Drawing Life: Surviving the Unabomber (C-SPAN Interview)

Brian Lamb & David Gelernter

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Interview Synopsis

David Gelernter talked about his new book, *Drawing Life: Surviving the Unabomber*, published by Free Press. The book chronicles the period after Mr. Gelernter was seriously injured by a bomb allegedly sent to him by Theodore Kacyznski, whose trial on charges of being the Unabomber is about to begin. Mr. Gelernter argues that society is losing its belief in moral authority.

Book Synopsis

For many of us, an appreciation for life—a commitment to drawing it in our own image—does not begin until we are confronted with loss or, as David Gelernter was, our own death. Gelernter is an Associate Professor of Computer Science at Yale, well-known for his skepticism about computers and his anti-technology musings. A writer, an artist, and a family man, he also has been the recipient of two mailings from the Unabomber.

The mailbomb that almost killed Gelernter m June of 1993 changed his life forever. Beyond its permanent physical markings, the experience infused Gelernter with a sense of both moral outrage and obligation. Thus, *DRAWING LIFE* is more than a memoir. Gelernter offers what is at once a meditation on contemporary cultural values that priviledge ”victims” and ”tolerance” and an argument that posits that we have lost our ability to make moral judgments and, worse, have abandoned the concept of evil.

Gelernter was especially enraged by the way in which the media sought to get his story, to make him the newest tragedy in the headlines. ”Those of us who hate today’s victim culture,” Gelernter writes, ”don’t hate it because we are Teddy Roosevelts aiming to build character and toughen people up (not that there is anything wrong with that program); we hate it because it inflicts harm. When you encourage a man to see himself as a victim of anything—crime, poverty, bigotry, bad luck—you are piling bricks on his chest.”

Further, when the Unabomber was discovered, a major news magazine’s cover story about the Unabomber labeled him a ”Mad Genius.” To this Gelernter responds, ”In the end, this is an argument for eliminating the very idea of guilt, and I can only guess that the attraction in calling a criminal ’mad’ is that it gets you off the hook and you don’t have to be judgmental. But a society too squeamish to call evil by its right name has destroyed its first, best defense against cutthroats.” Our moral compass is gone. he argues. and it is time we decide to reestablish our bearings.

In *DRAWING LIFE,* David Gelernter shares his moving journey to recovery with us as a metaphor for hope: As he heals his wounds and makes new the pieces of his past, he urges that our nation do the same.
—*from the publisher’s website*

Transcript

Brian Lamb: David Gelernter, author of "Drawing Fire: Surviving the Unabomber," why did you write this?

David Gelrnter: "Drawing Life."

Brian: Thank you.

David: Why did I write it? You know, an author writes because he has to, and it's a kind of compulsion, it's a personality type. It never occurred to me that I wouldn't write this story. One of my first conscious thoughts coming to in the hospital is how soon I could get to a word processor and start writing. So it never occurred to me that I wouldn't do it. The project changed in scope a little. When I actually sat down to tell the story, I found that I was struggling with questions that I really didn't have any particular desire to examine or to ask, but they were so urgent I couldn't avoid them.

And so my reason's, in part, because a writer has to write to get things out of his system and, in part, because I wanted to try and put in order my own explanation for some of the weird things that happened, in getting blown up itself. I think violent crime has always been part of human society and always will be, but in the reaction that followed.

Brian: What day did it happen?

David: June –24th, I guess it is, 1993.

Brian: Where were you?

David: We had been on a vacation for a few days, so I'd been out of my office. And I generally get into my office kind of early by academic standards–eight, quarter after eight, something like that. And mail naturally accumulates when you're out of town, and one of the mail items was a book parcel, looking very much like a PhD dissertation. Students are always sending such material around. And I was in the process of going through my mail when the package blew up.

Brian: What was your first reaction?

David: Well, as I say in the book, it's kind of odd. It doesn't necessarily make sense. But a person isn't used to dodging bullets and bombs, and it's an odd occurrence. It occurred to me New Haven must be under attack somehow or other. I imagined bombs must be going off all over campus. It didn't–it took me awhile to grasp that I could have been singled out because I'm not in a murder prone line of work, and it never occurred to me that I would, myself, be a tempting target for something of this sort. So I first had, you know, strange thoughts about some weird thing going on in the city. I then noticed–it didn't take long–that I was badly hurt, and my attention was focused from thereon on getting myself patched up as expeditiously as possible.

Brian: Can you show us the size of the package?

David: Picture an absolutely normal book package, like that, you know...

Brian: And...

David: ...padded envelope.

Brian: Yeah, and at what point–I mean, I guess the reason why I'm asking is I've done the same thing when I opened up something. At what point in that package did it–the flash come?

David: Let's see, there was a pull-tab on the thing, and I pulled the tab and smoke started escaping. The smoke–there was smoke for a few seconds before the flash, during which period it occurred to me that I was probably in trouble. But it was a matter of only a very few seconds before the thing flashed–a terrific flash.

Brian: Was it loud?

David: Light more than a–light more than noise.

Brian: And did anybody else hear it besides you?

David: I don't know. I don't know. Not that I know of–as far as I know, the building was deserted, and it could be that people, you know, out on the street or something heard it. It was a big explosion, but...

Brian: And what of your body was damaged?

David: Basically my right side was pretty torn up. My hand was badly hurt. I couldn't see out of my right eye, and I was just gushing blood from wounds all over my right side, to make a long story short.

Brian: And you went to where then eventually to have yourself...

David: Well, my first thought was that there was a certain graduate student who often came in as early as I or even earlier, and I thought maybe I could get him to call the police or something. I set off down the hall. His office was dark. And I was already recalculating the situation. I was bleeding very badly, and so I figured my best bet was to walk instead of wait for a ride. And I'm lucky in that the computer science building is not far from the university health clinic, and I set off in that direction. It's down five-some-odd flights to ground and across a parking lot and up just a shallow hill across the street, and I made it without collapsing, which wasn't entirely clear to me that I would succeed in doing it. That was triumph number one for the day.

Brian: How many-and jump to today just for a moment. How would you describe your physical condition today four years...

David: A lot better than many people thought. I mean, basically, I'm in good health. I'm torn up to a considerable extent, but it could have been a lot worse. I got various wounds and things, as people do. I have damage to my right hand, but I have some use of some of it. My right eye is repaired in part and is a lot better than it was that day. So I'm lucky. My health is basically fine.

Brian: How many people were killed by the Unabomber?

David: Three men murdered.

Brian: How many packages like this went off over the time that he was doing his thing?

David: I don't really know. You know, it's a perfectly reasonable question. I've never been–crime has never been an interest of mine. You know, I'd never heard of this guy when the thing happened. And after it happened, although the FBI has been very forthcoming in telling me what's going on, I haven't been–I haven't all that interest–I believe the figure is in the 20s, 28, 29–something like that.

Brian: Have you ever talked to any of the other people that survived this thing?

David: Yeah. My wife and I had the opportunity to meet Professor Epstein and his wife. He was hurt the same time I was, a distinguished geneticist.

Brian: Where? Where was he living?

David: At the University of California Medical School at San Francisco. And it wasn't long after I was hurt–well, I guess it was the fall of '93. He was traveling east, and he stopped off at our place and we were delighted to meet him. An interesting guy.

Brian: What kind of exchange did you have?

David: Nothing very remarkable. We were each in a position to understand and sympathize with the other's position without saying all that much about it. I was delighted to see that he looked like he was in pretty good shape.

Brian: What kind of damage did he have?

David: I couldn't really tell you in detail. I'm not sure. It was–I think broadly similar to the way I was hurt.

Brian: How many operations have you had?

David: That's another good question that I can't necessarily answer accurately. Nine, 10, 11, something in that category-10 maybe.

Brian: You ever total up the number of days you spent in the hospital?

David: No. There was only one long stretch, which is immediately after I was hurt. It was six-some-odd weeks. And during the year, year and a half after that I was back frequently, but not for long stretches, so there was only one long stretch. There has been only one long stretch.

Brian: And what is the school–you said New Haven. I assume it's Yale.

David: Yale.

Brian: What kind of a professor are you?

David: Computer science.

Brian: Where was home originally?

David: Where do we live? Where was I born?

Brian: Where were you born?

David: Rochester, New York, but we moved out of town when I was an infant and I grew up in Westchester near New York City.

Brian: And what was the family like? How big?

David: I have a brother, who's also on the faculty at Yale, who is a geneticist and a psychiatrist, and I have a younger sister, a curator and librarian in Manhattan.

Brian: And what'd your parents do?

David: My father is, by training, a physicist. His background is in nuclear physics, and his dissertation was one of the earlier pieces of serious work in physics to make use of computers. He moved into computer science, was one of the creators of the field in the the late '50s, in particular, artificial intelligence. My mother is trained as a biologist, but resigned when I was born, which is an act for which I'll always be grateful to her.

Brian: And what role does this play in the book?

David: My parents and background?

Brian: Well, your mother resigning and your own wife–what did she do when you had kids?

David: Well, my wife is an architect, also retired at the moment. It plays a role. I always assumed–I hoped, as so many parents always have, that my children would be reared as well as I had been. I mean, that was–is my hope, you know, and so it's a universal hope of parents. Having had and benefitted from my mother's care and attention, I couldn't see denying that to my children. And my wife feels the same way. So it plays a big role, certainly a huge role in my life and her life and their lives, and it's a topic in the book as well.

Brian: What's this right here on the cover?

David: That's the bottom half of a painting of a girl looking at flowers. It's a slightly sentimental painting which is, I guess, why Free Press put it on the cover. I don't know if it was a typical painting of mine, you know, I stand by it.

Brian: You painted...

David: I'm not apologizing for it 'cause it's not a typical painting.

Brian: You painted it.

David: I painted it, yeah.

Brian: When?

David: Not long ago; a year, year and a half ago. As I describe in the book, after getting blown up, the thing that upset me the most in terms of myself, as opposed to my family in a broader sense, was the thought that my painting career was over, and I couldn't see painting without my right hand. And when I discovered that I was able to paint with my left hand, this was an important moment for me, and that painting is a relatively recent one.

Brian: What about this painting on the back?

David: Well, that's a self-portrait that I whipped off in a day for purposes of this jacket. I think you'll find that almost all painters obsessively paint and draw themselves, and this is just one of a large collection of such paintings and drawings.

Brian: You have a glove on your right hand now.

David: Uh-huh.

Brian: Do you always wear that?

David: Just about always. The way the thing is set up, it interferes when I'm typing on a computer keyboard, so I take it off to type and, otherwise, I have it on.

Brian: The reason I ask is because you, more than once in your book, say, 'you know, time and time again, I couldn't look at my hand.' Have you gotten past that?

David: Yes. Yes. I've gotten past that, although I'm never overjoyed to look at my hand, to tell you the truth.

Brian: What happened in your own family, your wife Jane and your –what are you kids' names?

David: Daniel and Joshua.

Brian: How old are they?

David: They are 10 and 7.

Brian: What was the impact on the family?

David: The impact was–well, it could have been a lot worse. In a sense, we were–well-fixed to deal with catastrophes of this sort in the sense that my parents lived fairly nearby on Long Island. Jane's parents and others of her relatives weren't far. My brother and his wife live just a few minutes from us. So my wife spent virtually full-time in the hospital with me. And we were tremendously lucky to have relatives to stay with the boys. And I think the boys were three and six at the time–were in a position they didn't love being in, but they were, in their own ways, as heroic as my wife and the rest of our families, I think. And they're fine and they did fine.

Brian: You say that you–there are three people you talk about, three groups: lawmen, medical personnel and reporters. And I wrote down that, 'My respect for the first two shot up,' the first two being lawmen and medical personnel. What happened to your attitude after this experience about reporters?

David: Well, I'd gone into this thing with a kind of positive feeling about reporters and the press. I dealt with reporters a little just as a technologist working in a hot area. Anybody in such a position does talk to reporters. And the ones I'd met were an impressive group as a whole, and I've always felt myself, personally, close to journalism as a writer. And not only that, but the writers I most admire come out of the journalistic tradition more than the belles-lettres tradition. So I'd had basically positive–warm, positive feelings about the press. Their behavior of the press staggered me. It was so astonishing that I had to sit down and rethink everything I knew about American culture.

And the press, of course, is not a monolithic entity, and I try and say that and make it clear in the book there were some reporters who I thought were first rate and who I do think are first rate. But from the very first, the behavior of the press was so at odds with common sense, with what I would regard as a rational man's expectations, that it left me dazed. The first part of this experience is an old, old story and has been told a million times before by a million people, which is the sort of hunting in packs, the mob wolf pack aspect of the press. And I should say in my case, it wasn't all that big a deal. It was just a–ridiculous–it was–to get home from the hospital after an extended stay and have people calling us around the clock at the rate of a dozen calls an hour when we were going at a good clip, and the faxes roll in and the e-mail accumulate and cars from TV stations prowling out front.

It was absurd. Nobody who's just been home–just got home from the hospital after a long stay feels that great. The chances that even if I were media mad, I would be interested in going on TV the next day, which was a proposition presented to me. Who would– seriously entertain such a proposition?

So at first, it was just the sheer volume which was dumb–I mean, it was irrational. It made no sense. And under the circumstances, you know, when–and I was just home and we had so much to deal with and to worry about and to cope with, it was very unwelcome.

Brian: Let me just say that you say I wrote this down, too, 'Sleazeball reporters plagued me.' Explain what a sleazeball reporter is.

David: Well, what I mean by sleazeball is really getting into phase two, after the first week or two or three. It was maybe three weeks during which the barrage was so intense we just–I couldn't even hear what was being said. There was no way we could focus on it, it was too much. When it started to slack off and I started hearing the messages on our answering machine and reading the faxes that rolled in, a story started to emerge that seems to me more important than just being harassed for a few weeks, which is no big deal. And I certainly wasn't physically hurt, and as I say, it's happened to a million people.

But this sleazeball reporters business, my problems were both with the way the press–some members of the press talked to and about me and the way they talked about the criminal in this case as well. There seems to be a presumption in the press that–again, I don't want to call universal, but is very popular–which is that a man would rejoice in victimhood, would want to be called a victim, would want to be addressed as a victim, would want to get letters that say essentially, 'Dear Victim, we want you to step forward and claim your share of American victimhood and step up to the mike and talk on behalf of American victims.' No man in his right mind wants to think of himself as a victim. When a man gets knocked down, he wants to get up again and brush himself off and get on with his life.

And I certainly don't deny or minimize what happened to me, but this relentless repetition of the word 'victim,' relentless repetition of this word and of the idea from TV people and from print reporters and from radio people and from magazine people was surprising and discouraging and saddening. And I think it's done the country harm because I've seen this happen in so many cases, the press stepping up to press victimhood on people who don't want it–don't want that status, as no rational person would.

Brian: You talk about a big New York TV personality who faxed you or sent word to you that he or she could not imagine what you were going through, and that irritated you, but first I want to ask you, can you tell us who that big TV personality was?

David: I'd rather not. You'd recognize the name.

Brian: Male or female?

David: Female.

Brian: And what happened? Tell us at least the story about how this works.

David: Yeah. You know, I should say, one of her statements was, 'I can't imagine what you're going through,' and I don't hold that against her, and she didn't mean any harm by it. I thought it was an interesting statement. What I disliked about her letters, what irritated me was–and there was nothing exceptional –about this; rather, it was their typicalness that was so striking–was her statement along the lines of, 'We want to make sure you get your fair shakes as a victim. We want to make sure that we're fair to victims. We insist that the victims be heard.'

And when somebody approaches you with an offer to expunge your personality and substitute victimhood, –believes that you want to tell your life story and view your life in terms of the worst thing that ever happened to you, I don't know anybody who would want to be referred to as 'Mr. Three Car Pile-up' or 'Miss Robbed At Gunpoint' or the cancer–'Skin Cancer Kid' or anything like that. Bad things happen to us. We put them behind us. We don't wallow in them, and we don't give up our identities to revel in how–you know, in how tough we have it. I didn't have it all that tough, actually, and in proportion, I don't minimize what happened to me, but getting blown up is not one of the big stories in my life.

Brian: You say that print reporters make the calls themselves, but TV interviewers are too important. Explain that.

David: Well, this was a pattern. I don't attach a lot of deep importance to it, but I–you know, this is interesting that I don't know if I ever heard from a TV station in a male voice, and these calls just rolled in. I'd rather talk to a woman than a man. I mean, you know, I could see this as being a rational policy decision. You know, it's harder to hang up on a–I mean, women are better conversationalists on the whole. I mean, I–you know, not in every case.

In my experience, they're better dealing with people, so, you know, for all I know, this represents a rational policy decision that we're gonna hook people, we're gonna be more successful in booking acts for our show if we have a woman call. I don't know. It might, on the other hand, be that the field of TV producing really is mostly female. Just one of those curious things. I don't make–I don't attach a lot of significance to it.

Brian: When you're in the hospital, at some point, Governor Weicker, the governor of Connecticut, tried to see you–how'd that work?

David: I don't know exactly what the deal was. I was told–I was threatened with his imminent appearance very early on. I think this must have been within an hour of my emerging from surgery, although I may have the time all mixed up because my sense of chronology in the early days is not clear. But, yeah, somebody said that he was on his way or he was at the hospital or he was desirous of putting in a bedside appearance, and I was absolutely in no mood for chatting with politicians.

Brian: Well, you wrote, though–you said that, 'Politicians are drawn to the targets of showy crimes like fruit flies to ripe bananas. They can't help themselves and probably don't even know they are doing it.'

David: Yeah. You know, I don't hold it against the guy. I've got much more serious grievances against Lowell Weicker than the fact that he wanted to show up at my bedside. I mean, fine, you know, for all I know, he's a wonderful guy. I don't know him personally. And his motives might have been pure, but certainly it is a noticeable fact that politicians often want to be on crime scenes, and, in part, it's a legitimate thing. I mean, they want to be–they want to be seen to be interested in what's happening to people in the area. I don't think there are very many people fresh out of surgery who would want to talk, chat even with their number one favorite politician, however.

Brian: Did any politician try to see you at any time during the last few years to talk about this?

David: I've heard from many people who work on Capitol Hill, staffers of various sorts, and actually had some interesting and useful conversations with them. I haven't come up face-to-face with any kind of significant politician, no.

Brian: You also make this statement about the media or one facet of the media. You say that, '"Sesame Street" is the obnoxious flagship of elite child-rearing.' Explain that please.

David: I hate "Sesame Street," and I want to give them credit for good intentions. I don't want to say, by knocking them down, that I think the alternatives are great. I think, you know, their heart is in the right place, and they were–you know, set off to do something good. I dislike many things about it. You know, I could go on with a lengthy tirade, as a matter of–which I won't do.

Brian: But what is it...

David: The mere fact that they seem to want to push a child's attention span down lower and lower drives me crazy. But the issue that came up in the book and what's relevant to this broader cultural discussion is the way that a homemaker never appears on that show, or if one ever has, I've never seen it. Starring roles for women invariably go to the female repairman and to the female teacher and to the female combat infantryman, for all I know. I don't know. I hate it that an occupation which I consider the noblest in human life is unworthy to be trotted out as something that a young woman might be interested in or one day aspire to become.

And I have nothing whatsoever against women doing whatever the hell they want. I am grateful for such female colleagues as I have. I wish there were more women in computer science. In the hard sciences in general, there are not many. I'm glad there are at least a few. I'm glad there are at least a few female graduate students. I'd rather deal with women, generally speaking, than with men, which is true for most men. But the way that a–women and others–people in general–who are interested in promoting, opening careers for women have felt it necessary, at the same time, to disparage and demean and belittle a woman who stays home, who selflessly gives up her career to rear her children. That I find infuriating. And it seems to me that when we look back at this era, this–a constant drumbeat of disparagement for homemakers will stand out as our number one sin, moral failing.

Brian: You also mention something about a bookstore –and the spiritual healing power of myth and you mention Bill Moyers, and you say that 'They have succeeded taking religion out of religion.' What's that about?

David: Well, I'm a religious man myself. I've always approached the world on basically religious terms. I had been accustomed, however, to treating as basically a good thing the suppression of religion in public life, in the public school, in public meetings and gatherings. Like other academics and people in my general milieu, class–whatever you want to call it–I figured you make a child say a prayer in school for a minute, how could that possibly have any meaning? You know, that's not important. However, I'm no longer so sure that's true. It seems to me that the relentless suppression of religion in the school–in the public schools, in political discourse–it's a striking thing if you look back a generation or two generations ago, if you read the speeches of Franklin Roosevelt, for example, or any prominent politician of an earlier generation, those speeches take place within a religious framework.

FDR refers to God all the time, not that he was a really pious or a religious person, but the religious and the moral framework was assumed, was part of the way he talked. And it's been driven out of public life, and I think that's hurt us. When I look at what seems to me to be the moral drift of modern life, I can't blame the ACLU for the whole of it or even for a big part of it, but it's a factor. I can't believe at this point that it has been good for us to disparage religion and to–drive it out of public life to the extent we have.

And this urge to– shove traditional religion, traditional Christianity, traditional Judaism off the stage, it's an embarrassment to the intelligentsia, to most of the elite today. The Bible itself has passages that are vividly embarrassing to the average intellectual. It seems to me so relentless that–well, a man needs religion. There are very few people who can live their lives without it. The traditional religions have been suppressed to such an extent that we see people's spiritual needs being met in all sorts of makeshift ways, and some of those makeshift ways, one could argue, are satisfying spiritually.

Environmentalists are explicit about the spiritual, religious side of what they're doing. It's a return to paganism and nature worship, which is perfectly legitimate spiritually, although it's certainly not Judaism or not Christianity. But there are other–many other people who, when they look for this New Age stuff and the power of myth and this bonding movement and that self-esteem movement, seem to be groping pathetically in the dark for the kind of moral and spiritual guidance that traditional Christianity rendered very successfully for a couple of millennia and Judaism for even longer.

And I have a feeling that many of these people are coming up with makeshift simulated religions that are not meeting their goals, and they're coming up with that because they don't know what their traditional religions are. I can tell you the average Jew in this country has no concept of what Judaism is, traditionally or stands for. And if you look at what's happening in the mainline churches–a very interesting piece in

The Weekly Standard not long ago about the Episcopal Church and the way Episcopal priests are trained today and the consistent denigration of the traditional moral shapes and teachings of this religion. I think most people don't know what those teachings are, remarkably enough, and they're in the dark; they're lost.

Brian: What religion do you practice?

David: I'm a Jew.

Brian: What form: Reform, Conservative, Orthodox?

David: That's a simple question, but no simple answers. I'm a right-wing centrist–sorry, a right-wing conservative, you might call me. I mean, the mainline Jewish denominations are like the mainline Christian denominations; they've moved hard left and lost the bulk of the faithful in doing so. We're in a terribly confused time.

Brian: And what role did religion play in your recovery from the Unabomber?

David: Well, it's more in the nature of a given in my life than something that dramatically emerged when I was hurt. I'm a religious man; I can't claim to be a particularly pious man. Religion was tremendously important to me in the hospital, and I tried to make sense of what was going on, but it's important to me all the time. And I've never wandered outside the spiritual shelter of religious belief. And it was a great place to be when it was lousy weather outside and I needed that kind of shelter. But that's where I had always been and where I continue to be.

Brian: How did you pass the time in the hospital? And did you have time where you couldn't watch a television or listen to radio or music or anything like that, where you just isolated?

David: I was isolated only in the beginning. I was in various kinds of intensive care units for a period of–I guess it was about a week or something like that. And there's really nothing much one can do in these ICU operations. After that, I could do, you know, what I wanted. However, I wasn't–was flat on my back. My right hand was under millions of layers of bindings and bandages and stuff. My left hand had also, though, been badly broken and was all bandaged, also, so I had zero hands and find there isn't much you can do flat on your back with zero hands. For the early period, I couldn't even wear my glasses because my right eye had been badly hurt and was bandaged, and the glasses wouldn't fit over it and so forth.

So thank God my wife was there with me and my family, also. I saw my brother nearly every day. I saw my parents all the time, not for as long–you know, not for extended periods when my wife was, but I saw them all the time.

And I was lucky in that I had just about finished a book when I got blown up and was at a period where I didn't need to do any heavy writing, but the manuscript needed to be gone over and edited and beat into shape, put into final form. And I did that with my wife's help; she read it out to me. And there's nothing that bucks a man up like the sound of his own words, and it was great that I had something to work on and actually deadlines to meet, which I more or less met. And aside from that, she read to me. I–you know, I couldn't hold a book. And other people read to me as well. My brother did and my parents did.

Brian: What about the eyesight now? You say the right eye was damaged. What does life look like now, and did you have an operation on the eye?

David: Yeah. My–the right eye, the cornea was scratched. There was some damage –in the rest of the eye as well, and the–but the rest of the eye looked like it was in good enough shape to warrant them ripping out the old cornea and installing a new one, an extraordinary procedure. I'm just tremendously impressed by the imaginativeness of this technology and by the skill of the surgeons who did it. So, I got a new cornea. There was some damage to the retina, so my vision isn't entirely clear, but it's a lot better than it was. And vision in my left eye is normal, so it's certainly a lot better than it was, although it's not perfect.

Brian: Who's "Hut Man?"

David: One of the many epithets that I made up sort of as I went along for the suspect in this case, a man who was discovered living in rural splendor in a little hut on a mountainside somewhere.

Brian: Do you think about him as an individual at all?

David: I really don't, not as a matter of policy. There are people who think about him, and I'm certainly glad that the FBI thought at length about him. And it certainly is a legitimate topic of interest. My feelings are of overwhelming revulsion. It's not a topic that I'm able to think about more than I am other things that are too disgusting for me to keep my mind on.

Brian: And what role will you play in the trial?

David: Well, part of the trial, as I understand it, consists of just establishing the facts of what crimes were committed. And I had a ringside seat at one of them. And so my role as I understand it–not being a lawyer, but prosecutors have also been very forthcoming and gone through this–my role is just to say what happened and make it clear to those present in the jury that a crime was committed and what kind of crime it was. So I don't play any role in–you know, in the guilt or innocence of the suspect. I'm just supposed to describe the crime.

Brian: What if this man is found guilty? What should he get as a sentence, in your opinion?

David: I've always been in favor of the death penalty for murderers–always–I mean, since I started thinking about the issue, whenever one does start thinking about the issue, and particularly when you have a man who murdered three people in the most cowardly way conceivable. I can't conceive of our not sentencing such a man to death if we are serious about murder, if we are serious about our absolute refusal to tolerate murder. I'm not sure we are serious about that, but I am in favor of the death penalty for murderers.

Brian: You said, you know, two of the three–lawmen, medical personnel and reporters, you –feel less of, but about the lawmen and the medical personnel, what about the lawmen? What is it you know about them now that you didn't know before?

David: There's virtually nothing I knew about them before, which is too bad. You know, the policemen, the law enforcement world is certainly important part of the

community, and you gain when you know who these people are and you have some sense of what they're like and what they're doing.

And I regret that I had almost never had an opportunity to talk to a policeman, much less an FBI man. You know, once or twice my car got–you know, it gets broken into or there's some minor criminal incident or other, you chat with a cop. But I had no particular conception of what these people were like. I was very impressed by the FBI men with whom I dealt and with the police also, because the police came into play, part of the investigation and also protecting us. In the–at the early stages, nobody had any idea who the criminal was or where he was or what he intended, and it was felt prudent to post police around our house, and it was reassuring to us that they were there. And the ones we met were also people I admired for their seriousness, for their straightforwardness.

The kind of sleazy, patronizing feel that you so often get from the press, the feel that you're listening to an adult address a child, is a feeling that I never got from any policeman or from any FBI man. I felt like an adult talking to other adults, and I felt as if I were talking to people who, while they didn't have to make a big deal about their sentiments about the country and about criminals, actually cared about the moral dimension of crime. I got a clear feeling from the FBI man I dealt with that they hated crime and they wanted to catch criminals. It mattered to them. They saw criminals as evil and not as curiosities. And I admired that, and I still do.

Brian: You mentioned E.B. White more than once, and you mentioned that you love him as a non-intellectual. Explain that, please.

David: I love him–his work in a lot of ways.

Brian: Please tell us who he is, first.

David: E.B. White, the great author, writer, best known today probably for his children's books-"Stuart Little," "Charlotte's Web" are his two best-known children's novels–and for revising William Strunk's famous book on English usage, now called "Strunk & White," and the book about how to write, par excellence. But one of the great prose stylists in the history of American letters, the person more than ever who gave Harold Ross' New Yorker its unforgettable brilliance, its just rightness of tone, its gorgeous writing, its restrained elegance, its vividness, its concreteness and unfailing sense of humor.

Brian: When did he live?

David: He was born in 1899, I think, maybe 1900, and I guess he died in 1986. I could be wrong on those dates, but they're about right.

Brian: Did you ever meet him?

David: No. I wish I had, but I didn't–he, in fact, describes in some of his pieces how many people–he lived on a farm in Maine, on the seashore–how many people invited themselves over and drove up his driveway and knocked on his door. Because the man's personality shines through his prose. His integrity is compelling, and you want to meet him. But, you know, he obviously didn't particularly appreciate having strangers

wandering around his lot, which I can understand, and I never really considered doing it.

Brian: What makes him...

David: I thought about it, but I never...

Brian: ...what makes him a non-intellectual?

David: What makes him a non-intellectual is his love of and pride in technique, his insistence on the importance of technically good writing, his love of the concrete detail, his vividness, his attachment to the humdrum daily occupations of the sort of person who is generally –beneath an intellectual's notice, his fascination with the fishermen in his small town and the grocerymen and the deer hunters of whom–one of whom he was not, but he wanted to hear what they did and how they worked, the way he was intrigued by the motormen on the old Sixth Avenue El in Manhattan, his vivid affection for the everyday life of everyday people and his belief in its transcendent importance. He didn't have to– push an ideology. He didn't have to sell you a theory. He was convinced that he could write something that you would find it worth your while to read merely by describing concretely, vividly what life was like.

Brian: When were you first introduced to him?

David: My mother has always been a big E.B. White fan, and there was never a time in my life when I wasn't aware of him. But it was–I read "Charlotte's Web." "Charlotte's Web" was a big deal when I was a child as, to some extent, it still is today. I mean, it was a book you couldn't avoid.

It was when his letters were published, which was in the late '70s–I think it was 1979; I was a graduate student–was when I was first really dazzled by the technical virtuosity of this man. He's one of the most famous writers of the century, but in academic circles and intellectual circles, he's patronized. The idea that a graduate student of anything, really, would be infatuated by E.B. White struck people as odd in university circles and a little bit childish. But he's a compellingly brilliant writer.

Brian: Where did you go to school?

David: I went to a public school in Westchester, and then I went to junior high and high school out on Long Island. I was an undergraduate at Yale.

Brian: Where'd you get your PhD?

David: I got my PhD at SUNY-Stony Brook, the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

Brian: In what specialty?

David: In computer science. I actually had it in mind at first to work on medical applications in computing, which is something that interested me very much and still does interest me, as a matter of fact. And there was some very good work going on at Stony Brook in that area. And I didn't wind up doing that, but it's a field that continues to interest me and a field that, after a long–you know, it was very difficult to interest most people in it for a long period, is now starting to bloom, as a matter of fact.

Brian: What kind of a teacher are you?

David: A pretty mediocre one. I wish I were a better teacher. I work at it, and you know, I think–I give Yale tremendous credit for believing in teaching and for forcing its faculty to teach. There is nobody who gets out of teaching at Yale, and I think that's right. My medium is painting and writing. I mean, I'm articulate in–paint and on the written–on the printed page. I'm not particularly articulate speaking, and I'm not a great lecturer and I'm not a great teacher. But I give it my best shot.

Brian: This painting on the cover, where did you do that?

David: Where did I do it? I did it in the makeshift studio that exists in our dining room instead of a dining room. My wife has tolerantly supervised the deletion of the dining room and the substitution of the studio where my boys and I work at a huge table. And I like having them do their stuff alongside me.

Brian: What's this–what are you saying with this painting on the back?

David: "Portrait of the Artist as an Artist"–it's just a picture of me holding a brush; not saying anything in particular, aside from the fact that my most immediate way of communicating and my best way of communicating is visually. I drew before I wrote, which lots of people do, I guess.

Brian: Do you sell your paintings?

David: Well, I have a dealer, but I find it very difficult to give him anything to sell. I'd rather give them away to people I know, where I know where they are and I know–I mean, it's hard to have a painting and just sort of dismiss it and see it float away. And, you know, the art market today is such that there isn't a person in America who couldn't sell artwork for money. My pet parrot could. Anything goes on today's art market. So it doesn't–it's not really a mark of legitimacy to be out there peddling your paintings commercially, and that being the case, I'd rather not.

Brian: How has your life changed now after the Unabomber and recovery?

David: Well, anybody could profit from stopping what he's doing for a year or the better part of one and stepping back and thinking things over. I mean, this is a well-known fact; it's not an original observation. Getting badly injured is obviously the worst conceivable way to arrange for a–you know, a period of contemplation. But the period of contemplation itself is valuable.

It was valuable to me because I got myself into such an intellectually confusing position in terms of what I do for a living. My interests are somewhat abnormal; they never lined up well with existing categories. I've been tremendously lucky. I consider myself fortunate in a million ways. One of them is being at Yale, and doing what I'm doing, despite which when I wound up in the hospital unable to carry on, I had to face up to the fact that I was not carrying out my responsibilities towards my own talent, such as it is; whether it's great or small, it isn't really in technology–and had to face up to the fact that I needed to do the things that I had always planned to do before I died, and that I'd better get to it.

Brian: How has this experience of talking about this book been?

David: The experience of talking about the book?

Brian: Talking about your–the whole–I mean, you've obviously been on the book tour talking about it. What's it like? I mean, have you...

David: What's it like? Well, it's not too bad. It's not as bad as I thought it might be. I'm not a great talker; I mean, I'd rather write than talk. But all writers feel that way.

I've been very lucky with this book. I mean, it's a great privilege to wind up on TV promoting your book. When a man writes a book, he wants desperately for people to read it. And it is a desperate hope because the average book–there are so many books out there, and the noise level is so high, the average book is trampled underfoot immediately and disappears.

So, you know, I've been tremendously lucky that people have paid attention to this book. I've been amazingly lucky to get good reviews in prominent places. So on the one hand, I'm not great in this medium, and I don't particularly enjoy it. On the other hand, I consider myself lucky to be doing it, and it's been interesting.

Brian: A hundred and fifty-nine pages; a short book. Did you plan it that way?

David: Yeah. It's harder to write short than write long. I didn't want to go on at excessive length. I mean, the topic of the–I don't think there are–details about a person's health are not interesting, and I didn't want to–I wanted to avoid getting into unnecessary detail about personal sides of the story that were unlikely to be of much value or use to anybody, besides which I think of the book mainly as a comedy–kind of dark comedy–and it's hard to sustain comedy over any very great length.

Brian: Now this next part I'm not sure you'll want to do, but at the end of your introduction, you say, 'And of course, to my wife Jane, of whom Gerta wrote'–and then you go, I think, into German and then Hebrew?

David: Yeah.

Brian: What's the other language? Would you translate that for us? Can you remember it?

David: The Gerta sentence, which says (German spoken), means, 'One look from you, one word, is worth more than all the wisdom in the world.' And the passage in Hebrew from Shir HaShirim says, 'Let me see your face and hear your voice because it's beautiful.'

Brian: Our guest–and help me pronounce your last name correctly...

David: Gelernter.

Brian: ...Gelernter, the author of this book, "Drawing Life: Surviving the Unabomber." Thank you very much.

David: Thank you.

A critique of his ideas & actions.

Brian Lamb & David Gelernter
Drawing Life: Surviving the Unabomber (C-SPAN Interview)
November 16, 1997

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