How I Survived the Unabomber

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On the morning of June 24, 1993, David Gelernter was nearly killed when he opened a package that had been mailed to him by the Unabomber. A professor of computer science at Yale, Gelernter was also an accomplished writer, painter and musician–all pursuits violently interrupted by the blast.

Gelernter was the Unabomber's 23rd victim; over the course of 17 years, from 1978 to 1995, the Unabomber would kill three people and wound 22 others. In 1996, after a manhunt that involved 145 federal investigators, a Montana hermit named Theodore Kaczynski was arrested and later charged with five of the 16 bombings. Kaczynski's trial is scheduled to start Nov. 12 in Sacramento, Calif., where he faces a 10-count federal indictment in connection with four bombings, two of them fatal. He is charged separately in New Jersey in a third fatal bombing.

Gelernter would recover, in great pain and with much reflection on a world that could produce the evil and terror visited on him. He recounts his ordeal in Drawing Life: Surviving the Unabomber, which will be available in bookstores this week.

We had just gotten back from a vacation in Washington, where the museums and carousel on the Mall turn the tourist-packed downtown into a giant amusement park. Naturally mail accumulates when I'm away, and my assistant had stacked most of it on my desk and put a package on my chair. It looked like a dissertation, I remember thinking; I didn't recognize the name in the return address, but newly graduated Ph.D.s are always sending their dissertations around. As a rule these are not particularly welcome and are quickly consigned to a "nonurgent reading" pile–"nonurgent" meaning "before hell freezes over, circumstances permitting"–but despite being invariably unpromising, they rarely actually explode.

It was a book package with a plastic zip cord. When I pulled the cord acrid white smoke billowed out–I remember the hiss and the strange smell–and moments later, a terrific flash. My first thought was along the lines of: Bombs must be going off all over campus this morning. It is a strange thought, but I assumed that I had to be part of a large-scale event. It didn't occur to me that I could possibly have been singled out as a target. I was not in a murder-prone line of work; I had no personal enemies, on account not of being lovable but of being obscure. That very morning, my wife told me later, she'd heard New York Senator Al D'Amato on the radio talking about a death threat he'd gotten–he was peeved–and she had reflected that it was good we had nothing to do with politics. Just a quick, thankful thought of a type you would ordinarily never recall.

I couldn't see out of my right eye, and my first thought was that I ought to wash it out, because it might have been sprayed with something that could destroy it. I traipsed to the bathroom in the middle of the building, thinking as I went that a certain graduate student–his office was midway down the hall–usually came in early, and I could get him to call the police; but his office was dark, so I figured I had better

call them myself. It hit me as I entered the bathroom that I was bleeding buckets and should come up with another plan. The university health clinic was nearby, up a short rise and across the street to the rear of our building. I spent only a moment in the bathroom, went to the stairs at the front corner of the building and–breathing with difficulty, in pain and royally annoyed–made my way down the 5 1/2 stories to level ground.

FBI men told me later that they had found a shoe in my office and my shirt on the staircase. They asked whether I had torn off the shirt to rig a tourniquet. Possibly, but I don't remember. My recollections feel continuous, but it turns out they are not.

A person's first impulse when he is faced with this sort of thing is to try to fit it into the ordinary events of the day: "You have just, out of the blue, been gravely hurt and all bets are off" is a message the mind doesn't want to hear. By the time I made it outside, I understood I was in bad shape, maybe dying, but was still not absolutely clear on whether I would have to cancel my appointments for the whole day. When I woke up after surgery and saw my wife hours later, my first thought was: Did they have to go bother her? I'd rather have called her myself and de-emphasized the more alarming aspects. I knew at the same time that my condition was critical. That's what the hospital reported, and it certainly felt that way. The mind is like a bottle of salad dressing, capable of operating in mutually incompatible layers.

They told me later that my blood pressure when I arrived at the clinic across the street measured zero; that it was lucky I had decided to walk and not wait for a ride, because I would likely have bled to death otherwise. But it was a very difficult walk. When I looked down at my right hand I saw the bones sticking out in all directions and the skin crumpled like paper.

It could only have been a two- or three-minute walk at the outside, but the possibility existed that I would pass out or just stop, and I didn't want to. Providentially an old Zionist marching song with a good, strong beat came into my head. Music is valuable.

I pushed through the heavy glass doors of the infirmary and round the corner to the walk-in clinic; I was reeling, but a stretcher materialized under me and people came fast. It was hard to talk, but I managed to tell someone my name and that a mail bomb had done the damage. In the background someone was upbraiding someone else: "You shouldn't have taken him here. We're not equipped for it." I managed to put in that I had walked over myself, which caused a brief puzzled silence. Here is a man, they were doubtless thinking, who positively is in no shape for a walk. They didn't know I had only come from computer science, and it didn't occur to me to elaborate, and perhaps they imagined a weird bloody procession through the streets of New Haven with the walker falling apart like a cartoon jalopy. But if they were puzzled, the show kept right on anyway, fast and purposeful; maybe everything is all right after all, I thought, somewhat detached from reality as usual. These people know what they're doing. A mere couple of minutes later a voice behind me said, "We're gonna roll," and they pushed me out to the ambulance at the curb. I didn't picture how long it would

be until I would walk another step under my own steam–which, Lord knows, was just as well.

Naturally I had no clear idea of the extent of my injuries. An optimist assumes that however bad things look in the short term, they will be patched together eventually. Although I should have inferred it from what I had seen, I was surprised and unhappy to learn that the damage to my right hand was permanent, both sides lopped off forever, thumb and little finger, and the middle fingers badly mangled. The plan was in fact to amputate most of the arm, an arm without a hand being useless–it would just get in the way, the surgeon pointed out crisply; but he was planning a last-ditch maneuver to attempt patching up what was left of the hand. If the attempt worked I would have one good hand and one "helper" hand. He was pleased with the plan, but I was unthrilled and less appreciative than I should have been. I didn't see what the hell a man would want with a "helper" hand. I had just that morning left home with two real ones and wished the table would stop gyrating.

I am hazy about much of my first week in the hospital. I went through two big operations that week, and it takes a while to snap back to normal after a long period of outness. My chest and right leg were covered with deep wounds. The dressings had to be changed regularly, and anesthesiologists would show up to dunk me under on those occasions too. Though my left hand was intact, it had been badly broken and was covered up, so I had zero hands in play. A bulky dressing covered my right eye, so I couldn't wear glasses, and I can't see much without them. I was running a fever nobody could explain. Your basic intensive-care-unit mattress is made, I would judge, of old tires filled with concrete. People kept insisting I had to eat (wounds can't heal unless you eat), but my appetite was far from robust. The sight, smell and thought of food made me sick. And physicians have the odd belief that people in intensive-care units can't hear–or at any rate can't understand, having been rendered temporarily insane by the mattresses. I didn't learn much from the discussions that took place outside my grim cubicle that I didn't know already, but to hear yourself discussed as an abstract medical object is disconcerting and depressing.

One of my darkest memories is of one morning at roughly 4 a.m. in the intensive-care unit under the harsh white-blue fluorescent light, a wall of instruments at my back, the concrete mattress underneath and a vague and harried nurse at the picture's edge. The joint otherwise empty–not many folks hang out in the ICU at 4 in the morning aside from the other badly sick inmates; one customer to a cubicle, as you can imagine, a lively bunch. Stretched on a dissecting table (it felt like), hovering in a blue-white shaft of silence, pain and bright chrome flashes off weird instruments, sleepless except when I was drugged, disconnected from my boys, disconnected from grass, trees, piles of books, dawn, dusk and my own signature. I no longer had a signature. I had been right-handed and my right hand, what was left of it, was hidden under a million layers of surgical dressing, to emerge months later grotesquely transformed and no longer able to hold a pen. A lawyer had visited my cubicle so that I could transfer power of attorney to my wife. It was nice of him. Lawyers don't ordinarily make house calls. I'd

had to sign the document and of course could not, but managed with a pen somehow connected to my bandaged, splinted left hand to make an X. To be reduced–the hotshot literary man, poet, author, deep reader–to signing myself with an X was an event that would have amused me under different circumstances.

Soon after emerging from the ICU I had my first talk with the FBI. (Agents may have visited me in the ICU also, but I don't remember.) Ron and Ken, of whom I saw a lot over the next several years–Ron smiling to compensate for Ken's usually looking worried. I liked them both; in a cant-ridden age I admired their cant-freedom, and it was clear also that they each had a personal interest in catching criminals and would love to catch this one. Ron's smile is interrupted only by an occasional wince that is so deep it throws off shock waves that make you wince too. The wince accompanies his restrained account of some unbelievably idiotic idea (of course he will never put it in those terms) other law-enforcement people have cooked up, or a promising lead that led nowhere.

The FBI men wanted to know everything: everywhere I had visited; especially every place I had lectured. I repeatedly found myself describing people who must have sounded strange but couldn't possibly, I kept saying, have mailed a bomb. I was sure I had never encountered such a person. The lists went on and on, usually until a medical staffer wandered by to do some procedure.

From the day I was hurt to the day the likely culprit was arrested (he was a mathematician, it turned out, living alone in a rustic cabin near Lincoln, Mont.), the manhunt rarely left our minds. As months passed, the tension did not slack off.

He hasn't struck in the same place twice, Ron told us at the start, yet. In truth no one had a clue what the man had in mind. When Professor Charles Epstein and I were injured in June 1993, it was Mr. Bucolic-Cottage-in-the-Countryside's first outing in several years. (Epstein is a distinguished geneticist at the University of California's San Francisco medical school. It is an honor to have been his co-target.) When he struck next, in late '94, he killed a man–an advertising executive with a family and, the evidence suggests, a big heart. An especially good man represents to a wicked one the ultimate danger–the conscience and justice he hates and can never silence. (Conscience is a Jewish invention, Hitler said; it wouldn't surprise me if the bomber felt the same. Or maybe he believes the military-industrial complex invented it, some slow afternoon.)

In the hospital I didn't worry about my own safety but did, all the time, about my family's at home. We didn't know where the bomber lived or what he planned. For all we knew, he lived in New Haven. During the first few weeks and at tense points thereafter, we had policemen around our home. My sensitive and too imaginative older boy pointed out what he saw as the obvious problems: they were guarding the front door, but what about the sliding doors leading out to the deck in back? How far can you reassure a worried child that he is safe and all is well when his father has just been blown up by a bomb? He needed his parents; we were unspeakably lucky to have his uncles and aunts and grandparents and our good friends to step in, but when a

six-year-old's mother is gone all day, his father all night too, and the grounds swarm with police–how far can you reassure him? The bomb that hurt Professor Epstein was addressed to his home, and he opened it in his kitchen. If his teenage daughter had been in the room, she would have been hurt, maybe killed. So we had to worry; we had no choice, because we knew our criminal to be a man who would not scruple to murder children.

My chief surgeon was attempting to save a piece of my hand by reupholstering the blown-up right edge with skin from somewhere else. The triumphal first week's surgery had made the attempt possible. He had been able to locate more bits of my wrist than he had anticipated, and had pieced them together into a thing that sort of looked like a wrist in the sense that a plastic car model assembled by a very young child sort of looks like a car. I don't intend that as a criticism–the operation was a surgical tour de force. In any case, my arm was stitched to my side for almost a month like a teacup handle. You can imagine how much fun that was–or if you can't, so much the better. It wasn't clear whether the maneuver would work, and many medical conferences took place. My wife was in on all. As for me, I wanted to hear the minimum. I just don't have the stomach for it. The procedure came off as planned; the question then was whether I'd be able to do anything with the piece of right hand I had got. But when it finally came out from under wraps months later, it was months more before I could even bring myself to look at it. I have never been one for freak shows and I am "sensitive" (to dress up an ugly condition in a nice word) to the point of physical illness.

Much as I hated the hospital and longed to get out, I was unclear and downhearted about the future. I didn't know how to picture life without a right hand or normal right eye. You'll learn to write with your left, people told me, but I only half believed them. No one told me I would learn to paint with my left, and I wouldn't have believed them if they had.

The hospital staff had been first-rate, by and large, but did not distinguish itself in the matter of my wedding ring. A nurse had emerged from the operating room complex during my first surgery and handed the thing in a plastic bag to my sister-in-law. It was covered with blood and gore. My wife set store by that wedding ring. She'd had a theory that you were supposed to wear it full time, even asleep–naturally I assumed she was kidding, but when it became clear she wasn't, I manfully gave it a try. (In actual practice there is no such thing as a male who can sleep with a ring on, as any anthropologist will tell you.) My sister-in-law cleaned it and we got the ring back, but it turns out that you need two hands to manage a ring.

In August, when I finally come home after six weeks in the hospital, my right hand is bandaged and splinted and has metal rods sticking out like toothpicks in a baked potato. The rods are holding my wrist together; they are supposed to come out in a later operation. I had worn an eye patch in the hospital. I no longer need it for protection, the damaged eye is stable, but I don't take it off right away. I dread the half-blurred view when the eye is uncovered. But the elastic of the patch gives you a headache eventually–probably that's why pirates are always in such a bad mood–and

I don't relish looking any stranger than strictly necessary, so hesitantly I remove it. And the world goes blurry and I walk around in a fog.

I struggle to get through the night. It's hard to drift off, my dreams are bad news and the dark birds of pain gather as I sleep. They shadow me like vultures all day and settle in at night, grabbing hold of the branches. It takes time to shake them off in the morning. Awakening I swallow painkillers and, until they kick in, sit at the edge of the mattress not moving, unable to. I am the picture of sloth–sitting around all day, moving slowly and uncertainly when I am forced to. But I am also suffering from the emotional equivalent of an out-of-control pulse.

I don't know how to confront the world one-handed and one-eyed. In the hospital I didn't need to confront it, but now I do, and there are precious few activities that don't involve clear vision and your right hand. My deep confusion is not a question of everyday tactics, it is the rest of my life. Permanent damage brings the rest of your life into play, pulls everything out of every closet and drawer and dumps it in a pile in front of you, and wherever you go, there is the rest-of-your-life problem to climb over. How will you do it in this suddenly modified body, with this suddenly unclear view?

Back in the hospital I had promised to teach as usual in the fall. When I got home I repeated the promise. But as September started, it was clear I couldn't do it. Even in principle–I was spending too many hours at the doctor's. But teaching would have been unthinkable in any case. I felt too rotten even to contemplate it.

In mid-September I promise to be back on the job for the spring term, but my confidence is dropping fast. As I sit on the sofa with the rods sticking out of my wrist, my hand hurting (at times acutely) and my arm hurting, my chest hurting and itching (at times maddeningly), my vision blurred, my energy zero and my confusion great, standing in front of a classroom is an act I can't even imagine. It has a nightmarish implausibility, like wandering onstage at Carnegie Hall in your pajamas. But if I can't teach in the spring, I will have to admit that my life has been knocked off the rails a lot more decisively than I have let on.

One rainy night, our fax machine whirs into action. Some fellow in California has a request: Would I please fax back immediately a list of 15 books similar to my own most recent one. He is specific about the 15–but forgets to include directions in the event I am only able to come up with (say) 12. Writers hear from crackpots all the time. It is part of being a writer. It is also part of being a crackpot. The non-crackpot letters amply make up for the others–many are interesting; some are moving, and remind you that writing is not the completely pointless obsession you often suspect it is.

But the FBI manhunt puts all crackpot letters in a new light. With a killer on the loose, the unexpected coming-to of the fax machine on a stormy night is ominous. We call Ron. We are in constant touch with the FBI. We call them, they call us. Over the long months between the day I am hurt and the day Hut Man is captured, we turn over a truckload of crackpot letters, faxes and E-mail.

In the period after you have been hurt by a mail bomb, all inbound communication channels are radioactive, and you look at the strange message on curling fax paper in the shadows as if it, too, might start hissing and explode.

By late winter of '94 I am able to drive again, and many evenings when I leave work and climb into my elderly Honda for the homeward trip, I hesitate before reaching around the wheel with my left hand, as I do, to turn the key; I leave the door ajar to allow for rapid egress should a bomb explode. Though I doubt the open door would have helped much. Sometimes I'd think, the instant before turning the key, this is it; my highly nuanced bomb sense tells me it's gonna blow. I'd even climb out sometimes for a quick and utterly pointless inspection. Turns out my highly nuanced bomb sense is no good.

In spring '95, Hut Man favors me with a personal note. My assistant and I glance at it; we confer for 10 seconds and he is off to the local FBI office. Toward midnight Agent Ron phones: the FBI crime lab has established the letter is genuine. And this same day, Ron tells us, the bomber has killed a man in California.

I am the only target ever to rate apres-bomb fan mail from Saint John of Montana. To what do I owe the honor? The instant I glanced at the letter, I thought I knew; the answer leaped out. He referred to the epilogue of my 1991 book Mirror Worlds. Evidently he has some sort of grudge against technology. (He used a typewriter and rode a bus–go figure; but the machines he loved best are the ones that kill people.) He picked me out originally, my guess is, with no idea who I was aside from some guy who worked with computers. He discovered later from the Mirror Worlds epilogue that he had succeeded in locating one of the very few persons in the field who doesn't like computers. Yes they are great in principle, still promising in practice and have revolutionized science and engineering, but I worry about their tendency to bring out the worst in us. I discuss these worries in the Mirror Worlds epilogue.

A man hates to look like a fool. To be loathed is one thing; to imagine people laughing at you is another, for many people far worse. When he saw Mirror Worlds, my hunch is, the bomber pictured the world laughing at him, which made him furious. Mirror Worlds was (Lord knows) no best seller but did get a fair amount of attention, and came out in paperback and in German and Japanese too. With the exaggerated self-regard of the hardened criminal, not to mention the mathematician–and our culprit is also, it so happens, a former Berkeley professor and, almost too perfect, a Harvard grad!–he no doubt saw himself as the topic of conversation and (consequently) ridicule in every Bierstube and sushi bar from Bremerhaven to Yatsuhiro. ("Was fur ein echt Schwein-faced Dummkopf, eh, Horst?" [Laughter]) Not to mention every living room of middle America. ("I jes' finished Mirror Worlds and lan' sakes, Mabel, that there genius bombed the only computer scientist in the whole dang country who hates computers! Don't that jes' have Harvard written all over it!" [Laughter]) My guess is the bomber wrote me in a spiteful rage. In any case the letter arrived, another man was dead, and the tension ratcheted higher.

The Bomber's Prayer: "May the Lord strike you dead, or better yet may I strike you dead and the Lord merely grant me the necessary skill with explosives."

In the clinic several hours a week I sit at a small table, my wife beside me, and therapist Marcia Dymarczyck stretches and pounds and folds and bends my strange approximation of a wrist and hand. I stare moodily into space (I am still unable to look at the hand) with the occasional grimace of pain as appropriate. She builds an assortment of weird-looking splints that are strapped on for the night; they stretch out the muscles, struts, guy-wires and internal neuromuscular Slinkies, which badly need stretching. But all the surgery has made it necessary to have more surgery, to clean up internal scars; and there is more work to be done on the fingers. Next operation, December.

Sometime in November comes a remarkable development: As a result of Marcia's efforts, I can unbend my right index finger and actually use it to type on a computer keyboard! It is the least damaged of the remaining right fingers; one segment got rearranged a bit, that's all. But at first I couldn't move it, and it was screaming pain to touch. With this right index finger back in play, my typing is revolutionized. It is nowhere near what it had been, but is a lot better. I am making progress.

In December Marcia presents me with a device she has made–a rigid fake thumb that straps onto the remains of my right hand. Clumsily I use the right hand to grasp a pen, a thing I had never expected to do again. The shaft slopes at a strange angle and I have just barely got hold of it, but she plunks down a sheet of paper in front of me and I cover it immediately with drawings. The chance to recapture a piece of life I thought was gone affects me powerfully–but I haven't quite nabbed it; it flickers like a butterfly nearby but out of reach. This first construction of hers is too clumsy for serious use and too uncomfortable to wear except in spurts.

But further developments come fast, and before long a different device–a kind of hand strap originally designed for arthritics–allows me to draw again with my right hand. The hand strap cramped my style. Roughly a year later I'd progressed so much that I could draw and paint with my left hand. But despite its imperfections I set to work drawing and painting with the hand strap, unreeling with intense effort a series of pictures I'd had in mind for years, clear on the fact I never would or could stop painting again.

In late December and early January I assemble material for my class and feel as if I am approaching a parachute jump; I am aboard the troop plane heading to the drop site, and there is no turning back no matter how queasy I feel. I can't write class notes, so I type them on the computer. Can't write legibly on the blackboard, so am planning a seminar-style class around a table, although there will be too many people for a seminar. Class meetings last an hour and a quarter, twice a week–a modest schedule, except that I can picture myself keeling over after half an hour of teaching. But here I am on board; no turning back. A few more weeks and Geronimo.

I have never taught this class before. I cooked it up last year before I got hurt. The goal is to teach some of the basics of computer science to nonscience students seriously

rather than in the usual cutesy, patronizing way. Teaching science to art minds. But the way we usually understand it, the whole distinction between science minds and art minds is a myth. The intellectual world and the Bronx Zoo each have two entrances; people who enter by the woodsy birdhouse way see the zoo very differently from ones who come in near the Asia department at the far end, with its lotus leaves and camel rides. But it's all one zoo. And art minds are capable of mastering the same intellectual territory as science minds, they merely approach it differently–speaking as an art mind in a scientific trade. So my plan for the course is to visit scientific landmarks with a class of intelligent art minds in tow. That is a hard assignment, particularly if you are no great shakes as a teacher. Why I had to cook the thing up in the first place isn't entirely clear to me this December. Teaching a course I had taught before would have been a lot easier. But I forgot to account for the possibility, in laying the class out last year, that I might get blown up in the interim.

It is time to start asking what I will do about my partial hand in the long run. A bizarre procedure has been developed in which a toe is grafted in place of a missing thumb, but I am not a candidate because too much of the hand is gone. Perhaps it's just as well. Some outfit in Manhattan specializes in fake hands made of plastic that you wear like gloves; they are so amazingly lifelike no one can tell you are wearing one. But I don't want a fake hand for decoration, I want it to use, and am content to cover it with a glove that looks like a glove. Anyway, the fake-hand option strikes me as grotesque–like a let's-pretend game I don't have the heart to play.

Somehow I work up the courage to look at my hand.

I can type two-handed and paint again, and I think I will be able to teach again. The reconstructed skills are unlike the old versions. They are dark and clumsy and usually painful: reflections in dead black water of my old life. But I am lucky to be making progress.

It is now mid-January, and the first meeting of my class feels like a press conference. Mobbed and noisy. Cameras flashing from the far corners. Students cluster round as I make for the desk in front–could we ask you a few questions? Sit in? Take your picture? Do an interview? Yale's student journalists are frighteningly lifelike facsimiles of the real thing. But of course people are curious. Do I look strange, sound strange? Will I hold together? By virtue of getting blown up I have become a campus celebrity, and my disinclination to be interviewed adds a Greta Garbo notoriety to boot. The crowd is no surprise, but I still don't like it.

My right hand and wrist are covered by a surgical sleeve, my normal way of going around until I finally acquire a proper thumbpiece and glove. I am wearing my standard mental-patient getup with a sports coat on top. I'm nervous. More cameras flash. I close my eyes.

But when I finally go ahead, it's O.K. The emergency fuel reserves a man can draw on when he goes forward despite not wanting to, not feeling he even can–they are amazing. They are among the finest design coups in the whole dazzling piece of work. I still draw on them today whenever I have to teach or lecture.

The week after the Oklahoma City bombing, the spring of '95, there was a big break in the case. Hut Man's goal was to be the country's No. 1 criminal; he'd been described as the "most wanted killer" in the nation and was obviously flattered. But Oklahoma City bumped him out of first place, so he got to work. Within a week he had put another bomb in the mail, which killed the president of the California Forestry Association. After Epstein and I were hurt, the remaining two bomb attacks were both fatal. For us it had been a near thing. The bastard was getting better. I got that letter from him the same day the California bomb went off. He was desperate to get back in the news. Soon after, he wrote the San Francisco Chronicle that he was planning to blow up a plane out of Los Angeles, so air travel went crazy. And then his final big move: he orders the New York Times and the Washington Post to publish his 35,000-word political tract, plus regular bulletins thereafter so the public will always be up to date on his latest inspirations. If they agree, he will stop killing people.

I would have told them not to publish. I'm glad they didn't ask me. I guess.

As soon as the tract materialized (the papers were still agonizing), the FBI brought it for me to see. I didn't want to read it, but had an obligation to; I might conceivably pick up the echo of something I had written or said, or a hint of some kind. I hated like hell to read it. I hated to have it in my hands. And I didn't notice anything, unfortunately, except that the author was a tedious fool.

Next spring, the FBI finally got their man. The suspect's brother read the tract, and it rang a bell.

I have always believed in the death penalty for murderers, and I still do.

The issue to my mind is how soon we forget the dead, assuming they are merely our fellow citizens–no more than that. It's hard for us to go on caring beyond a day or two, maybe a few weeks at the outside. But we show our respect for the dead, and proclaim the value of human life, by taking the trouble to execute murderers. Granted it's a bother. Symbolism means nothing to us, we just barely comprehend it; ceremonial means nothing to us, and to go through a symbolic, ritual act that proclaims "this community condemns and will not tolerate murder"–a gruesome act that turns the stomach, when we have basically forgotten the reason–for us is hard. We'd a hell of a lot rather not bother. And vengeance? The families are chained down with grief forever. "Pain, pain ever, forever." If an execution relieves them in the slightest, and I think it does, then we ought to do it–and if you want to call that vengeance, fine. I call it plain decency. Another word for it is justice.

Here is a man who murdered three people in the most cowardly way conceivable. His life's work was to take the nation by the collar and spit in its face. What's your most basic moral teaching, he asked us–not to murder? The hell with you; I flick away lives the way you flick ants off a picnic table. If outraged justice doesn't grab us like a fist from the inside and force us to kill a man like that we might as well face it, the dignity of human life means nothing to us any more; it means nothing; zero. We are only going through the motions of justice, reading a script from a book, mouthing the words, comprehending nothing.

I would sentence him to death. And I would commute the sentence in one case only, if he repents, apologizes and begs forgiveness of the dead men's families, and the whole world–and tells us how he plans to spend the whole rest of his life pleading with us to hate the vileness and evil he embodied and to love life, to protect and defend it, and tells us how he sees with perfect agonizing clarity that he deserves to die–then and only then I'd commute his sentence; not on the grounds that his lawyers slithered through some hole or other.

My own injuries don't constitute a capital crime. For what he did to me, I wouldn't dirty my mind thinking about him. For what he could have done to my boys and my wife I would strangle him with my bare hands, if I had the hands left. If someone handed me a gun or showed me the switch on the chair, I would kill him myself. (People will quote me out of context–but only fools; the hell with them.)

And if he repents? Spends the rest of his days pleading with the world to hate evil, to hate what he stood for and what he did? Then yes, I would relent and commute his sentence. I would have to.

Anyway, I now have a thumbpiece that works, here in 1997, and wear it much of the time. It's uncomfortable but tolerable. I take it off to type. I wear normal clothes. I can write decently left-handed. Writing takes more control than drawing–you can scale up a drawing to a size where your control is sure, but written letters usually have to be small.

My eye turned out to be a good candidate for a cornea transplant. Surgeons try to determine first whether the retina is in decent shape; no sense replacing the cornea if it isn't. It looked O.K. But then the eye pressure was no good and had to be fixed. The operation came off. Finally a replacement cornea was installed. The surgeons were remarkably good, and the technology is amazing. My vision was much better afterward. But it turns out that the retina was damaged after all. Not as badly as it might have been, but some.

My right eye works a lot better than it did, but the blur in my vision still places between me and the world a gap that I suppose will always be there. I still do badly in crowds, but I never liked crowds anyway. For various reasons traveling is harder than it used to be, which has cost me money and (within computer science) a certain amount of professional standing. But no matter, I never liked traveling–not by myself, anyway.

It turns out that getting both sides of your hand lopped off feels exactly as you would expect it to. You don't get used to it, and the nerves sputter, boil and hiss on and on. But the situation has its ups and downs; there are times it drives me crazy, other times I don't notice it much. Various prescription drugs are useful. The pain could tail off and disappear some day. In short, I'm the luckiest man alive.

So: What's the scoop on surviving a mail bomb? What do you learn? You learn that, at first, the past will seem only like a cause for mourning, but your job is to twist it around and make it a cause to rejoice. At the end of meals every Sabbath, observant Jews sing a psalm that has a strange muddle of verb tenses. It begins with a story of

the past. “When the Lord brought back the homecomers to Zion, we were like people who are dreaming ...” A few verses later a prayer starts: “Restore our fortunes, Lord, like streams in the Negev”–which are dry all summer. Then the prayer breaks off, as if the author had suddenly changed his mind or remembered something, and the poem concludes with a series of flat assertions. “Those who sow in tears will reap shouting with joy! Weeping as he goes, he carries the seed bag–and returns with shouts of joy, carrying his sheaves.” If you focus the big sweep of history on a single lifetime, the poet says, you see life as a stubborn return from sorrow again and again.

In our living room is an old silver spice box, and my wife has put my wedding ring inside. She didn’t tell me she had done it; one day I just discovered it there. Spice boxes are used in a religious ceremony that closes the Sabbath at Saturday sunset. You fill them with cloves, whose sweet scent conveys your hope that the coming week won’t be too bad, and consoles you for the loss of the week and the Sabbath that are gone. The box stands for consolation and guarded hope. We have several, and the one holding my ring was an anniversary present from my wife five years ago. The cloves are still in it and are still fragrant. I wish I could wear the ring; all is not for the best, and I can’t, but the spice box is the right place for it to stay.

David Gelernter
How I Survived the Unabomber
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<time.com/vault/issue/1997-09-22/page/82/>