

From the Unabomber to the Incels: Angry Young Men on Campus

Eileen Pollack Considers Their Rage—and Our Responsibility

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In 1978, a package left outside the Science and Engineering Building at the University of Illinois in Chicago was redirected to Northwestern University, where it ended up exploding and injuring a security officer. The following year, another bomb went off at Northwestern, this time at the technological institute, wounding a graduate student. Soon after, a bomb exploded in the mail compartment of an American Airlines flight, forcing an emergency landing but not hurting anyone. Because the terrorist who built these bombs targeted universities and airline companies, the FBI dubbed him the Unabomber.

Over the next 16 years, a total of 16 exploding packages were delivered to victims that included an airline official, computer scientists, a geneticist, and a behavioral psychologist, all of them men, although one professor's female secretary was also hurt. The bombs grew more and more dangerous, killing the owner of a computer rental shop, an executive for a firm that did public relations for Exxon, and a lobbyist for the timber industry.

In September 1995, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* published the Unabomber's manifesto, which catalogued the destruction that technology and industrialization were wreaking on the natural world and the quality of human life. Calling for a revolution, the bomber urged readers to rise up and destroy computers and machines, factories, cars, even medical research facilities, after which everyone would return to a more meaningful life of subsistence farming.

In the months that followed, a social worker named David Kaczynski came to believe the language and ideas in "Industrial Society and Its Future" echoed letters David's brother, Ted, had written him. After much agonizing, David shared his suspicions with the FBI, who raided Ted's cabin in Montana and charged him with making the bombs that had killed three men and maimed 23 other people.

A year before the manifesto came out, I moved from Boston to Ann Arbor to take a job teaching in the creative writing program at the University of Michigan. One of the Unabomber's victims, Nicklaus Suino, was a graduate of our program. Although Suino had earned his degree long before I arrived on campus, several of my colleagues knew him well. An aspiring writer and martial arts enthusiast, Suino had stayed in town and gotten a job for a psychology professor whose studies in behavioral modification attracted Kaczynski's ire; when Suino opened his boss's package, he got sprayed with shrapnel. Luckily, he survived, but my friends had no sympathy for the terrorist who had caused their former student so much pain and anguish.

The Unabomber's ties to my new employer ran even deeper than Nick Suino's wounds. In the mid 1960s, Kaczynski had been a graduate student in mathematics at the U of M. When his identity as the bomber was revealed, the anthropology professor who taught Kaczynski's elective in human evolution remembered him as so brilliant he had received the only A+ this professor ever had awarded. An instructor myself, I couldn't help but be reminded of all the brilliant but angry young men who had taken my own classes.

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Fascinated, I read everything I could find about the Unabomber, including Alston Chase's thoughtful biography *A Mind for Murder*. The son of Polish immigrants, Kaczynski had grown up in a working-class Chicago neighborhood. Handsome, clean cut, polite, he might have been popular with the other kids—if he hadn't been so much smarter and more sensitive than they were, if he and his parents hadn't been so much more cultured and racially tolerant than their peers. Shipped off to Harvard at 16, Kaczynski was scorned by his snobbish preppy classmates. If that weren't enough to stoke his anger, he was pressured to enroll in a series of pointless mind-control experiments carried out by a sadistic psychology professor who was secretly working for the CIA.

At Michigan, Kaczynski came into his own as a mathematician. But he had a difficult time fitting in on a campus where the favorite pastimes were getting drunk and trooping to the stadium on football Saturdays. As much as he dismissed his classmates as conventional and superficial, he was desperate to be loved. As he wrote later in his journal, he would have welcomed sex, but he could have gotten by just holding a woman's hand "if I thought she really cared for me."

Alone in his room, he was driven crazy by the sounds of the couple next door making love. Finally—and this is what broke my heart—Kaczynski decided to convince a psychiatrist to allow him to undergo the surgery and chemical treatments he thought would transform him into a woman, not because he was transgender, but because, as a woman, he might wrap his arms around himself and be held by someone female.

Kaczynski kept his appointment with the psychiatrist, only to realize he was going mad. Furious at a society that had pushed him to excel in academics at the cost of his ability to find love and connection to other human beings, he vowed to stop being such a good boy and learn to kill. Only later did he come up with an ideology that justified his murderous rage, lashing out at science and industrialization for destroying our environment, pressuring us to conform, depriving us of our privacy, and robbing us of our humanity.

I deplored Kaczynski's turn toward violence. But as someone who had spent four years at Yale in the 1970s as one of only two female physics majors, woefully unprepared and unpolished compared to my preppy classmates, I knew the damage that could be wrought by prolonged mental strain, a sense of inferiority, and isolation. Unlike Kaczynski, I didn't flee to a cabin in Montana; I left physics for the humanities, made myself into a writer, found friendship, fulfillment, love.

Because of my history, I paid special attention to any students who might feel out of place, whether they were working class, the children of immigrants, black, Hispanic, Asian, Muslim, female, or queer. But I also felt obliged to connect with the angry straight white men, many of them engineers, physicists, or computer scientists, who showed up in my literature and writing classes, ostensibly because they were fulfilling

a requirement, but also because they were searching for some deeper meaning mere equations couldn't provide.

Usually, the semester would start with these young men rolling their eyes to show how much smarter they were than anyone in the room, although I suspect their disdain would have been less acid if their professor had been a man. After these students turned in their first essays, I would ask them to come in to see me. I would praise their intelligence, say I could tell they were bored in class and to please let me know if I could do anything to make their work more challenging. I would let slip that I had earned a physics degree from Yale and knew every episode of *Star Trek* as well as they did. Then I would go through their essays and demonstrate how their arguments were unfocused, illogical, or unsubstantiated, how their language was wordy or vague, how they could improve all these weaknesses in the next revision.

Many of these young men became my allies. Long after they left the university, they sent me emails thanking me for taking them seriously and allowing them to write the truth about their lives. I was proud of what I had accomplished—until I began to wonder if it was really my responsibility to placate all these young men who resented their mothers for nagging them to sit up straight and be good boys, resented their female classmates for refusing to have sex with them, resented their black and brown classmates for sharing a culture and an identity with each other and having a noble cause to fight for.

What if I had reached out and hugged him? Might I have prevented him from moving to Montana and making bombs?

By the early 2000s, a subset of these disaffected white men had acquired a label: incels. Unlike Kaczynski, who targeted those he held responsible for despoiling nature or trying to control our minds, incels vented their rage at women, people of color, Jews, and immigrants. Some incels took their anger offline and went on shooting sprees. Still, the similarities were hard to miss. When I found out the Unabomber had spent five years at the university where I now taught, I started to wonder what I might have done if he had been my student.

What if Ted Kaczynski had turned in "Industrial Society and Its Future" for my class? I might have argued that killing a few people now to prevent a theoretical catastrophe later is rarely if ever justified. But how could I have disagreed that industrialization does threaten to destroy our privacy, wipe out millions of human beings, and cause countless other species to go extinct? What if Ted had confided how isolated he felt, how desperate he was to be held by a woman, loved? Might I have urged him to seek counseling? Tried to assuage his resentments? What if I had reached out and hugged him? Might I have prevented him from moving to Montana and making bombs?

Throughout my 38-year career as a writing instructor, I encountered essays and stories that forced me to decide whether the authors might be a threat to themselves or others. But a professor can't always tell who is dangerous and who is merely trying to be provocative. Some undergraduates write violent, misogynistic prose because that

is what they have grown up seeing on TV, in movies, in video games and online porn. Others have been sexually abused or beaten. Still others are showing the first signs of schizophrenia or bipolar disease. To make matters more complex, two of the students who scared me the most were female.

Calling for a revolution doesn't always indicate the ideologue will start building bombs. Ted Kaczynski's brother shared his hatred of technology, yet David ended up a happily married social worker. Nor do all the scary students spout rightwing ideology. If I had taught at Michigan in the 1960s and a student had written an essay urging his classmates to join the Black Panthers in offing the pigs, would I have notified the FBI? For that matter, how would I feel if the FBI showed up at my door to ask why I have visited so many extremist websites, why I have taken so many books about domestic terrorism out of the library, or why I own a copy of the nauseatingly racist and anti-Semitic *Turner Diaries*?

I would never expect a woman, a person of color, or a member of the LGBTQ community to see it as their responsibility to placate an angry white male student. But maybe, as a professor, I wasn't wrong to try to connect with everyone in my class, to educate them, perhaps even to love them. Maybe finding a way to lessen the loneliness and pain that torture so many of our students, no matter their gender, their sexual preference, their race, religion, social class, or ethnicity, should be a more pressing concern than most of our other research.

Trying to prevent lonely young men from turning into incels requires an act of radical compassion, which can never be compelled. But if we are willing to allow such a huge segment of our population to grow up feeling lonely and unloved, with no larger meaning to their lives than defending their whiteness and maleness from what they perceive to be a threat, we shouldn't be surprised if at least a few turn out to be Ted Kaczynskis.

The Professor of Immorality *is out now via Delphinium Books.*

The Ted K Archive

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