

Unabomber Dreams

Gary Greenberg

June 19, 2023

Ted Kaczynski had a recurring nightmare. “I would see myself and my cabin isolated on a tiny little patch of land,” he told me, “surrounded by a gigantic shopping center.” The dream wasn’t exactly prescient, but while the “intrusion of civilization” into his backwoods refuge did not occur, his cabin did end up surrounded by cement and steel—the airplane hangar in Sacramento to which the federal government transported it after his arrest. So did he, sentenced to live out his days in a supermax cell not much smaller than his cabin, where even the bed was cast in concrete.

The Unabomber confessed this dream to me in a letter that arrived 25 years and one day before he died, evidently by his own hand. It was the first of thirty he sent, part of a year-long exchange in which we were each trying to enlist the other’s aid. He was hoping I would use my modest credentials as a mental-health professional to clear him of the diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia that government psychiatrists had rendered. I was hoping he would let me be his biographer, or at least sit for his first media interview. I still don’t know whose agenda was more unsavory, but in any event, neither of our dreams came true.

What did come to fruition, although it took a quarter century or so, was his wish to be dead, which was the reason he wanted me to take on his psychiatrists in the first place. The schizophrenia diagnosis had been central to his defense team’s effort to spare him the death sentence sought by the prosecution. Kaczynski strenuously objected to this strategy, just as he had opposed their desire to enter an insanity defense at trial. He refused diagnostic testing until the judge insisted on it as a condition of considering Kaczynski’s motion to fire his lawyers and represent himself. The resulting diagnosis had sealed his fate, and he wanted me to help him with an appeal that would bring a different conclusion to his case. “I’m not interested in life in prison,” he wrote. “Faced with a choice between life imprisonment and the death penalty, I’d just as soon have the death penalty.”

If I pondered the implications of participating in a therapist-assisted suicide, I don’t remember it. I suppose I figured his chances of success to be very low, and I was unlikely to carry much weight against the government’s expert forensic psychiatrists. But more to the point, I was caught up in a grievance we had in common: the use of psychiatric diagnosis to explain away disturbing behavior. His beef was centered on the “unendurable injustice” of “having the insanity defense forced on me...and at being dishonestly represented as insane”—specifically, he wrote, by making “it appear that I thought the negative phenomena resulting from technological progress were directed at me personally...and that I thought the erosion of freedom in our society was the result of a concerted intention to destroy freedom.” Mine was with the claim of psychiatrists that their diagnoses represented diseases no different in kind from diabetes or bacterial infections, a claim to which the diagnosis of schizophrenia in a man who wrote these letters seemed to give the lie. For both of us, the issue was the way power can speak to, and drown out, truth.

At least that’s how it seems 25 years later, but that may be because the news of Kaczynski’s death arrived on a day when one of those negative phenomena was

pouring south from Canada, shrouding the country in the smoke of wildfires kindled by lightning in forests dried by heat and drought. I wasn't taking it personally, not exactly, but my wife's flaring asthma felt pretty close to home, and I had to suppress my inner Unabomber, who was near outrage at the ongoing failure of the people in power to reckon with the truth of climate change. Not that I think sending bombs through the mail to people I don't know is a solution—or anything other than evil—but the fact that forty years after scientists began to warn about the warming atmosphere, with floods and droughts and famines on the rise, with a choking miasma enveloping the nation's capital and financial center, evidence of a planet literally on fire, our leaders are still trying to carry on business as usual, which increasingly is no business at all: it's enough to make your blood boil. And to make you realize that in this one way, Ted Kaczynski was right: "technological civilization," as he called it, very well may do us in.

There was other momentous news on that smoky day, about another self-pitying menace to the public. The former president unleashes mayhem through social media rather than bombs, and from grand mansions rather than a ramshackle cabin, but the two men share a thirst for chaos that seems boundless, and detached from any aspiration to a better world. It's not hard to imagine Kaczynski applauding him, or his compatriots in his home state of Montana, who recently made it illegal to include data about carbon emissions in state-required environmental reviews. For that matter, he'd probably be gratified by the Arizona politician who warned Merrick Garland that 75 million armed people were out to get him or by the representatives in Congress who just recently took the world economy hostage—and not only because vengeance and spite were the Unabomber's stock-in-trade, but because, as he once wrote to me, "if we want changes of revolutionary magnitude, then what we want is not reform and compromise, but polarization." To see our leaders deepening division and unleashing chaos, and their supporters cheering them on, would be the fulfillment of another of Ted Kaczynski's dreams: the utter collapse of the society that technology makes possible.

There may have been a time when the Unabomber wasn't quite so dedicated to the destruction of everything—maybe as late as 1998, which is when he made the first suicide attempt I know of. He'd returned to his cell after hearing the judge in his trial decide to allow his attorneys to go forward with an insanity defense against his objections. He fashioned his bedsheets into a noose and tried to strangle himself. As he blacked out, he realized that he might fail and be left disabled by brain damage, so he aborted the attempt.

I have to conclude that at that time, unlike after his imprisonment (and after his cancer diagnosis), he must still have had some hope, however slight, of going free. Something still mattered to him; the nihilism incipient in his terrorism was not fully realized until he was entirely overwhelmed by circumstance, outmatched by all the forces arrayed against him. Twenty-five years later, some large portion of Americans, and many of our leaders, appear to be reaching the same point: overwhelming despair leading to the conclusion that seeking after moral principles is a fool's errand, that

nothing matters other than brute power, and that if you can't have or keep it, then you might as well destroy everything, even yourself.

I can't blame them, not really. After all, we do seem to be lurching from crisis to crisis without any relief on the horizon, the stakes are as high as they get, and solutions seem elusive, to say the least. Ted Kaczynski put it this way, after cataloging all the ills of the "industrial-technological system": "It would be better to dump the whole stinking system and take the consequences." I'm not sure he was right, but the system may have other ideas.

The Ted K Archive

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thepointmag.com. Forms of Life. Dispatches from the present.
Written from Scotland, Connecticut.

www.thetedkarchive.com