Interview with David Kaczynski on The Diane Rehm Show

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Guest Host: Indira Lakshmanan

It has been nearly 20 years since the arrest of Ted Kazcynski, the man known as the Unabomber. In the 1980s and 90s, Kazcynski sent a series of mail bombs, killing three and injuring dozens. The attacks might have continued if it weren't for Ted's brother, David. After reading the Unabomber's manifesto in the Washington Post, David Kazcynski grew suspicious. The ideas and writing resembled letters he had received from his mentally ill brother. David's tip led to Ted's arrest. Since then David has become an anti-death penalty activist and a mental health advocate. Now he has written a memoir. David Kaczynski and a forensic psychiatrist reflect on the story of the Unabomber and his family.

Guests

- **Dr. Liza Gold** Clinical professor of psychiatry, Georgetown University Medical Center; vice president, American Academy of Psychiatry & The Law; editor and author of "Gun Violence and Mental Illness"
- **David Kaczynski** Author of "Every Last Tie: The Story Of The Unabomber And His Family"

The Kaczynski Family, 1952

(Courtesy of David Kaczynski)

Transcript

MS. INDIRA LAKSHMANAN: Thanks for joining us. I'm Indira Lakshmanan sitting in for Diane Rehm. Twenty years ago, David Kaczynski faced a chilling decision. He suspected his mentally ill brother, Ted, might be the Unabomber, one of the FBI's most wanted men. As it turned out, he was right. Over 17 years, Ted Kaczynski has mailed or hand delivered a series of increasingly sophisticated mail bombs that killed three people and injured two dozen, along the way, sowing terror, even threatening to explode airplanes.

As David suspicions grew, he faced a life-altering decision, turn in his beloved older brother whom he worshipped as a child, possibly condemning him to death or say nothing and risk that if the culprit was his brother, he might kill someone again. Joining me in the studio to share his incredible life story is David Kaczynski and later on in the show, we will also be joined by Dr. Liza Gold, a psychiatrist at Georgetown University who studies the relationship between violence and mental health. Welcome.



MR. DAVID KACZYNSKI: Good to be here, Indira.

LAKSHMANAN: Good to have you. And you, the listeners, are, of course, as always, most welcome to join our conversation, share your thoughts, ask your questions. You can call us at 1-800-433-8850. You can send us email at drshow@wamu.org. Join us on Facebook or send us a tweet. So David, you have just published a very personal book called, "Every Last Tie: The Story Of The Unabomber And His Family." What motivated you to share your family's story and why now, 20 years after the fact?

KACZYNSKI: I think there might have been a couple of factors. One was the death of our mom in 2011 and I retired as director of New Yorkers Against the Death Penalty a few months after that. And so my focus shifted from kind of the external world, this mission of opposing the death penalty, advocating for more accessible treatment for people with mental illness to kind of turning inward. Especially after mom died, I thought a lot about her.

I missed her terribly and I began to write a little bit about her and then I began to write more about the family, my brother and my father. And just about that time, I got — I was approached by Gisela Fosado who is an editor at Duke University. And she said, David, we'd love it if you would consider submitting a manuscript to us. And so I took it more seriously. I didn't necessarily begin by intending to publish something, but the timing was right.

And as I said, I was beginning to look more inward and look kind of back at the past and try to process and make sense of the story that I'd lived through.

LAKSHMANAN: And you'd gone, of course, from your mission, as you say, of being an anti-death penalty activist and mental health advocate to starting to write poetry. And so, in a way, the writing was maybe a natural transition in this book, which is really extraordinary. You begin with your childhood. What kind of a brother was Ted when you were growing up?

KACZYNSKI: You know, I have very many fond memories of Ted. You know, one of my fondest was that when I was a little boy and we'd move to a new house, I couldn't kind of reach the doorknob to let myself back into the house. I could push my way out of the screen door, but I couldn't let myself back in. And Ted, who was about — who was seven years older than I am, so about 10 years old at this point, got this idea that he'd take a spool from mom's sewing kit and he removed the thread from the spool and then he hammered the spool onto the wooden screen door, in effect, making a makeshift door handle for me.

So, you know, as a little boy, and here's my big brother taking care of me, having the insight to realize, hey, my little brother's struggling to get in the house. Maybe there's something I could do to help him. That's one just small story. But he was a good big brother. We had a loving family. And, in a sense, because of the age difference, there was no sibling rivalry. It was like I had Ted up on a pedestal. He was my hero when I was growing up.

LAKSHMANAN: He was also incredibly brilliant not just in your family, but compared with everyone in your neighborhood, everyone you knew.

KACZYNSKI: Yes. At one point, his IQ, I think, was tested and they came up with the number, 165. So you're a genius at 140. Ted was kind of off the charts. He was really brilliant, especially at mathematics. He ended up getting a scholarship, graduating from high school two years early, barely 16 years old and getting a scholarship to go to Harvard University.

LAKSHMANAN: Incredible. And you describe that a moment of looking back at a photograph of that day when he was going off to Harvard University, the whole family was so proud of him, 16 years old with his scholarship, holding his suitcase. Tell us about that photo and how it made you feel years later.

KACZYNSKI: Yeah, I look back at that picture and, you know, I went through a lot of photos after mom passed away and that one really struck me because it seemed like such a hopeful moment. You know, Ted is kind of dressed up and I'm dressed up just like my big brother and I'm kind looking off to the side almost like looking off into the future that I see is bright and golden and I think of, you know, my brother's going to do great things in the world and I'm so proud of him and maybe I can be like him someday.

I look back at that little boy and I think, gee, that was me. So much has changed since then and a lot of disappointments.

LAKSHMANAN: And that was him. And that was him in the picture. I mean, the face that you describe of his looking out at the camera with so much hope and expectation for his future.

KACZYNSKI: And a friendliness, a sense of connection. You look at that picture, Ted could look into a camera and you could see his eyes were bright and they were open. You look at later photographs, some of which are contained in this book, of brother and there's — like the light has gone out of his eyes. Something has happened.

LAKSHMANAN: And yet, even at a young age, you describe asking both of your parents separately, what was wrong with your brother. On the one hand, he's this incredibly kind and empathetic and loving older brother who thinks of making a little doorknob for a 3-year-old little tot, and at the same time, you knew, at your young age, that something was wrong with him. How?

KACZYNSKI: Well, he tended to withdraw. He didn't have friends. I was a very social kid. I had lots of friends in the neighborhood. Ted did not have many friends, certainly not close friends. He spent a lot of time by himself. There were times when I felt there was a kind of barrier, like I couldn't quite read his feelings, like he would shut down to some extent. And I think that was what motivated me to ask first mother and then my father, you know, what's wrong with Teddy? Why is he different?

Mom's initial response was, well, David, there's nothing wrong with your brother. There are differences between people. You're very social. Ted is more intellectual. It's fine. You're both wonderful in your own way. I think that was a good answer. But at some point, mom realized that that quite didn't cover it for me and she went on to explain a traumatic experience that my brother had had when he was 3 years old. He'd

gotten sick. They took him to the — I'm sorry. I said 3 years old. I meant 9 months old.

So here we're talking about a child that's preverbal who has to go to the hospital. And mom always felt that that hospital experience, about a week or two weeks in the hospital as a 9 month old baby was quite traumatic to Ted, that he had changed dramatically over that period of time. In those days, hospitals weren't particularly welcoming to families so they were — mom and dad were only allowed to visit Ted, their infant son, during regular visiting hours, which was two hours, three days a week and...

LAKSHMANAN: Hmm. That is heartbreaking.

KACZYNSKI: Yeah, I think — and there's quite a bit of research that shows that that particular stage of 9 months to a year old is a stage where, you know, connections, bonding is developed and there's a lot of literature on attachment disorder. There's some sense — at least mom felt very, very strongly that that trauma had affected Ted's ability to trust people and to perhaps feel that he was loved.

LAKSHMANAN: Well, you describe in the book how your mother said that he was crying hysterically when he was being handed over to the doctors and nurses at 9 months old by your parents and then, that was it. They were gone because, as you say, they were only allowed to visit three times a week and that she felt, for years and decades afterwards, that even this 9 month old baby somehow had never forgiven her for leaving him at the hospital with these strangers.

KACZYNSKI: Yeah, like there was some kind of imprint of a memory of abandonment or a broken relationship that had affected Ted for the rest of his life.

LAKSHMANAN: Well, you mention that as one traumatic experience, but another one is here he was enrolled at Harvard on a scholarship at the tender age of 16. Sounds like a great start to life, but not only did he suffer from profound social isolation there, in your telling, but I was horrified to read about the cruel psychological experimentation that was done on him as minor. Tell us.

KACZYNSKI: Yes. Ted was, in effect, a guinea pig in a psychological research project that was conducted, I believe funded, by the U.S. government. There's suspicion without clear proof that it might have actually been funded by the CIA, which was, at that point, funding a lot of experiments on mind control of American citizens, sometimes in prisons, in mental institutions, but also on college campuses. The scholar who oversaw that study, Henry Murray, was actually quite famous in his day and had been actually part of the OSS, which was a forerunner of the CIA.

So there's a lot of possibilities that this study had been perhaps funded by the CIA.

LAKSHMANAN: And what did he do to Ted?

KACZYNSKI: What it involved was a weekly meeting that involved a conversation with someone that Ted thought was another peer, another subject to the experiment. It was actually a graduate student who was coached to behave in an insulting and humiliating way. The basic premise of the study was to see how bright college

students, especially those with alienation in their personalities, would respond to aggressive attacks on their beliefs and personal characteristics.

LAKSHMANAN: So painful to hear that that was done to him and when he was a minor. All right. Well, we are going to take a short break here. Coming up, your comments, your questions, more about Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, from his brother. Stay with us.

Welcome back. I'm Indira Lakshmanan sitting in for Diane Rehm. This hour, I'm joined by David Kaczynski, brother of the Unabomber Ted Kaczynski, and author of a new memoir, "Every Last Tie: The Story Of The Unabomber And His Family." And also joining us now, Dr. Liza Gold, clinical professor of psychiatry at Georgetown School of Medicine and editor and author of "Gun Violence and Mental Illness."

Right before we went to the break, David, we were talking about this psychological study that Ted was subjected to while he was an undergraduate student at Harvard University from the fall of 1959 to the spring of 1962. Tell us a little bit more about it.

KACZYNSKI: Yeah. I believe that Murray himself, the man who oversaw the study, called — described the process as sweeping and abusive attacks. And Ted is a kind of an alienated young — bright young person, spent three years every week facing this kind of abusive treatment. Later on, when his lawyers found out about this, they asked him, Ted, why did you put up with this? You know, this was one of the worst experiences of your life. Why didn't you just walk away from it?

And Ted's response to them was I wanted to prove I could take it, that I couldn't be broken. So much like Ted and yet, in a way, it kind of leaves this lingering question of, you know, how much effect — how much damage did these studies actually do to my brother's personality, self esteem and way of thinking about other people.

LAKSHMANAN: And one of the most heartbreaking things for me in this book is, as a parent, reading that your mother was asked her permission to let him participate in a psychological study because he was a minor. He couldn't give his own consent. And she, you know, from Chicago, wrote a letter signing yes because she thought that they were going to be helping him. She thought they were going to be giving him some sort of psychological support. She knew that her son was somewhat alienated and socially isolated.

KACZYNSKI: I remember her exact words when she spoke with me about it. She said she thought these nice psychiatrists might help Ted. And I — exactly the opposite was happening.

LAKSHMANAN: Well, Ted graduated with a degree in math from Harvard, went on to get a PhD at the University of Michigan and ended up as an assistant professor at UC Berkeley, a third elite institution, so it looked like his life was on a great path. What happened?

KACZYNSKI: Well, at some point, he wrote a letter to our parents and said he had decided to quit his job. He thought they might be angry at him about this. I mean, this was — they'd funded a wonderful education for him. They had high hopes

for their son and he was throwing it all away. In some sense, he was kind of on the top of the world, a rising star in academia and he decides to quit because he's come to the conclusion that technology is actually — most of us admire, think highly of and think is a great premise for humanity, is actually very negative, very destructive.

So because a lot of mathematics is involved in technology, he basically said he didn't want to do mathematics anymore. He didn't want to teach mathematics and, in fact, he wanted to remove himself as far as possible from technology. And that's when he had this idea that he would live out in the wilderness.

LAKSHMANAN: So he quit his job at Berkeley in 1969. He said he traveled because he wanted to live in the wilderness. What was your reaction? And it was quite different from your parents' reaction.

KACZYNSKI: Yeah. Well, actually, mom and dad weren't angry at Ted. I mean, I think mom, at some point, was a little concerned. She said to me, you know, David, I don't think this is really so much about technology as it is about your brother's difficulty with people. You know, maybe he's running away from a society that he doesn't understand and can't fit into. And I think mom was probably right there. To me, this was Ted. This was my big brother. He's smart. He's principled. His ideas are very intriguing to me and I think, wow, how many people in life get to do what they want instead of what other people expect them to do?

And how many people are so principled to make sacrifices on the basis of a belief system, in this case that, for Ted, that technology was destructive?

LAKSHMANAN: And you actually jumped in the car with him and drove across Western Canada to help him look for a piece of land to homestead.

KACZYNSKI: Yeah. We spent about two months one summer and he actually made an application to apply for a homesteading permit to homestead some land in Canada. Around this time, it was during the time of the Vietnam War. I think Canada was being inundated by, you know, young males who were trying to escape the draft and they basically denied his application and that's when Ted's focus shifted to Montana.

LAKSHMANAN: So he ends up in Montana where he becomes increasingly isolated and he begins sending scathing letters to your parents. At what point did you realize that something was wrong?

KACZYNSKI: I guess that was my first real shock with Ted. I mean, the first time I felt I really did not understand my brother's thinking. I remember a 23-page letter came. This was about five years after Ted had moved to Montana, living in a little cabin, very isolated. And it was basically claiming that he was abused as a child, not physically, but emotionally, that they pushed him academically because — to feed their own pride, to feed their own egos, but not because they cared about him.

I remember in one particular case, he said, mom, you yelled at me for throwing socks under the bed. Didn't you know that this is normal behavior for an adolescent boy? Well, Ted, you know, it's kind of normal behavior for an adolescent boy's mother to, you know, maybe get upset sometimes. So it's like his perspective on our family

and our parents was totally different. And I thought well, Ted, maybe he's lost his temper. He's gotten a little angry. He's said some things he didn't mean.

I remember writing to him, telling him how devastating the letter had been to mom and dad, that he should apologize and instead, I get a very sort of escalated response from Ted and I began to realize, wow, he actually believes he was not loved when, in fact, we were both deeply loved by both of our parents.

LAKSHMANAN: And the first mention of mental illness itself came when you were visiting home and your mother handed you a book called "The Stranger, My Son" by Louise Wilson about the journey of a mother seeking to understand and obtain help for her mentally ill son. So it seems like your mom had a sense of what was going on. Did you acknowledge what she said and did the two of you try to help get him mental health help?

KACZYNSKI: You know, I remember reading the book and mom didn't say why she was interested in having me read this book, but when I handed it back to her — and the book describes a mother's journey trying to get help for her seriously mentally ill son diagnosed with schizophrenia and finding there was not much help available and there was a lot of stigma and she ended up being blamed for her son's problems. I think we've come a long way in our understanding of mental illness since the time that book was written.

But I remember handing it back mom and said, just almost taking a little risk. Mom, did you ask me to read this 'cause it reminded you of Ted? And I saw her eyes kind of get big and she looked at me, full of concern, and said, yeah, did it remind your of Ted a little bit, David? And I said, yes. And, of course, it's kind of interesting, mom, at that point, says, of course, Ted isn't schizophrenic, you know, but maybe he has some tendencies in this direction. Maybe we should watch this.

So I think there's some element of denial here. There's such a stigma on mental illness. You know, parents are blamed for it. Nobody wants to acknowledge that a loved one is mentally ill, especially at that day and age. And I think there's another factor here that when you're so close to someone, you lose some of your perspective, you know. You sort of adjust. You adapt to their incremental changes over time. But this was not an incremental change, this sudden blast of anger coming from Ted was totally unexpected and kind of inexplicable to me.

LAKSHMANAN: Well, David, you talk in the book about how Ted actually sought out mental health services for himself and was unsuccessful. Tell us why.

KACZYNSKI: Yeah. This is something that I was very surprised to learn after Ted's arrest from his attorneys that, at some point, and he had actually been the Unabomber at this point. He had actually sent bombs to people, had already killed one person. He wrote a letter to the mental health services in the rural county where he lived in Montana asking if he could do therapy through the mail. And he probably didn't know he has schizophrenia, but he knew that he had difficulty sleeping. He knew he felt high anxiety around people. He knew he had problems in adjusting to, you know, society.

He wanted to get help through the mail. And, of course, he was told, by return letter, no, the system doesn't work this way. You have to actually come up. You have to show — present yourself for an interview. You have to pay for services or we could help you apply for welfare. And anyway, there were a number of barriers. And for Ted, someone who was paranoid, who had trust issues, these were insurmountable barriers. There was no way Ted was going to sit face to face with someone and talk about his problems.

That would've been overwhelmingly difficult for Ted, given his mental problems and his problems in relating to people.

LAKSHMANAN: He wasn't going to leave the cabin and also, he didn't have the money to pay for the services.

KACZYNSKI: Exactly.

LAKSHMANAN: Dr. Liza Gold, it seems like David and his family knew that Ted was struggling, but they couldn't find a way to get him help. How common is this?

DR. LIZA GOLD: Well, I'm very sad to say that it's extremely common. To say that the mental health system is broken in this country is a tremendous understatement. It's not even cohesive enough to really call it a system, I think. And unfortunately, as a society, we've accepted the lack of investment in mental health resources and we bemoan it at certain times, but we have accepted it in the people we vote for, in our social policy and in the suffering that it causes only occasionally comes to the surface when there's a terrible incident that happens.

But it's heartbreaking. I get calls frequently from family members. My son, my husband, my brother, my uncle, my father, usually it's a male, but not always, often it can be a female. And, you know, they don't think they're ill and we can't get them into treatment and we're worried they're gonna commit suicide, usually, is the concern and what can we do. And we go over — I do spend time going over what their options are give the resources.

LAKSHMANAN: I'm Indira Lakshmanan and you're listening to "The Diane Rehm Show." David, I'd love it if you would read a passage in your book for us. There's one bit on page 24 where you really sort of sum up how you feel about the whole thing. Can you read that for us?

KACZYNSKI: Sure, thank you. "Suddenly, it felt as if my brother and I were central characters in a grandiose tragedy. I began to discern a frightening symmetry in our lives that lead me to the terrible dilemma that Linda and I then faced. Do nothing and run the risk that Ted might kill again or turn him in and accept the likelihood that he would be executed for his crimes. I could not reconcile the conflict between our moral obligation and my love from my brother, could not make a decision without sacrificing one for the other.

But perhaps, I thought, we would wake up someday and see our situation differently. Perhaps our sacrifice compelled by reason and necessity would feel less painful now that I had come closer to acknowledging the worst about my brother. If we waited for some magical resolution of our dilemma, we would end up waiting forever. We could end up

waiting until someone else got blown up. The alternatives looked to stark to be true, more like literature than life.

Looking back over our lives as brothers, I began to see how every step lead to this terrible juncture. Now, I felt trapped inside the narrative of our lives. My identity forever defined by the fate of being Ted Kaczynski's brother. I wanted out of that role. I wanted to make my own choices in life, not have them foisted upon me. I wanted to create my own story and yet to choose to do nothing was itself a choice. There was no escape. I was boxed in by the awful dilemma.

And for some time, I felt engulfed in a vision of the universe as dark as Ted's. When federal agents entered my brother's tiny cabin near Lincoln, Montana, on April 3, 1996, they discovered bomb-making parts and plans, a carbon copy of the Unabomber's manifesto and most chilling of all, another live bomb found under his bed wrapped and apparently ready to be mailed to someone. My resentment of Ted strangely melted away.

The way I was accustomed to thinking about him, my usual frame of reference no longer worked. Now, there was just emptiness and deep pity in my heart where my brother had been. I wondered how Ted would receive the news that I'd turned him in. I hoped he might understand on some level why I had done so and not hate me for it. How would it feel to my paranoid brother to be turned in by the one person he had loved and trusted? I thought it must feel like the confirmation of his darkest thought.

Mom's warning voice from childhood echoed in my ears. David, you must never abandon your brother because that's what he fears the most."

LAKSHMANAN: Thank you so much for sharing that with us. You must never abandon your brother because that's what he fears most. It takes us back to that moment when was the 9 month old baby stuck in the hospital without his parents. I'm also reminded of a story that you tell in the book about a rabbit. Tell us that story.

KACZYNSKI: Yeah. We lived in this suburb of Chicago with, you know, my father had a garden. And one day, he found this little baby rabbit in the garden and, you know, he took it and we had had, like, a little box. He put it in this little box and it was kind of cool that, you know, here we had a chance to look at little rabbit up close. And a lot of my friends, people from, you know, other little boys and girls clustered around. We were all looking at this rabbit down in the box.

And then, Teddy was the last person to come up, kind of. And he looked down into that box with the, you know, the rabbit — had a screen on top and the rabbit was kind of trapped in this box. And Ted's reaction was, like, very different from ours and it was instinctive. It was, oh, oh, no. Let it go, let it go. It was like he was almost panicked to look at this rabbit. And all of a sudden, I realized, oh, this little rabbit's afraid. It's trembling. It's — hey, we're being cruel. Let's let it go.

And sure enough, our father realizing that he had caused distress to his other son, took the rabbit across to a park across a little piece of woods across the street and let the rabbit go. It reminded me — in many ways, I thought — this story has come back to me because it reminded me of Ted's sensitivity, particularly when he could identify

with someone in pain or a creature that was hurting or frightened, in this case, a little rabbit.

And then, after his arrest, I thought, oh, my gosh, is Ted going to spend his life trapped in a cage like this little rabbit? Is this the fulfillment of his worst fear?

LAKSHMANAN: Indeed. Of course, he was sensitive to other people's pain, but he ended up hurting people very badly, killing three people and injuring two dozen of them. We'll talk more about that when we come back a short break. We'll take your calls and your questions. Stay with us. We'll be right back.

Welcome back. I'm Indira Lakshmanan. I'm sitting in for Diane Rehm. This hour we're talking with David Kaczynski, the brother of the notorious Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski, and author of a new memoir "Every Last Tie: The Story Of The Unabomber And His Family." And Dr. Liza Gold, a clinical professor of psychology at Georgetown School of Medicine, and also author of "Gun Violence and Mental Illness."

I want to start out with an email that we got from Larry, that says, "Coincidentally just two days back I read Ted Kaczynski's manifesto." He's referring to the 35,000 word piece that was published both in The New York Times and The Washington Post. He threatened to have more victims if they didn't publish his piece. And the listener says, "This does not seem to me the work of an insane man. Maybe from someone with a 40 degree tilt, but not insane," he asks. Dr. Gold?

GOLD: Well, insanity is not a medical term or a psychiatric term in this century. It's really a legal term, and it's defined legally in certain ways. And one can have paranoid delusions, hallucinations, other kinds of fixed false beliefs, and still not entirely lose the ability to have rational thought. And so that's sort of a misconception, I think, that is, again, reinforced over and over again by the legal system, which has a very, very narrow definition of this concept, insanity.

There's no question that people can have fixed false beliefs, delusions, hallucinations even, and still maintain the ability to plan, to function in many ways normally, unless you get up close and personal and see what's going on underneath the surface. So to the extent that there's no question I never evaluated Ted Kaczynski, obviously, but I've read some of the psychiatric reports, et cetera. There's no question in my mind that those were likely correct, that he had a mental illness. He did not necessarily meet the legal definition of insanity, but he certainly had a mental illness. And there is a disconnect there.

LAKSHMANAN: All right. Well, David, before the break, you were talking about your brother in terms of how you as his younger sibling saw so many flashes of his sensitivity and his goodness, but when did you suspect that he might actually be the Unabomber?

KACZYNSKI: The first person to suspect this was my wife, Linda, who actually had never met Ted. She had read some of his letters. Linda was actually the first person to sort of, as maybe a more objective member of the family, to begin to have real concerns about mental illness. So even long before we had even heard of the Unabomber, she persuaded me to take some of Ted's letters to a psychiatrist who said,

you know, we don't make a diagnosis based on letters, but your brother's really sick, and he needs help.

And of course we're stuck in this hard place. How do we get him help if he doesn't know he's ill, if he's — so I'm thinking — when Linda said to me, do you think he could be the Unabomber, I'm thinking — I'm remembering the sensitive older brother I had. I think, no, Ted is not capable of this. And so a huge mystery for me, and one that I really struggle within the book is how could I have these memories, how could I know this person who at the age of ten could be so kind to me, and yet cold-bloodedly send bombs to people he didn't even know, completely innocent people.

It's just like how does this — how is this disconnect possible? How can a human being have sensitivity on one hand and a completely callous disregard for life on the other?

LAKSHMANAN: And so when you read the Unabomber manifesto in the papers, what did you think? Did you immediately think, yes, this is Ted?

KACZYNSKI: Well, you know, I read it actually with Linda sitting next to me. We read it on a computer screen. I realized very quickly Linda was looking at my face, because she didn't know Ted. She knew that my face would tell her more than the words on the screen. And I was all set to turn to her and say, I know it's not him. I know how he writes. I know how he thinks. And unfortunately I started to get this — on an intuitive level, I started to really — my heart sank when I started to read it. Intellectually I think I told Linda at that point, maybe there's one chance in a 1,000.

And that's when we began to really investigate. We compared Ted's letters to me over the years, some of which dealt with this theme of technology and passages in the manifesto. And over a period of probably about a month eventually I got to the point of saying, you know, I think it might be a 50/50 chance that Ted is the Unabomber.

LAKSHMANAN: And then you had to make this life altering decision, altering his life, and forever altering your life as well to go to the authorities.

KACZYNSKI: And facing this kind of dilemma, this life and death dilemma where you realize you're looking for a way out, but you realize that any choice you make could lead to somebody dying. If you do nothing, and you make that choice, your brother might send another bomb to somebody, and they would be killed. Their families would be devastated. What a horrible — I couldn't live with the blood of innocent people on my hands. On the other hand, what's the alternative? Turning Ted in, the likelihood that he would face the death penalty, what would it be like to go through the rest of my life with my brother's blood on my hands?

Ultimately I think there was really only one choice to be made, and that was we could not just sit by and let this person — we're the only people who could stop the Unabomber, because we're the only people who know Ted well enough to suspect him. And so we made the decision that we would go forward and at least do the one thing — if Ted was the Unabomber, we could stop it, and that's what we decided to do.

LAKSHMANAN: So you alerted authorities, and of course did result in his capture in Montana in his cabin. You immediately began campaigning against the death

penalty for your brother, first specifically, and then at large against the death penalty in general. But did you ever get to communicate with your brother from the moment that you turned him in?

KACZYNSKI: No. You know, Ted had kind of estranged himself first from our parents, and then ultimately from me. I hadn't received a friendly letter from Ted in years. When he was arrested, I reached out to his attorneys, asked if I could speak with them, asked if I could see Ted, asked how Ted was doing. I really wanted to try to explain to him why I'd done what I'd done. And unfortunately Ted at this point had slammed a door. He said he would never meet or speak with or communicate with his family again. That was 20 years ago. And it's still true. I continue to write to Ted from time to time, but I've never received a response.

LAKSHMANAN: Well, it sort of goes to a comment that we've gotten here on website from someone who says, "Half the time David talks about his brother as though he's deceased. I find that interesting."

KACZYNSKI: Mmm. Mmm. Well, it's interesting. I wonder, that brother that I loved, you know, it's almost like I've lost him in a certain sense, you know. I have to believe that there is this spark inside him that on some level, he probably knows what he's done, he probably knows the harm that he's done, and I still have some hope that perhaps at some point Ted might open a door and I would rush to see him if that were to happen.

LAKSHMANAN: How did he...

KACZYNSKI: But I don't know if it ever will.

LAKSHMANAN: How did he react when he found out you were the one who turned him in?

KACZYNSKI: You know, I only heard this story third hand, so I'm not sure if it's exactly true, but apparently Ted asked one of the attorneys that he had contact with at the very beginning, how did they find me? And the attorney said, well, it was your brother that turned you in. And Ted wouldn't believe it at first. He said, no, David loves me. He wouldn't do such a thing. So that was painful to hear. I have to believe that what we did was not only for the benefit of protecting society and preventing future victims. I think it was for Ted's benefit as well.

LAKSHMANAN: Dr. Gold.

GOLD: You know, reading through David's book over the last few days, there was one passage that really struck me about how none of us go through life without loss. We lose one thing, we lose people, we lose material possessions, we can lose parts of ourselves, various types of loss. As someone who lost a brother many years ago, he passed away at a young age, I was really struck again, and made me think of this question about being deceased in that, you know, there's a tremendous loss here for David, even before. Although his brother was estranged, he could maintain his image of his caring, older brother.

Once the information clicked about the Unabomber, that is — there are multiple losses here for him. Those memories become tinged I would think. You can ask him.

Plus, of course the relationship now, the fact that they were estranged takes on a whole other meaning, and no contact for 20 years. So, you know, the loss of a brother is a very difficult thing for anybody to live through. And David has described and talked about this.

KACZYNSKI: This is not the first time I've heard him talk about this, in a way that is so compassionate for others and presents a model, I think, for compassion and understanding for both others and self, that I just want to say it's very moving, not only on a professional level, but on a personal level as well.

LAKSHMANAN: Thank you for that.

KACZYNSKI: The other thing I think it's really important to remember is how much harm Ted did, how much his own pain translated through his violence into pain for other people, and all the people he hurt. And I've met some of his victims and victims' family members. There's so much — we tend to focus so much on, you know, perpetrator, what got the perpetrator there. We don't really give enough thought and attention to victims and the plight of victims. And often they feel, you know, very, very cut off and isolated and wondering, you know, what to do with this loss.

LAKSHMANAN: All right. Let's take a quick call from Dick in Pittsford, N.Y. Dick, you're on the air.

DICK: Thank you for taking my call. I have great respect for David. I'm a retired FBI agent, and I know that he had to make the most difficult of choices. Fortunately in hearing him talk today it seems to be that he is probably come to be more accepting of the most difficult choice that he had to make. And it was obviously the right choice, but it had to have been at great cost to him and his family. So I'm calling just to thank him for his courage, and most of all the courage that he shows today by talking about it. And the final thing is just to support him for his work against capital punishment. So thank you, David.

LAKSHMANAN: Well, thank you for your call, Dick. You know, it's interesting because that choice you made did redound back to you with consequences. Immediately after the arrest, the media surrounded your house. They seemed to be in search of the answer to what kind of a family would produce the Unabomber. Is that a fair question for outsiders to ask about the family of someone who was on the FBI's most wanted list?

KACZYNSKI: Well, sure. And actually that's one of my motivations in writing the book, to sort of shine a light into the family that my brother and I grew up in, and to paint a picture that's I think complex, but still very loving picture of both my mother and father, who really had such love for their children, really cared more about their children than they did about themselves, and to understand — I think — and in meeting with other families, not only of people who have committed violence, but where mental illness is a factor in the family, understanding that mental illness can come in any family. It's not caused by a dysfunctional family. It's other factors that create it.

LAKSHMANAN: Interesting point. I'm Indira Lakshmanan, and you're listening to "The Diane Rehm Show." In fact, we have several callers who want to talk about the mental health aspect. Let's go to Michael from Fayette, Ala. Michael, you're on the air.

MICHAEL: Good morning. Thanks so much for accepting my call.

LAKSHMANAN: Yes.

MICHAEL: Oh, I don't know how to say this. I don't know if Mr. Kaczynski himself ever took any personality tests, but as somebody like myself who has had obsessive compulsive disorder twice, and once had severe depression, and also had a very rare — was born with a very rare autism called Asperger Syndrome. I also have temporal lobe epilepsy. You take — very often if you're given mental health — I mean, medical health, very rare out here in rural America, you're given something like the Minnesota multiphasic personality inventory, is what I was given at University of Alabama, Birmingham.

LAKSHMANAN: Mm-hmm.

MICHAEL: Has any of these Congress people and Senators or state governments, and this is especially for Dr. Gold — oh, how can I say it? If states administered this with gun permits, and especially these gun shows and flea markets and so forth...

LAKSHMANAN: Okay.

MICHAEL: ...pawn shops, that would still enable the gun owners' rights that white conservatives down here in the south beat the chests about, just weed out the mentally — not only the mentally ill, but also young adults...

LAKSHMANAN: Okay.

MICHAEL: ...who don't take the bullets out and lock the gun...

LAKSHMANAN: Thank you for...

MICHAEL: ...but are parents of small children.

LAKSHMANAN: ...thank you for your call, Michael. I think that the caller is trying to ask about whether state governments or the federal government are doing anything with the gun permit process to determine if a person has a mental disorder to prevent them from getting a gun.

GOLD: Well, that question...

LAKSHMANAN: Dr. Gold.

GOLD: ...could take a whole hour to answer. The short answer is there are certain mental health prohibitors in the federal law and in some state laws that put your name onto the NICS background check system. Those are not really evidence based. They don't work well in preventing people who for reasons of mental health, primarily issues of suicide, should not have guns. And most of the guns that people have when they commit suicide and often even homicide are legally purchased. So the short answer is yes, but no.

KACZYNSKI: I'd love to comment on that too. I think it's just really important. There's some very good research out there that people with even the most serious kinds of mental illness are not statistically more violent than the population at large. And so

this kind of linkage of mental illness and violence kind of feeds into the stereotypical ways we have of thinking about mental illness. And that's a terrible injustice to people with mental illness.

GOLD: Yep, absolutely. That's absolutely true. I will say, you know, mental — people with mental illness account for only three to five percent of all violence in the United States. Gun violence, even less so. And every time they are linked, it does contribute to the stereotype that people with mental illness are dangerous. When, in fact, it's extraordinarily rare.

LAKSHMANAN: Good point to make, Dr. Gold. Thank you. In the last minute we have left, David, I want to bring in a concern from some listeners, particularly Anna in Ann Arbor, Mich., is wondering about people who might be in a situation where they have a loved one who might be a little odd, but hasn't done anything that they know of to prove it. What advice do you give to someone with that? And also many listeners want to know how Ted is doing today, if you could tell us.

KACZYNSKI: Yeah, very quickly, I think the most important thing is to keep an open communication, to just keep the door open, keep the heart open, be compassionate, listen, be a really good listener, Try to develop trust and hopefully, you know, persuade the person that, you know, help is not — doesn't mean there's something — you know, doesn't annihilate you as a person to acknowledge that you have an illness, and maybe it's good to get some help.

As far as how Ted is doing today, I learn about how he's doing from the media. As I said, he doesn't communicate with me. My understanding is that he has a fairly wide correspondence with people who are interested in his ideas. So in some strange way he has more social interaction in the most secure prison in America than he ever had before. That's about all I could say.

LAKSHMANAN: Amazing. Thank you so much for sharing your story with us. David Kaczynski, brother of Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, and author of a new memoir, "Every Last Tie." And Dr. Liza Gold, a psychiatry professor at Georgetown School of Medicine. I'm Indira Lakshmanan. Thank you for listening to "The Diane Rehm Show."

The Ted K Archive

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