

Unmasking the Unabomber

Ellen Becker and Tom Mcpheeters

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In 1995, when Ted Kaczynski's brother David revealed to authorities that his family believed Ted was the Unabomber, the media quickly seized on the story of brother versus brother. But, in the process, the truth of how the Kaczynski family solved the mystery was lost. In August, for instance, when the federal government turned over a \$1 million reward to David for his role in providing information in the arrest and conviction of his brother, the media ignored the role that David's wife, Linda Patrik, played in the drama. When the Unabomber manifesto first appeared in the Washington Post on September 19, 1995, Patrik, a philosophy professor at Union College in Schenectady, New York, connected what she had learned about Ted from her husband and the characteristics of the Unabomber as portrayed in the newspapers. In this interview with Ellen Becker and Tom McPheeters of the Journal of Family Life, Linda and David reveal for the first time the real story of how the Unabomber was caught.—The Editors

Linda Patrik: It took me a month or two to convince David to take the possibility that Ted was the Unabomber seriously. I had gone to Paris in the summer of 1995, and because there had recently been bombings in the Paris subways, the Parisians were fascinated with the Unabomber and there were newspaper articles on him every day. It was a time when the FBI was releasing more information to the public: about his woodworking ability, about the cities he had lived in, and the fact that he was now considered to be a loner rather than part of a revolutionary group.

Ellen Becker: Considering what you went through, you must have experienced a lot of fear.

Patrik: I was completely wrapped up in fear. But I knew I had to tell David about this as soon as he arrived in Paris, after he recovered from jet lag. I was very scared, to the point of having paranoid fantasies about people planting newspaper stories or people following me in Paris because I was so absorbed in the suspicion that Ted was the Unabomber.

At first David thought I was nuts and didn't take it seriously. But I couldn't drop it, so we discussed the situation intensely for a couple of days.

Becker: Did you have any doubts in that period, or were you pretty convinced that Ted was the Unabomber?

Patrik: In philosophy, you get really complicated notions of what knowledge is, so that if I had to answer as a professional philosopher, I'd never say anything of the kind. But if you allow for the things that Western philosophy doesn't, such as strong gut feelings, strong intuitions, then you allow yourself to draw conclusions that don't necessarily appear rational at first. I couldn't get this thought of Ted being the Unabomber out of my mind. I was obsessed, and I couldn't tell if it was a realistic obsession or a fantasy obsession.

Tom McPheeters: Tell us more about how you related to David in this period and how this process went between the two of you.

Patrik: I really liked Paris, and I wanted David to see it, so we talked about his brother for a while and then came to an agreement that David would read the manifesto

when we returned home. In exchange, we let the problem recede into the background so that we could enjoy the city.

Still, it was a strange stay in Paris. We had two weeks of wonderful romance, and in the evening we sat on the balcony of the apartment and discussed his brother possibly being the Unabomber. I had to listen to David telling me that my suspicions about his brother were unjustified.

McPheeters: And what was the experience like for you, David?

David Kaczynski: It was strange, in that it had to be a joint decision, I think for a couple of reasons. One was that our whole family was in denial about the extent of Ted's illness. I think that in some ways you could relate our denial to some of the family's beliefs, which were that it was OK to be different, that we were different from other people, and that it was OK if Ted was different. It was OK if Ted didn't follow the normal career track that someone as brilliant as he was would ordinarily follow.

But I think there was a deep fear that many families feel when mental illness strikes, that there is something wrong with the whole family. It's a tremendous stigma. There is tremendous shame associated with it. It took Linda, somebody outside the family who saw more clearly, to press me on this issue. She had persuaded me back in 1991 to take some of my brother's letters to a psychiatrist, and the psychiatrist confirmed that he thought Ted was very ill and isolation was definitely negative for him. There was not a good prognosis for him. At the same time, the legalities left very little to do, so we just kind of let things be and hoped that Ted would find help or seek us out when he realized he needed help.

I began taking this seriously only when Linda insisted that I read the Unabomber manifesto. I was confident when I approached it that I would be able to tell her in a page or two that this was certainly not my brother. I felt a sudden fear when I realized that I couldn't give her that assurance. I was the one who knew Ted. Linda had never met Ted, except through my stories about my brother. But she had very strong intuition and depended on me for information, for feedback. After we had retrieved more letters from my mother's home and compared them to parts of the manifesto, I said there might be a 50-50 chance. And I felt how immediately disturbed Linda was at that point. For the first time the mirror that I was in our relationship was confirming to her that her intuitions, her fears, might be accurate.

McPheeters: At that point, how did the two of you proceed?

Patrik: We were emotionally a mess at that point. It was hard for us to see people. We spent every evening talking about this for two or three or four hours. David dug out letters from his brother so that we could match the writing style. I was pretty convinced it was Ted, but I couldn't tell for sure. David knew the writing style, and I knew that the ideas were Ted's, so together we became convinced. It became a matter of strategy at that point. And of also being very scared. I had been afraid of Ted long before this, and I had told David that he was never to allow Ted into our house.

Kaczynski: I think the process for the family was that Ted's deterioration took place so gradually that we were able to normalize it and say to ourselves, "Well, that's

just Ted.” We needed a perspective from someone outside the family to wake us up to just how far out on a limb he had gone by that time. We had many family memories of very tender and close experiences with Ted as well. I remembered the brother who offered to give me a prized possession, his coin collection, when I returned from the hospital after an illness.

There was also a time in Linda’s and my relationship that was very important to me, having to do with an incident that had happened the last time I saw Ted. I had been sawing up some firewood with one of his saws, and the sawhorse collapsed. I fell down, and the saw and the logs and everything all tumbled down together. I was lying on the ground, and my brother ran up to me and said, “Are you OK?” I answered, “I hope I didn’t break your saw,” because I knew that he lived so simply, that every possession was important to him and he took care of them very well. But he said, “To hell with the saw, it’s you I care about.” When I told Linda that story, I turned to her and saw that she was crying. And to me that meant that now she, too, saw that this was a real human being, and not just someone who was potentially a monster.

Once the Kaczynski family finally made the decision to turn Ted over to authorities, they campaigned vigorously to have him exempted from the death penalty by reason of insanity.

Becker: Realizing that the government was going to seek the death penalty was something of a surprise, wasn’t it?

Patrik: That’s somewhat inaccurate, because we had talked about the possibility of the death penalty before we went to the FBI. In our discussions between the end of October and about mid-December, when we submitted the manifesto to writing analysis, the death penalty was one of our main issues of contention.

McPheeters: Contention between you and government?

Patrik: Between David and me. I argued that even if it meant the death penalty, we needed to turn him in to the FBI, whereas David was reluctant to turn him in if it meant the death penalty. I used a number of philosophical arguments and all kinds of womanly subterfuge [laughter]. David and I went into it knowing that it could mean that the government could seek the death penalty. We bit the bullet and just went ahead.

Kaczynski: Once contact was made with the FBI, I was told by the agents a number of things that led me to believe that the government really appreciated our cooperation, that they too identified Ted as a mentally ill person. I was told a couple of things that I found very reassuring. One was that it was clear from Ted’s letters that he was mentally disturbed, and that—considering how much emotional duress he had been in for so long—he might be much, much happier spending the rest of his life in prison than he would be living the way he was. There was no mention of the death penalty at that point.

I was also told by an FBI agent who was a specialist in behavioral sciences that for my own piece of mind, she wanted to let me know Ted did not fully appreciate the harm he was inflicting on others. We talked about Ted as a human being. I definitely

had the sense that this investigation was prioritized within the FBI task force, that it was closely monitored from above, and that the agents were representing to me the way the case would be handled—in other words, with gratitude to the family, with some kind of understanding and compassion about my brother’s illness. So, when a year and some months later the government announced that it would seek the death penalty, I felt a tremendous violation. I felt they had been dishonest with me.

I think that I am going to be processing my role in this for my whole life. I don’t think any of this would have happened without [Linda’s] being on the scene. I think I would have found a way to put it in a drawer and not look at it just because it was so painful, so frightening. A big part of this process for me was a fundamental trust in Linda and in our relationship. I trusted that we were together in this, and our wrestling with it was deeply respectful to each other. Without the trust I felt in her, or the respect I felt she had for me and my love for my brother, I never could have begun to go through with it.

A critique of his ideas & actions.



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