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## Bill King\*

We're here to celebrate Bill Conger's life, but I've been crying for nearly a week now and if I'm not able to suspend my grief as well as I hope to, bear with me.

Looking around this beautiful chapel, this very crowded hall, it strikes me that I see something I've never seen at a memorial service. When we remember guys Bill Conger's age, it's usually a room full of people in their sixties. In this crowd of people who love Bill Conger I see students, I see young lawyers and old ones, friends from every demographic out there. How typical of what I would have expected at a gathering to remember our very atypical friend Bill Conger.

Bill has said that the years at OCU were the happiest of his life. And why not? He was teaching—he was a natural teacher. He was working with young people—perfect for a guy who was a young person even when his body wasn't. He was learning and always reading, and what better place than a great university to keep learning?

But most of you here today have known Bill as an adult. You've known the mature Bill: feared litigator, President of the State Bar Association, revered professor. You've no doubt seen the playful side of Bill. It was an inescapable part of him, healthy or not, good times and not so good. That's the part Sherry asked me to talk about: the funny—hilariously funny when he took off on a story—upbeat guy I've known for over fifty years. In fact, when Sherry asked me to say a few words this afternoon, she knew well that the Bill I knew (and the Bill that both of us reverted to instantly every time we've been together since high school) was totally the playful Bill.

I told Sherry that for me to tell any story that Bill Conger ever told would be sacrilege; Bill was a raconteur for the ages. I'm not. I was the audience, and an appreciative one. Conger liked to say that only my wife Robin was a "cheaper laugh" than I was. I know better. Only for Conger were we cheap laughs.

Here's what else I know: Bill Conger started out with advantages not all of us have.

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\* Bill King and his wife, Robin (Cypert) King, met Bill and Sherry (Martin) Conger when the four were high school classmates in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. While the Kings lived in Nashville and the Congers in Oklahoma City, they remained close friends for the next fifty years.

A big heart, huge heart.

A very big funny bone.

And not a mean bone in his body, not one.

When you're young and growing up together, you know each other's parents. Bill was a product of the South, and his Mom and Dad showed the sophistication and the gentility we've come to associate with the deep South, in their case Louisiana. I can still see George Conger Sr., sitting in a lawn chair in the front yard early in the morning (he'd already had his morning walk). "Hello King," he'd say. "I'm just here cogitating. What do you and Bill Conger have cooked up today?"

"I'm just cogitating." I bet you've heard Bill Conger say that. I have. Like his Dad, Bill thought about things. Like his Dad, he was the best kind of philosopher. And like his Dad, he became a lawyer. One of the things Bill cogitated about, I suspect, was very simply what's right and what's wrong. He had a strong sense of that, of social justice, and those of us who knew him well saw it exhibited, quietly, in how he dealt with people; all people, all the time. He'd never have said that's why he became a lawyer, but I think it was.

But who thought about those kinds of things when you were 16? That's how old Sherry was, too, when she met him. It's the same with my wife Robin, and Marilyn and Charlie Bethea—Charlie who not only was Bill's high school classmate and his fraternity brother at OU, but the same Charlie we can all thank for being the always-there, devoted, caring cardiologist for Bill for all these years. All of us were 16 then. Sherry asked me the other night if I remembered when I first met Bill. I sure do... the very first night.

Bill's parents were transferred from Shreveport to Bartlesville. Small towns aren't always that easy to break into, but when Bill Conger showed up it was different. He was a big city kid (Shreveport!) and he had friends with names like "Blocker," not John and Allen and Charlie. Besides, he was a TWIN. And not just a twin—his twin was a girl, a beautiful girl! So the exotic Bill and Betty Conger fit right in. But only after we showed them our own classy style.

That first night the guys (and several of them are here today: you know who you are!) took Bill out for a Bartlesville rite of passage in his own car, a '53 Chevy Bill had dubbed "The Green Hornet." We waited for the Daylight Donuts out on Frank Phillips Boulevard to close. Then we went around back, and sure enough, they'd loaded a couple of trashcans with that day's unsold donuts. We loaded them up in the Green

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Hornet. We drove to Claudia Bradshaw's house. Now some people thought t.p.-ing a girl's house was cool. Not us—we were cooler. We “donuted” Claudia's lawn, her driveway, her front porch. We made a tower of donuts up the antenna of her car. And when her Dad flew out of the house, we ran like hell. But not to the Green Hornet. Mr. Bradshaw got there first. And when the police arrived, he gave them the keys. On Bill Conger's first night in Bartlesville, we successfully begged the police not to call our parents. Bill was a great negotiator that night; we should have known he'd be a great lawyer.

We've howled about that first night in Bartlesville. And I think it was the absurdity of the situation that Conger loved most about his first night in town. What he had then, and never lost, was that incredible ability to laugh at himself. He loved laughing at himself. That's who he was. That's what was so, so hilarious about Bill's stories. They were almost always at his own expense.

More than once this afternoon we've heard Bill described as a “mentor.” Clearly that's why he was a beloved teacher, but even to our little posse, that's kind of what he was. He was the guy you wanted to hang with. The basement of his house was kind of our clubhouse: a lot of slow dancing to Johnny Mathis there with our girlfriends, our few first beers, a lot of hanging out.

That Shreveport sophistication taught us stuff. We skipped school. Bill would say, “Hey let's take an Izaak Walton,”<sup>8</sup> so we went fishing that day. We didn't just skip school. Our Izaak Walton's were the action version of cogitating. Or one day we skipped off to Tulsa to catch Brigitte Bardot in ...*And God Created Woman*—as risqué as it got in those days, and we weren't going to miss it. We took in Revivals at the Fire Baptized Holiness Church.

And memorably, when Bill's friend “Blocker” came up from Shreveport for a week's visit with his old pal, we picked him up at the airport in Tulsa, headed toward Bartlesville, and when we got to tiny Ochelata, we pulled in and Conger said, “Well, here we are!” Bill laid it on thick, showing off the few “downtown” buildings, and his family's new home, a farm straight out of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Hook, line and sinker, Blocker bought it. So if you wondered when the practical jokes started, that may have been it.

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8. Izaak Walton, a 17th century author, wrote what some might consider the definitive book on fishing. See IZAAK WALTON, *THE COMPLEAT ANGLER; OR THE CONTEMPLATIVE MAN'S RECREATION* (London, Ward, Lock, & Co. 1653).

But there was also Bill the athlete. A really good basketball and baseball player, and not a bad footballer, either. Here's how he told it when we all came back to a Thunder game last year. Bill, imitating the radio announcer's voice: "Parsons back to pass, ball's in the air, perfect spiral, Conger downfield, this could be a Wildcat touchdown... OH MY, it bounces off the back of Conger's helmet, Ponca City wins!"

But then Bill grew up (well, not really) and became an Oklahoman. Here's how he grew up.

Many years ago, my secretary Peggy, new on the job and a little insecure, received a phone call. I wasn't in. "Miss Dennis," the caller said, "this is Detective Conger, from the Oklahoma City Police Department. I need to ask you some questions. Has Mr. King been to Oklahoma City recently?" I had been, which "Detective" Conger of course well knew. When Peggy indicated I had, Detective Conger said, "Well, Miss Dennis, that's what I was afraid of. I'm afraid Mr. King has been in our city, at our hospital here, claiming to be Dr. William Vogelfanger, and he's been giving pelvic examinations to the patients. I must ask you to say nothing to Mr. King. The police will be by soon."

Peggy never met Bill, but it wasn't the last time she was taken in. Actually I think the last time was when he left a message indicating that I had asked him to call and have her dismiss the office at noon that day, in honor of Armistice Day, a holiday still observed in France and Belgium, I think, but definitely not in Nashville. When I got back to the office, no one was there.

Bill could have been an actor; he would have been a great one. He was unbelievable with kids, with a manner eerily similar to Bill Cosby's. I asked our sons to tell me their first memory of Bill: For both, it was Park City, 1980—three Conger girls and two King boys, ages 5 to 12 or so, on their first ski trip. Both remember climbing into the 4-person gondola. Bill, wearing those silver one-way sunglasses, carefully removed his ski glove, reached out to shake our eight-year-old's hand, and, with great seriousness, introduced himself: "Bond. James Bond." It's become part of our family lore.

Pretty much all of us work hard to strike a balance between our careers, our family, our faith, our priorities. So I think most of us save our greatest admiration for those who strike an elegant balance. I don't know anyone who did it better than Bill. His career speaks for itself.

I never saw him in a courtroom, yet I always said if they caught me, call Conger.

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I never saw him teach, but when he won the Professor of the Year award at the law school, pretty much as a rookie, was anyone surprised?

But he didn't live for his career, even with all his success and all his recognition, never once did I see him struggle with that balance. His family was first. Terribly proud of them, always there for them, shaped by his family as he helped shape them. Bill was the best. Period, end of story.

Erin, Jennifer, Christen... Parker, Julianne, young two-month-old Vivian... George Robert, Betty, Julia... Sherry, the love of Bill's life and his tower of strength, as a young woman and as Bill's lifelong mate, and never more than you've been this week, thanks for sharing this remarkable being with us.



