

A conversation with Linda E. Patrik

Linda E. Patrik

Jul 1, 1998

In the summer of 1995, Linda E. Patrik, associate professor of philosophy, began to read newspaper reports about the Unabomber case. She became concerned that the Unabomber's profile seemed to match her brother-in-law, Ted Kaczynski, and she encouraged her husband, David Kaczynski, to consider that his brother might be the Unabomber.

Nearly three years later, after the conviction of Ted Kaczynski as the Unabomber, Patrik sat down with Adrian MacLean '98 and Katie Pasco of the Office of Communications to recount the details of her discovery and the impact of the conviction of Ted Kaczynski on her life.

Q: What role did you play in the Kaczynski family's recognition that Ted Kaczynski had a mental disorder?

Patrik: I have never met Ted Kaczynski, so I only know him from the stories that my husband and mother-in-law have told me. Psychiatrists say that in eighty percent of the cases of schizophrenia, family members themselves do not recognize the disease and resist the diagnosis, even if it comes from a professional psychiatrist. Usually it takes someone from outside the family to see that there is a problem. They think that this is the role that I played with Ted Kaczynski.

Q: How did you recognize his illness?

Patrik: Since I never met Ted, I came to know him through his correspondence with the family. Ted briefly corresponded with his family in 1990 and 1991 but then lapsed into sending extremely negative, insulting, violent-sounding letters.

In the fall of 1990, after the death of his father, he resumed correspondence with his mother, and at first the letters were cordial. They would address, for example, Buddhism, because Wanda was puzzled as to why David and I were married in a Tibetan Buddhist ceremony. They wrote about other matters, such as books and politics, but sometime in the spring or early summer of 1991 Ted became furious with his mother again, as he had many times in the past. He insisted that she not write to him again, and these letters included fairly cruel and vicious attacks. He blamed her for his lack of sociability and for his lack of relationships with women. He blamed her for pushing him academically; he blamed her for everything.

One of the most frightening letters for me — the one that convinced me that we needed a psychiatric opinion — was about two women. They were women that Ted knew from a distance and would have liked to date. The way that he described them was strange. So I was worried and wanted a professional opinion.

Q: So you convinced David to take Ted's letters to a psychiatrist?

Patrik: The letters convinced me that we needed a psychiatric opinion, so David took them to Dr. Robert Mitchell in Schenectady. At the two consultations, Dr. Mitchell told us that he thought Ted was mentally disturbed. At that point, we discussed strategies and whether it was possible to have Ted committed, but Dr. Mitchell explained that it is extremely difficult to get someone institutionalized if they have not committed a crime and if no one knows of them harming themselves or others. At that point, in 1991, we had no evidence whatsoever that Ted had harmed anyone or had harmed himself, so we didn't think that it was possible to have him committed.

Dr. Mitchell also reminded us that most violence occurs within families, and if we confronted Ted and tried to put him in a mental hospital, he could react with violence. We decided to contact a heart specialist whom Ted had been seeing in Montana for a heart problem, and we begged her to urge Ted to get therapy. But Ted never came to her office again, so nothing ever came of that.

Q: When did you first realize that Ted might be the Unabomber?

Patrik: In the summer of 1995, I was vacationing in Paris and I began to look over the reports about the Unabomber that were printed in the Herald Tribune. That summer, after the Unabomber threatened to blow up a plane flying out of Los Angeles, the FBI changed its policies and began to seek help from the public by releasing a lot more information.

I read this information every day in the Paris Herald Tribune and began to worry that Ted could be the Unabomber. When David joined me in Paris, I urged him to consider that his brother might be the Unabomber.

Q: What indications did you have that Ted might be the Unabomber?

Patrik: It was a lot of things — Ted's woodworking capability, the cities he had lived in, the fact that at this point the FBI believed the Unabomber to be a loner, and they believed him to be highly committed to an anti-technology cause.

Q: When did you first read the Unabomber's manifesto?

Patrik: My colleague, Professor Felmon Davis, downloaded the manifesto from the Internet for me in mid-October. I had lied and told him I was going to teach a course on environmental ethics.

I knew as soon as I saw it that it was Ted who had written it. The anti-technology stance in the manifesto was as extreme as Ted's views and lifestyle. There were also criticisms of liberals that seemed to be similar to the attacks he made against his parents. I called David right away and told him to come to my office so that he could read it, too. David was deeply disturbed by the manifesto but he was not sure it was written by Ted. And if David couldn't be sure, I really couldn't be sure either, since all I had to go on was the evidence and feelings that David had.

Q: What did you do next?

Patrik: After David and I both read the manifesto, David dug up many letters that he had from Ted, and we spent a month talking about it and comparing the letters to the manifesto. I also discussed my concerns with Dr. Robert Mitchell in therapy sessions. Then we contacted my best childhood friend, Susan Swanson, who is a private investigator in Chicago. I knew that we could trust her; I didn't know anyone else who could help us in a practical way.

Without telling Susan that it had anything to do with the Unabomber, we asked her how to get a writing analysis done. As a teacher of writing — at that time I was grading at least thirty to forty papers a week — I had an eye for writing style. I convinced David that we should have a writing analysis done, but we didn't know how to locate someone who would preserve our confidentiality, so that's why we turned to Susan.

Q: What did you tell her?

Patrik: At that point we just told her we had two documents that needed to be compared. She began to search for experts in the field, and she came back to say that the top expert was Clint Van Zant, a retired FBI agent. We knew that turning over any document to him was tantamount to turning it over to the FBI, so we had to make a decision whether we were willing, even with the scanty evidence that we had, to essentially turn this information over to the FBI.

It took us another month to decide. David was particularly concerned that his brother was so paranoid that if Ted were innocent, anyone showing up on his doorstep, especially an FBI agent, would be in danger. David was worried that his brother might either shoot himself or shoot the person who showed up — or, if his brother were innocent, we would be putting him through great emotional turmoil.

We made our decision by mid-December and told Susan to go ahead and engage Van Zant to do the writing analysis. We sent the letters, retyped, to Susan, who sent them to Van Zant and protected our confidentiality.

Q: What did the analysis indicate?

Patrik: The report came back around New Year's Eve and said that there was a forty to sixty percent chance that the manifesto and the letters were written by the same person. David and I had agreed that if the report said that there was at least a twenty-five percent chance, we would go to the FBI.

Q: This was your first contact with the FBI?

Patrik: Yes. We had a problem finding a lawyer to be our mediator with the FBI, but finally Susan arranged for her old law school friend, Tony Bisceglie, to be our mediator.

Susan had drawn up a list of nine conditions that we wanted the FBI to agree to, most of which involved preventing the FBI from jumping the gun and targeting Ted as their main suspect. We wanted them to search out evidence very carefully, because we didn't know if he was guilty or innocent, but we knew that he was mentally ill.

The list included conditions for a safe arrest and for the preservation of our confidentiality. The FBI was not supposed to reveal that David and I were the ones who turned in Ted. Susan's list of conditions

was used by Tony Bisceglie as the basis for his letter to the FBI, which opened our negotiations with the FBI.

Q: When did you learn that the FBI had breached your confidentiality?

Patrik: David and I were listening to the CBS News the night of Ted's arrest in April, and Dan Rather announced that David had turned in his brother. His exact words were that David "fingered his brother." The FBI had had a chance earlier that day to tell us that they had breached confidentiality, but they chose not to notify us.

Q: Based on the media craze that invaded your life at that point, what are your impressions of the media?

Patrik: David and I have very different views on this. David feels positively about the media now, whereas I still have some residual resentment. Since David launched himself into a two-year battle to save his brother's life, he had to rely on the media. The interviews he gave lasted three to four hours, and he came to find journalists who were thoughtful people, good writers, intellectuals. So he actually made friends with some of the media people.

This is only my third interview. I certainly liked the 60 Minutes interview; I found them intelligent and sensitive; they didn't pressure us. It's just that first onslaught — the paparazzi — they had no ethics whatsoever.

Q: Why did you and David make the decision that you did?

Patrik: It's very clear to me that the decision was for the sake of the victims. The victims had suffered greatly, and we wanted to make sure that never happened again. David has met with some of the victims, but I have never had a chance to talk to them. I would like to tell them that the decision we made was for their sake and for the sake of people like them. There is no easy way to tell them that their horror and their pain touched us all deeply, and that's why we didn't stop. We had only the vaguest idea that Ted might be the Unabomber. Many people would have just put those suspicions out of their minds, but I think that it was the pain of the victims that motivated us to continue.

Q: How was your life on campus?

Patrik: Union itself was great. Roger Hull, Dean Cool, Dean Sorum, all of my colleagues, the philosophy secretary, the people in the Public Relations and Safety and Security Offices — they all were great.

First, they stonewalled the media when the media were out of control and behaving unethically. The media in this country, in cases like this, have no respect for privacy and no respect for the feelings of a family going through trauma. Everybody at the College, from the top down, did their best to stem the tide of the media invasion, and I greatly appreciate the protection they gave me — both the protection that I needed to continue working and the protection of my privacy.

On a more personal note, the Philosophy Department secretary, Marianne Snowden, and my colleagues were very gentle in giving me space — not pestering me with questions, not wanting to know the latest news. Also, a number of friends at the College helped David and me move into a new home. We were reluctant to hire a moving company because we had confidential papers, and we didn't want strangers coming into our home. About ten of our friends, many of them professors, helped us move during the time that they were still teaching.

My two best friends, Professors Roset Khosropour and Sigrid Killenter, also provided great emotional support, even when they didn't know what was troubling me. Through all of this, I have found that friendship is more important than everything else.

Q: As a philosopher, what have you learned from all of this?

Patrik: Based on this whole experience, I have lost respect for tremendous intellect. I have discovered that genius needs to be coupled with heart and loving relationships with people to have a positive impact on society. I now know that intellectual brilliance alone has great dangers.

This experience has also made me think about some things in terms of my research. I don't have answers, but I do have questions. Before all this, I was working on a book about the obstacles that block

us from figuring out what is in our own self-interest. I had focused my thinking on individuals and self-interest, but I think that what this experience has revealed is not an answer but an understanding that sometimes ethical decisions need to be made that have nothing to do with self-interest or self-benefit. Sometimes, ethical decisions are simply called for. They come to you by fortune, I suppose one might say.

On a more personal note, I also see how the ability David and I had to make our decision arose out of the good things David and I had in our life. In my book, I had concluded that what is in our self-interest is not necessarily something that we have to strive for or work toward. Instead, much of what is good for us we already have — the privileges that we enjoy. These privileges are the talents that we have, the opportunities that are open to us, the strengths in our lives, either from our family, our economic situation, our jobs, or our marriages.

On a personal level, I have realized that I am quite privileged to have my job at Union and a loving marriage with David. These are great gifts, wonderful things. I have realized that when one is privileged in these ways, one can undertake difficult tasks.

Q: You are going on sabbatical next year. What are your plans?

Patrik: When all this came up, I essentially dropped my book project; I had neither the time nor the concentration to work on it. This has absorbed my husband's life and, as a result, it has also absorbed my life. So the main project for my sabbatical is to return to the book, *Knowing What is Good For Us*. I will also be editing an anthology on existential literature.

Q: How are you going to move on from this? What is left to confront?

Patrik: We still have to pay our attorney's fees. We have to figure out a way to pay him, which is difficult because we have been reluctant to do a movie or book deal.

We don't know if the government will give us the million-dollar reward. We would very much like the reward money to go to the victims, but if they tax us and then if they tax the victims when they receive the money, there's not much money left.

David has been approached about book and movie deals, but he doesn't feel like he can write a book. He's still in too much pain from this experience and in too much pain over his brother. I've urged him to write a book, partly because he's an excellent writer and partly just to pay our attorney, but he has always said no. Maybe he'll change his mind once we go on sabbatical.

Personally, I am eager to return to the work I had set out for myself and return to the things that mean a lot to both David and me. One thing that means a lot is our marriage; we are deeply committed to it. We would like some private time to go canoeing, go to the movies, and to have fun — like we used to have before all this started. We want our lives back.

The Ted K Archive

A critique of his ideas & actions



Linda E. Patrik
A conversation with Linda E. Patrik
Jul 1, 1998

Union College News Archives

www.thetedkarchive.com