



*The
long journey
of*
**Nathan
Phelps**
by **Marcello Di Cintio**

Decades after he fled his childhood home and church, the son of America's most controversial preacher has found a life—if not all the answers—in Calgary.

God hates fags. According to the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, God also hates America, Canada, and Islam. God hates Barack Obama—who, as it turns out, is the Antichrist. He hates Paul McCartney and Justin Timberlake (“The fags love him, and he them. His filth justifies their filth,” says the WBC). But God hates fags most of all.

God also hates Nathan Phelps. At least that is what Nate thought on his 18th birthday in 1976, back when he still believed that God exists. At the stroke of midnight—the precise moment he legally became an adult and couldn’t be dragged back—Nate stepped out the door of his family’s Topeka compound and left the Westboro Baptist Church behind. Nate loaded a few belongings into the old Rambler he’d bought secretly for \$350 and drove away. “I left there believing with the same certainty that the sun is going to rise in the east that around the year 2000 Christ would come and I was going to hell,” Nate said. “I knew I would suffer for an eternity.”

Nate had already suffered. For the first 18 years of his life, Nate cowered under the tyranny of his father, Fred Phelps, the extremist Calvinist preacher and disbarred lawyer who founded Westboro Baptist Church in 1955. The WBC’s

congregation consisted, then as now, almost entirely of the Phelps extended family. Each day the family gathered in the chapel to hear the Pastor give sermons filled with Old Testament fire. Fred Phelps' God was no loving shepherd. He was a vengeful and demanding lord. So, too, was the Pastor himself, and he ruled over his family with cruelty and violence. Phelps countered even the smallest transgressions or failings of his wife and children with obscenity-laden rage. The Pastor, a former Golden Gloves boxer, never "spared the rod." Nate remembers being bent over a church pew while his father punched and spat on him. He regularly beat Nate and his siblings with a pickaxe handle, and had leather straps custom-made for whippings.

I first met Nate Phelps a couple months after his father's death last March. Knowing what I did about the elder Phelps, I wasn't sure if I should offer Nate my condolences. How do you grieve for a man like Fred Phelps? Nate told me he could only feel the most superficial sadness for his death. "Instead, I mourn the man he could have been," Nate said. A man with Fred Phelps' obvious intelligence, sharp focus and relentless drive might have achieved great things had he not devoted those talents to hate.

Fred Phelps did nothing in half measures. During law school, the Pastor popped enough amphetamines and barbiturates to end up in the back of an ambulance. The incident terrified him and inspired a family fitness and nutrition regimen that bordered on madness. Family dinners consisted of steamed cabbage, rose hip and bone-meal tablets, and little piles of brewer's yeast. After seeing an ad for a Jack LaLanne exercise system on a Wheaties cereal box, the elder Phelps abruptly put everyone on a running program. Nate remembers the first family run: "The old man goes out and gets all his running gear. He packs us all in the car and we go to the

local high school. He gets halfway around the track and almost passes out." Despite the unimpressive beginning, the forced exercise regime lasted nearly a decade. The entire family, even Nate's youngest siblings, ran five to 10 miles a day and competed in road races. "He had 10-year-old kids out running marathons," Nate said.

Nate knew from an early age he could not be the son his father wanted him to be. "If you weren't aggressive like he was in challenging the 'evils' out there, then you could get beat for that," Nate said. "But I just couldn't do it. It wasn't in me to be that way." Nate felt humiliated

Nathan Phelps "souvenirs" from rallies and political campaigns reflect a more inclusive philosophy. So, too, does the news coverage (facing page).



by this softness, by the absence of his father's pugilistic fury, and knew the beatings were not going to stop. He knew, too, that his lack of conviction meant he was not among God's chosen. Nate was going to hell anyway. He might as well flee.

Nate spent his first nights of freedom sleeping in a gas station rest room. Then he moved in with his older brother, Mark, who had fled the church a few years earlier. Nate and Mark worked together in print shops in St. Louis and Kansas City before the brothers had a falling out. "I cut my ties with Mark in a destructive way," Nate said. Feeling isolated and alone in Kansas City, Nate made contact with his sisters Shirley and Maggie in Topeka. They told him that their father had mellowed and wasn't violent anymore. They urged him to come back and Nate returned.

The reunion was short-lived. "Within a month I realized it was a mistake," Nate said. Fred Phelps expected his prodigal son to work for free in his brother's law office in return for room and board with the family. He also expected Nate to enrol in law school himself, an education the family would pay for. Nate wasn't interested. When he found work outside the family, they told him to leave. They wouldn't tolerate his independence. This time Nate would not come back, and he would never see his father again.

Nate moved into an apartment above a Volkswagen repair shop with a couple of friends. They partied constantly. "Our couch was a stack of Styrofoam covered by a blanket," Nate remembers. He worked at Wendy's and lived off Frosties and whatever discards he could take from the kitchen. He spent his money on beer and drugs.

Nate said that he didn't smoke much weed—it made him sleepy—and only dropped acid a few times, but he "really, really liked speed."

Soon, though, Nate had had enough. He recalls sitting in his 1971 Javelin one night as a party raged in the upstairs apartment. "I was playing 'A Man I'll Never Be' by Boston over and over in the car, crying," he said. "That seems like the point where I realized I had to change directions."

Nate found another job as a live-in repairman in an apartment complex and started to pull away from the drugs and alcohol. Eventually he reconciled with Mark and moved to California to work with him in a print shop he'd opened a month earlier. Nate started dating a single-mother named Tammi, whom he married in 1986. Things were going well. Although he had every reason, finally, to be happy, Nate struggled to shake the certainty that he was condemned

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by God. He'd been raised to believe that questioning one's faith is a sinful act. "Every time you start engaging your analytical mind, there is a voice in your head that says the devil is working in you," he said. Nate grew suspicious of his own doubts, and feared that something dark and insidious motivated his skepticism. "One of the ways you knew you weren't right with the Lord was if you starting asking questions."

Nate sought professional help. He spent over a year with a counsellor who had a theology degree, to deal "with the religious side of things." Then he began another round of counselling with a different therapist, who diagnosed Nate with post traumatic stress disorder. At the therapist's insistence, Nate spent two weeks in a California psych ward under the guise of getting focused. "I came away from that basically thinking it was a scam," Nate said, but he accepts without question his PTSD diagnosis. To this day, Nate does not deal well with strong expressions of anger. He shakes in the presence of rage, even if the anger is not directed at him. When he is the target, Nate either shuts down or, on rare occasions, goes "ballistic." "Afterwards I have a very strong guilty reaction because I hate being like my dad."

Nate's faith began to crack in the 1990s. First, Nate became a father. He'd been taught to believe that children are a gift from God—a blessing that he, a man destined for hell, surely didn't deserve. He suspected God planned to kill his child to punish him. This didn't happen. In fact, he and Tammi had two more children. Secondly, the year 2000 came and went without the promised Apocalypse. Being stood up by the Messiah further weakened Nate's faith. Then came the attacks of Sept. 11. Nate watched the towers smoulder and fall on television with Tammi's mother, a woman he had never before quarrelled with. In her anxiety over the tragedy, she blurted out "We are not right with God. We've got to get right with God." Nate responded, "Are you out of your f---ing mind? You just saw four men fly planes into buildings because they felt they were right with God."

The terrors of 9/11 led to a shift in Nate's philosophy. Not only did he reject the pronouncements of his father's hateful Christianity, he began to reject the idea of religion altogether. Nate saw the culpability of faith, of all faiths, in the actions of the terrorists and others who inflict pain in the name of God. Most of the world's population believe in some kind of spirituality, Nate said, and the vast majority of them do no

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harm. But a tiny minority—those like the al-Qaeda hijackers, or his own father—commit heinous acts that they justify with religion. "Faith has that power because 99 percent of people say that faith is a legitimate arbiter of truth," Nate said.

According to Nate, even my Catholic grandmother, whose Sunday morning mythology I don't share but hardly begrudge, abets those who would use faith to do evil. Her rituals grant tacit approval to extremists. "Your grandmother, even though she's never done any harm as a Catholic, puts forward the notion that we can know something without discovering the truth of it. That we can just know it," he said. The men who flew the airliners into the World Trade Centre believed, without evidence, that they would be rewarded for their actions by God. "The broad use of faith is benign. But the broad acceptance of faith as a way to discover truth is dangerous."

I asked Phelps if he believed my grandmother was foolish. "That's a hard one," he said. He paused before answering, and in his pause I sensed a caution born of kindness. Unlike contemporary celebrity atheists like Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens who go after religious believers like they were piñatas, Phelps did not want to insult my grandmother. Eventually, though, he said, "Yes. She is foolish. But I don't necessarily blame her for her foolishness because it is a collective foolishness. We are blinded by that."

Just as the Sept. 11 attacks shifted Nate's personal philosophy, the resulting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq inspired the Westboro Baptist Church to bring their hateful ministry to the masses. The WBC had attracted attention in Kansas since the early 1990s, when the family started protesting alleged homosexual activity in Topeka's Gage Park. But the WBC earned global fame, and nearly unanimous scorn, when it started picketing the military funerals of American service men and women killed overseas. Dead soldiers, the WBC claimed, were God's punishment for America's accommodation of homosexuality. WBC members, adults and children alike, set up near churches and cemeteries where they held signs proclaiming "Thank God for Dead Soldiers" and "God Blew up the Troops."

The media attention emboldened the WBC, which expanded its scope.



Now the church protests the funerals of AIDS victims and celebrities. They picket courthouses, cultural events, rock concerts and any individual or institution they consider a “fag enabler.” The WBC also maintains an active presence online. Perusing WBC’s various websites—GodHatesFags.com, GodHatesTheWorld.com, BeastObama.com, Priests-RapeBoys.com, among others—is not an experience I’d recommend. At first, the over-the-top absurdity of WBC’s online contributions read as parody. It is hard not to laugh out loud at their page-long screeds against Katy Perry and the Beatles, say, or their hateful rewrites of popular songs. Before long, though, the sincerity of their hatred becomes hard to bear. You don’t want to spend too much time with the Phelps family.

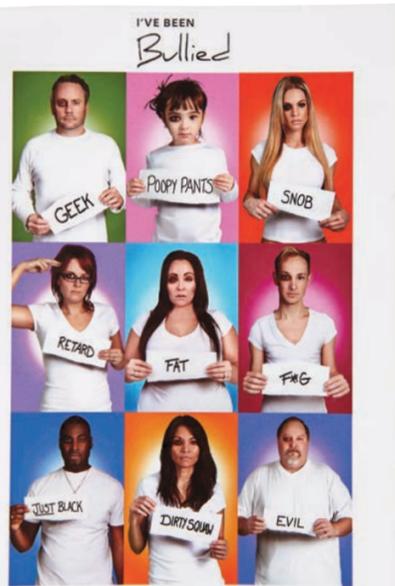
As it turns out, some Phelps family members agree. Several of Nate’s relatives, including four of his siblings, have left the church. Most now follow some sort of mainstream Christian faith and lead quiet, private lives. Nate, though, felt compelled to go public. He started to tell his story at universities and lecture halls across North America, and has become a sought-after presenter on humanism, skepticism and gay rights. Last June, he gave a TED talk called “Faith, Hope and Love...” at TEDxYYC in Calgary, and he is working on a memoir titled *Not My Father’s Son*. Nate believes speaking out can help make amends for some of the emotional trauma his family has caused over the years, especially to the LGBT community.

The speaking engagements also allow Nate to dispel some of the misconceptions people harbour about the WBC. The church’s views may be extreme, but the WBC is not a cult. Fred Phelps is no David Koresh. Nate wants people to understand that his father’s sermons, even his most vile diatribes, stayed true to Biblical teaching. “He didn’t pull anything out of thin air,” Nate said. Christians who maintain that “God is Love” simply don’t know their Scripture. “There are passages in the Bible that specifically say that God hates. If you don’t like that, fine. If you want to ignore it in the creation of your idea of God, fine. But we didn’t make this s--t up. It’s there in the Bible.” And while contemporary believers might consider Pastor Phelps’ version of Christianity a distortion, the basic core of his dogma was once considered mainstream. “It was what everybody believed,” Nate said. “If my father was born 250 years ago, people would have been quoting his sermons.”

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— Phelps, on his father



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While Nate’s activism is a reaction to his father’s hateful faith, he remains adamant that his atheism is not. Phelps bristles at the suggestion that he wouldn’t have abandoned God had he grown up with “regular” Christian religion rather than with the harsh Calvinism of the WBC. “Probably my closest friend in the world said to me more than once, ‘If you had just been exposed to God in the way that God really is, you would not have any issue with Christianity.’” The idea offends Nate. He stopped believing in God after years of analytical thought, therapy, and often painful internal debate. It was no knee-jerk defiance. To consider Nate’s faithlessness a blunt reaction to his tyrannical upbringing dismisses his long journey.

That journey eventually led Nate to Canada. Two years after he and Tammi separated in 2005, Nate met a Canadian woman named Angela online and moved to Cranbrook to be with her. “When I came up here I was a naïve son of a gun,” he said. He thought his California licence plate would grant him some cachet with British Columbians. He quickly realized that Cranbrook was in the heart of softwood lumber country and the industry was in the midst of a bitter trade dispute with the U.S. at the time. “I couldn’t get rid of that plate fast enough,” he laughs.

Nate and Angela visited Calgary in 2010 when the local chapter of the Centre for Inquiry—an educational charity devoted to rational, secular and humanistic thinking—invited him to speak. Mike Gray held the executive director position of CFI at the time. He remembers Nate’s presentation about surviving and escaping his family’s church. “Nate stands up in front of the crowd and comes across as unbelievably genuine. Unbelievably kind and caring. And he is just relaying his life story. After the speech, we all just stood there. People didn’t know what to do.” Later, when Gray mentioned that he was stepping down as CFI’s director, Nate said he’d take the job. He and Angela moved to Calgary.

Nate held the director’s position for four years. Gray admired the passion and humility he brought to the job. Nate’s devotion to LGBT issues in particular impressed Gray. “Nate is well aware of the sins of his father. And aware of the harm his father caused in the gay community,” Gray said. Nate wanted to make amends in whatever way he could. Gray owned a Calgary gay bar called Club Sapiens. When he was short-staffed, Nate would volunteer to come in

and help out as a doorman. Nate has a bouncer’s build—he is 6-4 and weighs around 250 pounds—but lacks the typically fierce doorman’s demeanour. “Nate is almost like a cross between the Pillsbury Doughboy and Santa Claus,” Gray said. “He has this chuckle. All my other bouncers were sitting there with a grimace on their faces. Nate just sits there with his laugh having a great time. Everything was amusing to him. Everything made him smile. It was great to have him around.”

And Nate plans to stay around. He currently holds permanent residency status in Canada and hopes to apply for citizenship soon. He even married a Calgarian, Cindi, whom he met after he and Angela split a few years ago. Nate enjoys living among Calgary’s various ethnicities, a phenomenon he never experienced in Kansas, Orange County, Cranbrook or anywhere else he’s lived. Nate doesn’t feel that religion is as dangerous in Canada as it is in the United States where faith is embedded in politics. Still, Stephen Harper’s religious convictions trouble him. He is suspicious, for example, of the teachings of the church Harper attends and the Office of Religious Freedoms Harper opened last year. “Why the f--k did he do that? What is the reading between the lines? We need freedom *from* religion.”

I wanted to connect with the Phelps family in Topeka to ask them about Nate. This entailed exchanging direct messages with a WBC Twitter account set up solely for media requests. After a couple of attempts I managed to connect with Fred Jr., Nate’s elder brother, who agreed to consider a “maximum of five questions” via email. In the end, Fred Jr. didn’t say much. When I asked him what Nate was like as a child, he said only that Nate was “constantly in trouble.” He did not have any specific recollection of his family’s reaction to Nate’s leaving in 1976, but said that he “can’t imagine many were surprised.” His family thinks “very little” about Nate’s speaking publicly about his life at WBC, and considers his gay-rights activism “foolish.” When I asked him if he ever misses Nate and whether or not any fraternal bonds remain, he wrote “no; no; no.”

Fred Jr. ended his email with two Bible quotes. The meaning of the first, from the Book of John, was clear enough: “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: But they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.” The second quote, from Proverbs, confused me: “Go from the presence of a foolish man, when thou perceivest not in him the lips of knowledge.” Since it was Nate who left the church, I didn’t understand who Fred Jr. was calling the “foolish man.” Certainly not his late father and namesake Pastor Phelps. Then I realized Fred Jr. was probably referring to me. I suspect the Proverbs line is his standard sign-off to daft and hellbound journalists.

Last week, members of the WBC travelled to New York City. They

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after faith departs. Nate concedes, too, that he is occasionally struck by the positive power of religion. He remembers coverage of Elizabeth Smart’s abduction and rescue in Utah. Smart’s captors held her for over a year and she endured unimaginable horrors. Afterwards, Smart told an interviewer that her Mormon faith allowed her to survive the ordeal. Nate and Angela watched the interview on television. He turned and asked her, “How can I speak out against faith in the face of this?”

Nate also admitted, to my surprise, that he would like to find God. “I’ve always searched for God,” he said. “My position isn’t a reaction to my father’s theology like many assert. It is a thoughtful conclusion based on evidence, or the lack of evidence. But throughout that search, I have always gravitated toward claims of proof. Emotionally, I would love to discover god. I let go of my fear of the God of my father long ago, but that doesn’t mean I’m not intrigued by the idea. I just require evidence.”



demonstrated in front of the September 11th anniversary commemoration with Day-Glo signs reading, among other things, “Thank God 4 9/11.” Nate, instead, marked the date on his Facebook page by posting: “September 11, a day to recommit to rationality. Of all the causes of violence, ideology is the most deadly, turning ordinary men into monsters.” Nate’s position on religion will trouble many believers, no doubt. There are those who will find his rejection of faith as offensive as the WBC’s perversion of it. Nate is not sympathetic. “If we’re going to be successful as a species long term, faith is going to have to go away.”

And yet, I don’t quite buy it when Nate claims to be a “firebrand atheist.” He is too gentle to be a firebrand. I don’t doubt his atheism, of course, but despite his clear and genuine antagonism towards religion, Nate occasionally reveals a softness. He appreciates the esthetic beauty of religious ritual, for example, and never doubts the sincerity of the devout. “After all, I believed my father was honest,” he said. He catches himself humming old hymns, and Bible verses reflexively pop into his head. Religion is a kind of tattoo that lingers long after faith departs. Nate concedes, too, that he is occasionally struck by the positive power of religion. He remembers coverage of Elizabeth Smart’s abduction and rescue in Utah. Smart’s captors held her for over a year and she endured unimaginable horrors. Afterwards, Smart told an interviewer that her Mormon faith allowed her to survive the ordeal. Nate and Angela watched the interview on television. He turned and asked her, “How can I speak out against faith in the face of this?”