionable advice, ever. More than a few spent a large part of the session reading their notes to remember who I was. And I have no interest in talking about being raped as a child, both because I know it wouldn't help and because I have no confidence it would remain secret. I know the legal and practical limits of doctor/patient confidentiality, growing up in a house where we'd hear stories about the various mental illnesses of famous people, stories that were passed down through generations. All it takes is one doctor who thinks my story is interesting enough to share or a doctor who thinks it's her right or responsibility to contact the authorities and have me identify the molester (justifying her decision by telling herself that someone else might be in danger). All it takes is a single doctor who violates my trust, just like the "friends" who I told I was gay did, and everything would be made public and I'd be forced to live in a world where people would know how fucked up I am. And yes, I realize this indicates that I have severe trust issues, but they're based on a large number of experiences with people who have shown a profound disrespect for their word and the privacy of others.

People say suicide is selfish. I think it's selfish to ask people to continue living painful and miserable lives, just so you possibly won't feel sad for a week or two. Suicide may be a permanent solution to a temporary problem, but it's also a permanent solution to a ~23 year-old problem that grows more intense and overwhelming every day.

Some people are just dealt bad hands in this life. I know many people have it worse than I do, and maybe I'm just not a strong person, but I really did try to deal with this. I've tried to deal with this every day for the last 23 years and I just can't fucking take it anymore.

I often wonder what life must be like for other people. People who can feel the love from others and give it back unadulterated, people who can experience sex as an intimate and joyous experience, people who can experience the colors and happenings of this world without constant misery. I wonder who I'd be if things had been different or if I were a stronger person. It sounds pretty great.

I'm prepared for death. I'm prepared for the pain and I am ready to no longer exist. Thanks to the

strictness of New Jersey gun laws this will probably be much more painful than it needs to be, but what can you do. My only fear at this point is messing something up and surviving.

I'd also like to address my family, if you can call them that. I despise everything they stand for and I truly hate them, in a non-emotional, dispassionate and what I believe is a healthy way. The world will be a better place when they're dead--one with less hatred and intolerance.

If you're unfamiliar with the situation, my parents are fundamentalist Christians who kicked me out of their house and cut me off financially when I was 19 because I refused to attend seven hours of church a week.
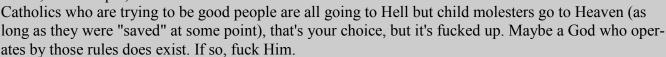
They live in a black and white reality they've constructed for themselves. They partition the world into good and evil and survive by hating everything they fear or misunderstand and calling it love. They don't understand that good and decent people exist all around us, "saved" or not, and that evil and cruel people occupy a large percentage of their church. They take advantage of people looking for hope by teaching them to practice the same hatred they practice.

A random example:

"I am personally convinced that if a Muslim truly believes and obeys the Koran, he will be a terrorist." - George Zeller, August 24, 2010.

If you choose to follow a religion where, for example, devout Catholics who are trying to be good people are all going to Hell but child molesters go to Heaven (as long as they were "saved" at some point), that's your choice, but it's fucked up. Maybe a God who operates by those rules does exist. If so, fuck Him.

Their church was always more important than the members of their family and they happily sacrificed whatever necessary in order to satisfy their contrived beliefs about who they should be.

I grew up in a house where love was proxied through a God I could never believe in. A house where the love of music with any sort of a beat was literally beaten out of me. A house full of hatred and intolerance, run by two people who were experts at appearing kind and warm when others were around. Parents who tell an eight year old that his grandmother is going to Hell because she's Catholic. Parents who claim not to be racist but then talk about the horrors of miscegenation. I could list hundreds of other examples, but it's tiring.

Since being kicked out, I've interacted with them in relatively normal ways. I talk to them on the phone like nothing happened. I'm not sure why. Maybe because I like pretending I have a family. Maybe I like having people I can talk to about what's been going on in my life. Whatever the reason, it's not real and it feels like a sham. I should have never allowed this reconnection to happen.

I wrote the above a while ago, and I do feel like that much of the time. At other times, though, I feel less hateful. I know my parents honestly believe the crap they believe in. I know that my mom, at least, loved me very much and tried her best. One reason I put this off for so long is because I know how much pain it will cause her. She has been sad since she found out I wasn't "saved", since she believes I'm going to Hell, which is not a sadness for which I am responsible. That was never going to change, and presumably she believes the state of my physical body is much less important than the state of my soul. Still, I cannot intellectually justify this decision, knowing how much it will hurt her. Maybe my ability to take my own life, knowing how much pain it will cause, shows that I am a monster who doesn't deserve to live. All I know is that I can't deal with this pain any longer and I'm am truly sorry I couldn't wait until my family and everyone I knew died so this could be done without hurting anyone. For years I've wished that I'd be hit by a bus or die while saving a baby from drowning so my death might be more acceptable, but I was never so lucky.

To those of you who have shown me love, thank you for putting up with all my shittiness and moodiness and arbitrariness. I was never the person I wanted to be. Maybe without the darkness I would have been a better person, maybe not. I did try to be a good person, but I realize I never got very far.

I'm sorry for the pain this causes. I really do wish I had another option. I hope this letter explains why I needed to do this. If you can't understand this decision, I hope you can at least forgive me.

Bill Zeller

Please save this letter and repost it if gets deleted. I don't want people to wonder why I did this. I disseminated it more widely than I might have otherwise because I'm worried that my family might try to restrict access to it. I don't mind if this letter is made public. In fact, I'd prefer it be made public to people being unable to read it and drawing their own conclusions.

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