

# Unabomber: A Victim Reflects on the Evil Coward

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The first time I was honored beyond deserving was on a tour of a Hollywood studio as a child. For some reason, I was chosen to go onstage and pet a fake gorilla while it growled dramatically. I got a big hand. For several months after I was badly hurt by a mail bomb, it was the same story, roughly speaking: gratifying but undeserved applause. The public figured that computer technology had been (in some sense) the intended victim, and so I became Mr. Computer Science. I was proud to represent a field that has contributed so much in the way of knowledge, jobs, wealth and space-invader games over its brief history, but it was an honor I didn't deserve. There are computer scientists far more distinguished than I, and to tell the truth, I don't even like computers very much. They pose technical problems that are deep and engrossing, but when there is playing to be done, I'd much rather play with my young boys or my wife. I will make time to untangle the minor problems the boys' computer is prone to only when I am up against a wall and Prince of Persia has ground to a dead halt. I don't want any kidnapped princesses on my conscience.

I was especially unworthy to take on the role of representing computer science, because I had written pieces that many colleagues regarded as traitorous. The aspect of my first book, *Mirror Worlds*, that attracted the most attention was the debate between pro- and antitechnology alter egos; my skeptical side won. I'd also published attacks on the use of computers in school. Parents plead for a decent education in the basics, reading and writing and history and arithmetic, and too many teachers respond with vacuous fun and games with computers.

As for the suspect to whom (evidently) I owe the distinction, I will pass over in silence the fact that he is a Harvard man, and otherwise he doesn't interest me. The tendency among some intellectuals and journalists to dignify with analysis the thinking of violent criminals has always struck me as low and contemptible. I couldn't care less what the man's views on technology are or what message he intended to deliver; the message I got was that in any society, no matter how rich, just and free, you can rely on there being a certain number of evil cowards. I thank him for passing it along, but I knew that anyway.

When I made it back to my office several months after the explosion, it was immaculate for the first time in my career. There had been a fire and the sprinklers triggered, but my friends, colleagues and graduate students had lugged everything to a new office and set things up beautifully. At the bottom of one crate, I found my battered but legible copy of essays by E.B. White. I knew immediately what it was doing there and why it had survived the blast; it included a short piece called "What Do Our Hearts Treasure?" White tells in his unsentimental, concrete way about a Christmas he and his wife had to spend in Florida, about their vague unhappiness and forced cheer—and their pleasure when a box arrived from back home in Maine, out of the blue, and proved to be full of fir branches whose scent filled the room.

The bright side, so to speak, of grave injury, discomfort and nearness to death is that you emerge with a clear fix on what the heart treasures. Mostly I didn't learn anything new but had the satisfaction of having my hunches confirmed. I emerged

knowing that, as I had always suspected, the time I spend with my wife and boys is all that matters in the end. I emerged as a practicing Jew. (Admittedly, I had always been one.) In the "miscellaneous" department, I emerged with great admiration for Senator Dole, whose battlefield injuries were a little like mine; I cribbed my leftie handshake from him, and his example cheered me when things were bad. I'd admired him anyway, but without any sense of personal connection.

I emerged no longer diffident about lining up incorrectly with conventional career categories. By inclination I'm a writer and painter; I got into computer science because of the talmudic injunction to learn a useful trade and support your wife and family. Shoemaking was more what the rabbis had in mind, but I had never shown any aptitude for shoes and don't regret my choice. The explosion smashed my right hand, and for several months I was under the impression I would never paint again; I bitterly regretted the work I had never put down on canvas. But I learned to paint with my left hand, and will never again neglect my duties as a painter. By the same token, I'd been planning a book about the 1939 New York World's Fair. It was to be such an abnormal book—part history, part novel—that I figured it would be years before I worked up enough courage to write the thing. But when I got home from the hospital, it was clear that I ought just to sit down and do it. To my surprise it was a success; one critic who is quoted in praise of White's book on its cover is quoted on the cover of mine too—a thing the heart treasures. A number of people even bought copies.

And maybe in the end I might not have been a bad choice for Mr. Technology. It doesn't take a great scientist to embody the nobility of the basic enterprise; a man who doesn't see technology as the world's most important proposition and would rather be playing with his children than making discoveries might conceivably be a good representative of the whole quintessentially human quest, our continuing attempt to learn and build new things. My response to this week's arrest is to congratulate the FBI on its fine work, thank once again the many people who helped us generously when we needed it, remember and honor the men who were bestially murdered and drink l'chaim—to the life of mind, to the human enterprise that no bomb can touch.

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