Blood bond

David Kaczynski reflects on an agonizing choice: turning in his troubled brother Ted, the Unabomber

David Kaczynski & Maria Eftimiades

August 10, 1998

Susan Mosser, whose husband was killed in December 1994 by a mail bomb sent by Unabomber Theodore Kaczynski, said it with feeling. "Bury him so far down he'll be closer to hell–because that's where the devil belongs," she told United States District Judge Garland Burrell Jr. at Kaczynski's May 4 sentencing." Burrell listened, then did what he could. He gave Kaczynski, 56–who had pleaded guilty to 16 bombings over 17 years, killing 3 and injuring 29–four life terms in federal prison plus 30 years.

Though the ruling sealed Kaczynski's fate and offered some small solace to his victims who survived and to the families of those who did not, it did little to answer the lingering question: How did a highly educated mathematics professor become one of history's most cold-blooded serial killers? That is a mystery that still daily consumes David Kaczynski, 48, who made the wrenching decision to turn his brother in to the FBI in the fall of 1995. "Dave's motive was to save lives," says his wife, Linda Patrik, 48, a professor at Union College in Schenectady, N.Y., "and that includes his brother's life."

David, assistant director of an Upstate New York shelter for homeless and runaway youths, is convinced his brother has long suffered from mental illness (a conclusion with which a government psychiatrist agreed, diagnosing the elder Kaczynski as paranoid schizophrenic) and hopes Theodore's plight will focus attention on the moral incongruity of seeking the death penalty for someone mentally ill. "It's not right," he says. "It's taking vengeance way too far." He shared his inside view of the Unabomber saga with New York bureau chief Maria Eftimiades.

I will never forget how my wife, Linda, first raised the idea. It was August 1995, and we had just met in Paris for what seemed would be an idyllic vacation. The first night we shared a romantic dinner on the balcony of the hotel. The next morning, when we woke up, she said, "There's something we have to talk about." She had been reading in the International Herald Tribune how the FBI was releasing new details of the Unabomber's profile–that he was probably interested in woodworking, that he was a loner. She was very scared it was Ted. I thought she'd let her imagination run away with her. I said, "He lives in Montana, he hates to travel, he's never been violent." I simply found it hard to believe the brother I knew could be responsible for such violence. Since then I have struggled to make sense of Ted's descent, beginning with my earliest memories.

Because of our age difference, 7 1/2 years, Ted was a mentor to me as a child. I remember small kindnesses when we were kids in Evergreen Park, Ill. When I was almost 5, I cut my hand badly on a piece of glass, and my parents rushed me to the hospital. When I returned home after four days, he was waiting for me with his coin collection, his most prized possession. He was going to give it to me, but my parents said, "No, Ted, you don't need to do that. Dave knows you love him."

My mother began to understand early on that Ted needed help in negotiating with the world. He didn't understand the meaning of gestures and relationships. Sometimes he would be open to her advice, other times he would say, "Don't bother me." That was a familiar refrain. My father was puzzled by being unable to develop the same close relationship with Ted that he had with me. He longed for it. But Ted spent a lot of time in his room upstairs.

Ted had very few friends in high school and not a single one when he was in college at Harvard. There were other warning signs. When the family moved from Illinois to Iowa, he was 24 and in graduate school at Michigan. But it was so difficult for him that he followed our mother around the house, begging her to make the moving men go away.

Even years later, after he left his position teaching mathematics at Berkeley, he remained a loner. In 1970 he was back living with my parents in Illinois, and again he stayed isolated in his room for a long, long time. He had no plans; he became extremely depressed.

I had gone to Montana in 1971 and taken a job as a steelworker. I got a letter from my parents saying Ted had left, and they didn't know where he had gone. They were worried. He had left a note that sounded suicidal. Several weeks later, he showed up at my apartment. He had a plan for us to buy land in Montana, and we bought 1.4 acres near Lincoln, where he built his cabin.

In 1975 or '76 he wrote a very abusive letter to our parents in which he expressed pain and anger over minor reprimands from years before. It was the first time I figured I didn't know Ted as well as I thought I had. He was without an internal mechanism to heal, so every emotional hurt from childhood onward had accumulated. The letter listed all kinds of small emotional bruises and then concluded, "This proves you must not have really loved me." He believed they cared more about his career and his intellect than they did about who he was as a person. I know that's not true. They had a great deal of respect for the independence of their children. I had gone to Columbia and Ted to Harvard, and both of us had failed to take advantage of this very expensive education our parents had provided for us. They had the same reaction I would have expected from many upwardly mobile, working-class immigrant families: "Look, we've spent thousands of dollars, and now you're living out in the woods."

After the letter, I attempted to play the role of mediator, thinking Ted would have cooled off a bit. Instead he wrote me a letter that repeated everything he'd said to our parents and said if I ever tried to defend them again he would begin to hate me as well. That's the first time I thought, "Gee, there's something about Ted that I really don't know, that I really can't understand."

I moved to Texas in 1982, and we exchanged long letters at least every month. Some of those letters seemed strange. I worried he might become an outcast in his community. So I went to visit him in Montana in the fall of 1986. It reassured me to find that he did have relationships–with people like the mailman and the town librarian. It was my hope that he had a niche in life that would keep him stabilized.

One day while I was there I was sawing a log on this makeshift sawhorse, when I lost my balance and everything came tumbling down. I was lying there in a pile of wood, and he came running up. I said, "I hope I didn't break the saw." And he said, "The hell with the saw, it's you I care about." That was a very poignant moment in our relationship. But that visit was the last time I saw him for more than a decade.

I wrote Ted when I learned that our father had terminal cancer. Father was in great pain, and he took his life in 1990. I told Ted I would send money for him to come to the memorial service. He didn't come, but he did telephone my mother on the day of the memorial.

When Linda and I returned from our Paris vacation, the Washington Post published the Unabomber's manifesto. After I read the first few pages, my jaw literally dropped. One particular phrase disturbed me. It said modern philosophers were not "cool-headed logicians." Ted had once said I was not a "cool-headed logician," and I had never heard anyone else use that phrase. My first reaction was a great deal of anger. We had Linda's childhood friend Susan Swanson, a private investigator, take two of Ted's letters to a linguistics expert, who analyzed them and found there was an 80 percent chance the same person had written the letters and the manifesto. This wasn't a situation I could deal with anymore–I had a clear, definite responsibility to do something. Susan put us in touch with a law-school friend of hers, Tony Bisceglie, who put his heart and soul into helping us. Linda and I flew down to Washington to meet with the FBI.

At the first session I told them where Ted lived. It was just a heartwrenching feeling. I knew that forever afterward what I was as a person, particularly as a brother, was going to be defined by that moment. I hoped they could see how desperate, how paranoid, how fragile he was and that he would be handled with some compassion.

Telling my mother was very hard. She loves Ted with all her heart. I worried she might not understand what I had done and that she would hold it against me. But when I told her, she hugged me and said, "David, I'm so sorry for what you've gone through."

My primary concern was convincing the Justice Department not to pursue the death penalty, since I knew Ted was mentally ill. Obviously I was very disappointed when they decided to pursue it after all. I went up to the Adirondack Mountains with my backpack for four or five days. It was the closest I came to feeling hopeless about it all.

Both my mother and I cried when we saw Ted at the trial after so long. I was partly dreading talking to him, so his refusal to make eye contact somehow made it easier for us both, though it also gave me a real feeling that I have lost my brother. While it was very difficult to listen to the tremendous lasting pain that the victims expressed, it was also important for me. I had a sense there was no way I could emerge from my own pain without understanding theirs a little better.

The last morning of the trial, we learned the prosecution would accept a deal that would avoid the death penalty. Waiting to hear whether Ted would accept the conditions was the longest 10 hours of my life. It was a tremendous relief that his life was

spared, but now it's like he's in two prisons–one his jail cell, the other the illness that destroyed his life. My biggest hope is that he will live a life that has dignity, that has purpose. My secondary hope is that someday he will be able to experience genuine remorse and that the door might be open for reconciliation. His attorneys have told me that when they ask him about me, he says he loves me, but he's very angry at me and not ready to forgive me.

I can look back now and feel that my actions were good for the community and for my brother. That clearly wouldn't have been the case if he were put to death. Obviously there are no happy endings in a tragedy like this, but my hope is very much alive and stronger than ever.

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People magazine. August 10, 1998, Vol. 50 Issue 4, pp. 77-81.
<fredericiabib.dk/work/work-of:150010-master:919345?type=artikel>