David Kaczynski Knows How Jared Loughner's Family Feels

Dana Chivvis

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Last week's shootings in Arizona have left David Kaczynski sick with grief. The country's trauma in the aftermath of an inexplicable act of violence has elicited memories of his own trauma 15 years ago, as he watched the news of his brother Ted's arrest on television. His brother Ted, better known as the Unabomber.

"I remember waking up one morning and having a really crushing feeling of depression, like waking up from a bad dream, only it wasn't," Kaczynski remembered during an interview this morning.

In the aftermath of Saturday's shooting in Arizona, the brother of "Unabomber" Ted Kaczynski, shown in prison in 1999, says he understands what the accused shooter's family is going through.

As the country tries to make sense of the Tucson massacre, collective attention has turned to accused shooter Jared Loughner's family, as if somehow the answer to the impossible question "Why?" lies behind their barricaded door. But the history of random acts of violence shows that often the killer's family is asking the same question.

"Your whole reality has changed," Kaczynski told AOL News. "You can't imagine how they could have done it, how you're gonna live with it."

It's a feeling shared by other families of high-profile killers or suspects. Many respond, as the Loughners did on Wednesday, with written statements and an avoidance of the media. But David Kaczynski has long been open about the deeds of his brother, who he turned in to the FBI in 1996.

David was born seven years after Ted. In an essay called "Missing Parts," David, now 61, writes that he "placed Ted up on a pedestal" when they were kids. Ted went to Harvard when he was 16, then went on to receive a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan and to teach at Berkeley.

David, meanwhile, graduated from Columbia and moved to Montana. In 1971, Ted joined him there, and the brothers bought a now infamous plot of land outside Lincoln.

As the decade progressed, Ted became increasingly angry with their parents and in 1982 cut communication with them altogether. In 1989, David, who was then living in Texas, moved to Schenectady, N.Y., to be with Linda Patrik, a philosophy professor at Union College, whom he married the following summer.

It was Patrik who first noticed a resemblance between the Unabomber's profile and her brother-in-law. She had never met Ted but was familiar with his ideas from his letters. In September 1995, when the Unabomber's manifesto was published in The Washington Post and The New York Times, she brought it to David's attention.

"I was very dismissive. I just didn't think it could be possible because Ted had never been violent," David said. As he was reading the manifesto on Patrik's computer screen, he realized she was watching him.

"I got a very chilled feeling and I realized that there was some kind of possibility that Linda might be right," Kaczynski said.

After months of consternation, they turned Ted in to the FBI. He is now serving a life sentence at a federal supermax prison in Florence, Colo. David and his mother send him letters and gifts on holidays and birthdays. Ted has never responded.

"We want him to know that no matter what he has done, we don't disown him," Kaczynski said. "We love him."

And yet mingled with love is shame over what his brother has done. Though he knows rationally that the Unabomber was the product of a mental illness, that answer to the question "Why?" isn't entirely fulfilling.

"I still find myself doing it, trying to search for reason," Kaczynski said. "But in some sense, there is no explaining an irrational person."

In the moral reckoning of the country, David Kaczynski gets high marks. He was, after all, the one who ended the attacks by turning his brother in. But the families of killers don't usually benefit from the same sympathetic public response.

Susan Klebold, mother of Columbine killer Dylan Klebold, wrote in a 2009 article in Oprah magazine:

But while I perceived myself to be a victim of the tragedy, I didn't have the comfort of being perceived that way by most of the community. I was widely viewed as a perpetrator or at least an accomplice since I was the person who had raised a "monster."

The statements that killers' families make after each incident often reflect shock, despair and contrition.

In the wake of the Virginia Tech massacre in 2007, Sun-Kyung Cho, the Princeton-educated sister of shooter Seung-Hui Cho, released a statement for her family that said:

We are humbled by this darkness. We feel hopeless, helpless and lost. This is someone that I grew up with and loved. Now I feel like I didn't know this person. We have always been a close, peaceful and loving family. My brother was quiet and reserved, yet struggled to fit in. We never could have envisioned that he was capable of so much violence. He has made the world weep. We are living a nightmare.

Similarly, the Loughner family released a statement on Wednesday, saying they can't understand why the attack happened, and that they wish they could "change the heinous events of Saturday." But most of what we know about Randy and Amy Loughner has been pieced together from the accounts of neighbors, who say they didn't actually know them that well at all.

Kaczynski says he wants the Loughners to know he's praying for them, thinking about them, and is willing to help them if they want it.

"We don't know them," Kaczynski said. "They're suffering from their own trauma, just as much as the victims' families."

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