

For the love of a brother

Holly Bailey & Ted Kaczynski

Contents

The Cliff Notes	3
The Letters	8
Letter #1	8
Letter #2	9
Letter #3	10

The Cliff Notes

David Kaczynski knows he did the right thing by turning in his brother as a serial killer. But it's as painful today as it was 20 years ago.

From his prison cell, Ted Kaczynski — the “Unabomber,” who terrified the nation in the 1980s and early 1990s — has carried on a remarkable correspondence with thousands of people all over the world. As the 20th anniversary of his arrest approaches, Yahoo News is publishing a series of articles based on his letters and other writings, housed in an archive at the University of Michigan. They shed unprecedented light on the mind of Kaczynski — genius, madman and murderer.

IN THE DESERT SOUTHWEST, USA — We were looking for a sign in a place where there are none. David Kaczynski had told us to look for a row of mailboxes, a rare sight in this remote wilderness, 60 miles from the nearest town. And there he was waiting, to lead us along an unpaved road into the heart of the open desert where he and his wife, Linda, now live.

That desire to escape into the wild was something David had shared with his brother, Ted. Though Ted is seven years older, he and David were once as close as only brothers can be. Over thirty years ago, the Kaczynskis, both Ivy League graduates, each quit their jobs and retreated into the wilderness. Ted built a cabin in the backwoods of Montana; David constructed his in the sweeping desert on the edge of Big Bend National Park in Texas. They both lived off the land, with no electricity or running water.

But over time their paths diverged in dramatic ways. Alone in his cabin and fueled by what court psychiatrists say was severe mental illness, Ted had become the Unabomber, terrorizing the nation with deadly mail and package bombs meant to bring attention to his anti-technology philosophy. David, unaware of what his brother was doing, returned to society and married. Years later, he made one of the most difficult decisions imaginable: to turn in the brother he loved as a suspected killer, which would save the lives of innocent victims, and perhaps Ted's as well. He made what he still believes is the only rational decision.

“It's like a shadow over my life, and I don't know what to do with it,” David said as he sat on the porch of the remote cabin he and Linda recently built. (Because they

still occasionally receive threats, they asked that the location not be disclosed.) “But maybe it’s time to turn the page.”

To help the process, David wrote a book, “Every Last Tie: The Story of the Unabomber and His Family.” It recounts what happened from David’s point of view, and how he and his late mother, Wanda, struggled to acknowledge that a beloved brother and son was a coldblooded killer.

“I still look back on the decision and know it had to be done,” David said. “He could have and probably would have killed other people. ... If there was any way out of having to do what I did and still be a responsible human being, I would have. But I had a responsibility. As painful as it was. As it still is.”

So David became the tortured hero of the Unabomber story, trying to save Ted from the death penalty while doing what he could to make up for his brother’s twisted crimes. He personally apologized to all the victims through letters, phone calls and, in some cases, in-person meetings, even though his brother has never apologized or expressed remorse. When David and his wife were given a \$1 million reward by the Justice Department for the tip that led to his brother’s arrest after a 17-year manhunt, they gave almost all of it to the victims.

As David recalls, it was Linda who first raised the possibility that Ted was the Unabomber. That was in 1995, after she read about the mysterious terrorist’s anti-technology “manifesto.” Linda had never met Ted, who had refused to come to their wedding. But she had read the letters he had sent to David over the years and was disturbed by their increasingly angry tone. She worried he might become violent toward David or others, if not himself. “People who are healthy in their minds don’t think like this,” she had told her husband.

At Linda’s urging, they took Ted’s letters to a psychiatrist shortly after they were married in 1990. The doctor said the letters seemed to show signs of “serious mental illness.” Linda and David asked about getting Ted into treatment, but learned that unless Ted volunteered they would face the challenging burden of proving he was a danger to himself or others. Little did they know that Ted had already killed the first of his three victims. The doctor also warned that if David sought involuntary treatment for Ted, he risked permanently ending their already strained relationship.

But five years later, as Linda read about the Unabomber’s manifesto, it set off an alarm with her. “Don’t be angry with me,” she said to David. “Has it ever occurred to you, even as a remote possibility, that your brother might be the Unabomber?”

David thought his wife’s imagination had run wild. He knew his brother had emotional issues. He had known from when he was a kid growing up in Evergreen Park, Ill., just outside Chicago, that his older brother was, as his mother put it, “special.” But there was no way that Ted could be a killer, he insisted. In spite of his angry letters, he knew him also to be kind and sensitive.

Yet a month later, after David agreed to read the Unabomber manifesto, he was overcome with dread. The Unabomber’s ideas — and his language — sounded ominously familiar.

David's stipulation to the FBI, when he contacted it with his suspicions, was that he would be warned before the bureau took action, and that his role would be kept secret. But when word leaked to the media that there was a Unabomber suspect, federal officials moved quickly. David and his family were given almost no notice, and someone leaked his role to the media. Within hours, reporters from all over the world were on David's doorstep.

A day later, sitting in a jail cell in Lincoln, Mont., Ted asked his public defender how the feds had found him. "Oh, didn't you know?" the man told him, according to a story that was later recounted to David by a member of his brother's legal team. "It was your brother."

Ted shook his head in disbelief. "No," he said. "David wouldn't do that."

According to his diaries confiscated by the FBI, Ted had spent years consumed with hatred of modern society. But after his arrest, Ted's obsession shifted to his brother and what he saw as his unforgivable betrayal. In Ted's view, David had abandoned their shared values by returning to mainstream society, and then sold him out to the FBI. Even worse was that David was now telling "endless lies" — most egregiously, that Ted was mentally ill. "LIES," Ted wrote in a letter to a correspondent that he's filed in his archive of personal papers at the University of Michigan Library's Labadie Collection.

In jail, Ted obsessively read every interview David gave to the media. With colored pencils, he marked up a lengthy New York Times story about the epic tragedy of "The Brothers Kaczynski" — one good, one evil. Underlining David's quotes in story after story, he scrawled the same words again and again in his perfect handwriting: "WRONG. WRONG. WRONG."

As his trial in Sacramento, Calif., approached, Ted became even angrier. Through his attorneys, he refused to speak to his family. His mother and brother had been nothing but a "disaster" for him, he wrote. His last words to David came in two blistering letters, about six months after his arrest, laying out his theory of why his brother had betrayed him:

"Of all the things you could conceivably have done to me, what you have done is by far the cruelest," Ted wrote. "You know me well enough to realize that above all I need physical freedom, silence and solitude, and that, to me, permanent imprisonment will be a fate far worse than death. ... Why did you do it? To stop the Unabomber? Hardly. The real reason you informed on me is that you hate me."

In a second letter, Ted cited David's references to his brother's mental illness. "Though you don't admit it to yourself, you know deep inside that you were inflicting acute suffering on me by making the public statements that you did, and you were doing it because you hate me on account of your own feelings of inferiority and inadequacy relative to me."

Since that day, he has not contacted David again. David, at the advice of Ted's attorneys, apologized to his brother to see if it would break the ice and lead to information that could help his defense.

“I do love you,” David wrote in an October 1996 letter. “I’m so, so sorry for what I’ve done and for how it hurts you.”

It was the first of dozens of letters David has written to his brother over the last 20 years. “I don’t know if it was entirely truthful,” David now says of his apology. “My main concern was to see if I could open a door, if that was something he needed. Maybe that was something I could do for him, to help him.”

Wanda Kaczynski, mother of convicted Unabomber Ted Kaczynski, shakes hands with Federal Defender Dennis Waks, left as she and her son David, at rear leave the U.S. Courthouse in the Fred E. Moss Federal Building, Jan. 22, 1998. (Reuters)

While David knew he was right to have turned in his brother, he struggled with the decision — and still does because he still loves his brother and wants to protect him. Searching for peace, he has found solace in Buddhism, and spent years in therapy.

But Ted has rejected all overtures — even from his mother, Wanda, who never stopped trying to connect with her son. “Someone told me that the greatest tragedy in life is to love someone who cannot love you back and/or to have someone love you and you cannot love that person back,” she wrote in 2005. “This is especially true for a parent who deeply loves a child who for some reason cannot love back. Well, for me, at age 88, the pain cannot long endure.”

Ted did not respond. Wanda died in September 2011.

Over the years, David found some comfort as an advocate for mental health and against the death penalty. He also found “tremendous healing” in an unusual place: through Gary Wright, one of his brother’s victims, who is now one of David’s closest friends.

Though many Unabomber victims and survivors shunned David’s attempts to apologize, he formed an early bond with Wright, who was nearly killed by a bomb planted outside his computer company in 1987. The explosion had embedded so many nails into Wright’s body that nurses at the hospital said he looked like a porcupine, but he miraculously survived, though he still suffers from pain and significant nerve damage in his hands.

David Kaczynski, brother of Unabomber Ted Kaczynski, is shown, Jan. 8, 2016, on his property in the southwest US. David and his wife recognized the writings of his brother when the Unabomber’s manifesto was published in media outlets. They eventually went to the FBI with this information that led to the arrest of his brother. (Photo by Khue Bui for Yahoo News)

Wright, a devout Christian, found healing after the attack by willing himself to forgive whoever had done this to him. So when David called in late 1996, Wright assured him that he didn’t hold him responsible.

On the other end of the line, David was stunned by Wright’s kindness, and speaking about him 20 years later, he still is. “Someone most willing to help me was someone my brother tried to kill,” he marvels. The two became friends, and have traveled the country together, speaking out about the death penalty and the importance of forgiveness.

In perhaps one final dig at his brother, Ted, according to his papers, has sought to make sure that when he dies, he is not buried with his family and that his brother has nothing to do with the disposal of his body.

In fact, it's unclear who does have that responsibility. Over the years, Ted, who will turn 74 in May, has repeatedly changed his mind, reflecting his shifting relationships. His onetime attorney Judy Clarke had been listed as among those responsible in paperwork he drew up in 1997, and while they kept in touch for many years after he pleaded guilty, he's now angry at her. In 2007, he drew up another document listing a group of his pen pals as the responsible party, but it's unclear if he's still on speaking terms with many of them.

David Kaczynski, drives away on his property in the southwest US. (Photo by Khue Bui for Yahoo News)

"I think one thing that weighs on David is knowing that he's probably never going to speak to Ted again," Gary Wright said. "Ted's eventually going to die, and it's probably going to be up to David to pick up Ted and bury him."

Over the years, David has continued to write to his brother, at least twice a year — on his birthday and around the holidays. It's difficult, he admitted, to find things to say to a brother who not only won't speak to him but has been a shadow on his life.

In December, David dutifully wrote to Ted again, but hinted at an end. "I want to believe that reconciliation is always a possibility," he said in our interview. "I believe he does know that I would be open to meet with him. I would go see him in a minute if he would be open to that. But I am not going to spend my life outside the door knocking if it's locked and stays locked."

No one knows what is inside Ted's heart, or if he will ever unlock it to the brother who still loves him. But almost certainly the door to his cell will open only to bring him out on a gurney, by which time, whatever David had hoped to tell him, it will be too late.

Read more in this Yahoo News Special Report:

The Letters

Collection Description: That desire to escape into the wild was something David had shared with his brother, Ted. Though Ted is seven years older, he and David were once as close as only brothers can be. Thirty years ago, the Kaczynskis, both Ivy League graduates, each quit their jobs and retreated into the wilderness.

Letter #1

Dave,

Of all the things you could conceivably have done to me, what you have done is by far the cruelest. You know it, and you know it before you did it, even though, with your usual talent for self-deception, you never permitted yourself to be conscious of it. You know me well enough to realize that above all I need physical freedom, silence, and solitude, and that, to me, permanent imprisonment will be a fate far worse than death. That would be the case even if I were imprisoned under the best of conditions. But you know very well that in prisons there is a high risk of homosexual rape and of abuse by other prisoners, or even by guards; and that even without that prisons are noisy and crowded; and you are certainly aware that I can't endure noise and crowding.

The FBI assured you that conditions in federal prisons were fine and that I would be happier in prison, but it is not conceivable that you could have believed this except by a particularly egregious act of self-deception. You know me, and you know that the FBI had very strong ulterior motives for giving you such assurances. As a matter of fact, I was living rather happily prior to my arrest, and prison will be torture for me.

You tried to get the FBI to arrest me under conditions that wouldn't involve risk of my being killed, and you urged the government not to seek the death penalty for me. But, as already noted, you knew well that permanent imprisonment would be for me far worse than death, so your effort to "save" me from death can only have been an attempt to solve your conscience by inflicting on me a punishment that in our society, is conventionally regarded as less severe than death.

It is interesting that you asked the FBI to promise not to reveal your identity as the informant, and you were very upset when that promise was broken. Evidently you were ashamed of what you were doing. Why did you do it? To stop the unabomber? Hardly. You knew that the unabomber had promised to stop bombing if his manifesto were published, and you knew that the promise would be kept if I were the unabomber, since I am strict about keeping promises. Furthermore, if I were the unabomber you

could have effectively stopped the bombings by warning me that you would tip off the FBI if I didn't desist.

The real reason why you informed on me is that you hate me. You say you love me, and you probably do. But you have deep, unresolved and uncontrolled conflicts concerning me, and your loving me does not prevent you from hating me at the same time. This hatred has repeatedly revealed itself in your behaviour toward me over the years. And what you hate me for is your own gnawing sense of inferiority. Your suspicion that I was the unabomber at last gave you your opportunity to get a crushing revenge on big brother for being smarter and more capable than you are, while maintaining the illusion that your motives were "moral."

Of course, you will not accept the truth about your own motives. I know from long experience that it is useless to reason with you where your emotions are involved, because you will resort to any sort of rationalization, no matter how far-fetched, to avoid facing up to difficult truths. You wear a kind of veil over your motives to keep yourself from being conscious of them, and it is this veil that enables you to live with yourself. But, some day the veil will fall away and you will see yourself as you really are. And on that day you will go to hell, because seeing yourself as you really are will truly be hell.

Ted

Letter #2

Dave:

If there was ever any doubt about the fact that your turning me in was motivated by your hatred of me, that doubt has been removed by your interviews that appeared in the New York Times and on 60 Minutes.

In those interviews you portrayed me as mentally ill. Did you really believe I was so? Hardly. In the past you have denied the very existence of mental illness. I have proof of this in the letters you wrote me concerning Joel Schwartz. Were you trying to "save" me from the death penalty by providing me with an insanity defense? If that had been your motive you would have emphasized the fact that I was subjected to verbal and psychological abuse, which you know is true and which would have helped my defense. Instead, you lied and denied that I had suffered such abuse, even though you are well aware (I've made it clear to you in various letters) that the acknowledgment of that abuse was desperately important to me, and that the denial of it tortured me with frustration and a sense of injustice.

Though you don't admit it to yourself, you know deep inside that you were inflicting acute suffering on me by making the public statements that you did, and you were doing it because you hate me on account of your own feelings of inferiority and of inadequacy relative to me.

Ted

Letter #3

Dear Ted,

Your letters were shown to me. Afterward I spoke with one of your attorneys, Gary. Soward, who confirmed that the jail environment is terribly noisy and demeaning. I both fear and in a gut sense know the effect this must be having on you. I know that I am the immediate cause of this suffering. I've passed through periods of denial, in which I tried to convince myself that my actions might even have helped you. But all of that is over now. I have had to glimpse my own cruelty and it is, as you say, a kind of hell. I do love you, I'm so, so sorry for what I've done and for how it hurts you.

Dave

The Ted K Archive

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The Cliff Notes & Letters

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