

The Mind of the Unabomber

Narcissism and its Discontents

Maggie Scarf

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On an ordinary Wednesday morning in early April, Houston psychiatrist Stuart Yudofsky was in session with a patient when someone began knocking urgently at his office door. It was Yudofsky's secretary, saying there was a caller on the line who had to be responded to immediately.

Ted Kaczynski leaves the Federal Courthouse in Sacramento, CA after admitting he was the Unabomber and pleading guilty to all counts.

"Should I come out or will you put the call through?" asked Dr. Yudofsky. She told him that she'd put the call through but added that he might want to be sitting down when he took it.

The caller was an FBI agent. "I don't want to alarm you excessively, Doctor," the agent said, "but in the process of going through the home of Theodore Kaczynski in Montana we discovered a list—we have reason to believe this is a hit list—and your name was on it. And next to your name it was noted that you are a professor and the chairman of the department of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Baylor, and that you are the editor-in-chief of the Journal of Neuropsychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences."

"There were also some annotations about an article in Scientific American," continued the agent, "in which you were quoted, and your work was discussed." Given that a live pipe bomb had been discovered on the Kaczynski premises, there was "some concern" about a chance—remote, to be sure—that the physician might have been sent a letter or mail bomb within the past several weeks. Yudofsky was asked to alert his staff, his family and the college's security force and to monitor scrupulously all letters and packages that arrived at his home or his office.

In the course of that first conversation, as Yudofsky later recounted, he had asked the agent only one question: Exactly how many names had been found on Theodore Kaczynski's list? "I guess my first reaction was, you know, simply wanting to calculate the odds," he told me, with a brief, somewhat embarrassed laugh. "And the FBI agent answered that there had been in the neighborhood of some twenty names on that list."

How far down on that prospective victims list, I asked Yudofsky, had his own name appeared? The psychiatrist paused briefly then said again that he hadn't asked. "But I did wonder, at the time..." he added, his voice hesitant. "I really did have many, many questions, but my patient was waiting and did need me... And, besides, I was stunned."

The psychiatrist's office staff was deeply shaken also. Given their daily routines, they realized that the Unabomber's lethal package would have been far likelier to blow up in the face of someone other than the technological/industrial target to whom it was addressed. As one of Dr. Yudofsky's secretaries later told me, it is she and her office mate who usually open the mail; she then added, in a strained voice, that two of the people injured in previous explosions were secretaries. "I've become really preoccupied by the 'almosts,'" she said. "It's just alarming to know that you've brushed this close to a disaster."

For Yudofsky's family, too, the news was alarming. The Yudofskys have three daughters, ranging in age from 7 to 15. He and his wife, who is also a psychiatrist, were

extremely careful about how they explained the matter to the children. They said that there had indeed been a threat, but that the suspected criminal was now in custody and that their father was not going to be harmed. "Still," recounted Stuart Yudofsky, "at the end of this long family discussion, in which we'd stressed that everything was really okay, I started walking back toward the kitchen, and my 7-year-old, Emily, suddenly burst into tears. 'Daddy, no one's going to blow you up, are they, Daddy?' she was crying, and she ran after me and held me tightly by the legs."

"Well, what she feared wasn't out of the realm of the possible," Yudofsky continued. "I'm very aware that we had been, all unwittingly, heading for some kind of a catastrophe... of the fact that our escaping it was due to chance, that it was principally a question of the timing. And this makes me feel doubly terrible for those who were hurt. When I read David Gelernter's essay in *Time* magazine I felt such an awful sadness... it was beyond words."

Multiple serial murderers, like predators in nature, usually fix upon quarry that is perceived to be vulnerable in some way—women (often prostitutes), children and the elderly; individuals who are socially isolated, lonely or needy. In this respect, the victims of the Unabomber were an unusual group, a victims' A-list, for every one of them was clearly thriving in his career, and some had achieved a certain degree of prominence in their respective fields.

Why had Stuart Yudofsky, in particular, turned up on the alleged Unabomber's lethal roll call? When I asked the psychiatrist about this, he said that he was as puzzled as anyone. But we do know that one of the serial bomber's pet hatreds was the study of genetics, and Yudofsky is a research psychiatrist interested in the neural substructure of human aggression. His major research interest has been the study and treatment of certain psychiatric symptoms—particularly rage attacks—that often accompany damage to the brain (for example, that caused by traumatic brain injuries, stroke, seizure disorders and diseases such as Alzheimer's).

Most recently Dr. Yudofsky has been studying the actions of certain potent brain chemicals (most importantly the neurotransmitter serotonin) as part of an effort to reveal the connection between particular inborn genetic defects and the emergence of aggressive and violent behavior. It was in regard to this "hot" area of brain research that Stuart Yudofsky's name appeared in the March 1995 issue of *Scientific American*.

In an article headlined "canscience 'cure' crime?" Yudofsky is quoted as saying, "With the expected advances... [from this new research] ... we're going to be able to diagnose many people who are biologically brain-prone to violence... I'm not worried about the downside as much as I am encouraged by the opportunity to prevent tragedies—to screen people who might have high risk and prevent them from harming someone else."

It was probably this article that first caught the Unabomber's attention and aroused his ire toward Yudofsky, for here was technology at its most fundamental and intrusive: high-powered research into the substructure of the human brain—the criminal brain—*itself*.

Was it, as many people believe, the Unabomber's overweening vanity—his pressing need to remind us all that he was the wildest, most sophisticated and terrifying bomber in the nation—that ultimately exposed him? Certainly, it was in the wake of Oklahoma City that the serial murderer suddenly found a voice—a mocking, embittered voice, bubbling with self-righteous rage, but a distinctive voice nonetheless.

Until then, he had been striking out at a despised society for seventeen years without ever making the nature of his grievances clear. In the agonized aftermath of the Oklahoma explosion, though, he seemed to need to command our attention, to say, "I exist, and you forget me at your peril." In quick succession, another bomb, several taunting letters (one to David Gelernter), some threatening notes (among them, a threat to blow up an airliner) and his grandiose, rambling manifesto followed. The Unabomber had once again transfixed the attention of the nation; but, in doing so, he had emerged just far enough from the shelter of his silence to allow himself to be identified.

Given the type and amount of evidence gathered in the alleged Unabomber's Montana shack, the FBI does appear to have its man. What we still don't know, in any psychological detail, is why he did what he did. And why, after seventeen years of secret attacks, did the Unabomber break cover and begin to explain himself? Did Kaczynski, as some journalists have suggested, have the "urge to purge" himself—that is, did he want to be caught? Or did he yearn to prove himself ever more brilliant and elusive by dancing closer and closer to the edge of discovery?

One explanation, which many find satisfactory, is that the Unabomber is just plain crazy—a "full-service maniac," as Joe Klein of *Newsweek* phrased it. *Time* advanced the idea that suspected Unabomber Theodore J. Kaczynski's strange life story was "the Odyssey of a Mad Genius."

But the question remains (and it is a question that experts in psychiatry and the law have wrangled about endlessly over the years): Is bizarre behavior of this kind to be understood as lying within the realm of "madness" or of "badness"? Is this serial terrorist who is responsible for twenty-three injuries and three deaths to be viewed as someone fundamentally deranged or, as one of his victims, Yale professor David Gelernter, has called him, "an evil coward"?

If, in an effort to distinguish between "what is mad" and "what is bad," one turns to the psychiatric literature on homicide, the pickings are surprisingly sparse, especially when compared to the vast literature on suicide. An excellent exception, however, is a new book called *Homicide: A Psychiatric Perspective*, by Carl P. Malmquist, M.D., M.S. Dr. Malmquist is a forensic psychiatrist who states in his preface that he has "personally evaluated" over 500 individuals who have committed homicide. He argues that murderers are frequently not "mad" in the formal sense of the word—that is, they are generally not suffering from schizophrenia or some other psychotic illness that leads them to experience hallucinations, delusions or both. When it comes to psychiatric disorders, a much larger number of murderers meet the diagnostic criteria

for one or more of the severe personality disorders (e.g. Borderline Personality Disorder, Antisocial Personality Disorder, Narcissistic Personality Disorder and so forth).

In my own view, the diagnosis of Narcissistic Personality Disorder seems to be the most illuminating explanation of the Unabomber's seemingly incomprehensible behavior.

Narcissistic Personality Disorder, as delineated in DSM-IV (the most recent version of the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), is "A pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts..." The characteristic features of narcissistic disturbances are, in brief, an overinflated sense of uniqueness, self-importance and personal entitlement.

The narcissistic person is, nevertheless, deeply injured at the core and suffering from sorely depleted supplies of self-esteem. His overweening grandiosity is, for this reason, intermingled with a sense of inner emptiness and painful feelings of unworthiness, despair and desolation. His internal world contains only two views of the self: he is either great, powerful, brilliant, the very best, or he is a nothing—someone who is not at all special, a nobody. And since being nobody exceptional or special is experienced as profoundly threatening—it may indeed be equated with an annihilation of the self—the narcissistic person experiences an ever-present tension and inner pressure, which will fluctuate in intensity over the course of time, sometimes proving manageable and at other times completely intolerable.

Narcissists are hungry, voraciously in need of adulation—but theirs is a kind of hunger that can never, under any circumstances, be fully sated. For, even in instances where the narcissist does earn applause for what may be very real accomplishments and talents, the intensity of his needs for admiration and praise—which are never going to be met at the required level—eventually leave him feeling estranged, barren, depressed and resentful. And frequently, as his suffering intensifies, a brooding anger (he is not receiving his due!) begins to grow and develop. He looks for the person, or situation, to blame for his terrible pain.

"Narcissistic components are present more frequently in homicides than is usually believed," writes Malmquist. "The key seems to be an experience of some type of threat to one's vulnerable self that becomes magnified far beyond the nature of the threat."

One can imagine young Teddy John Kaczynski, the precociously bright little "genius" of the household, as he grew up and slowly retreated into adolescent fantasies of the wonderful mathematician he would one day become. And one can picture the emotionally immature Harvard undergraduate, so morbidly isolated that he seems to have become invisible; hardly anyone who knew him there can remember a thing about him (aside from the stench of garbage emanating from his room). It is in fact not hard to envisage why and how a pathologically shy, relatively poor young man from the Midwest, who was suddenly encountering other people just as smart and gifted—perhaps more so, and socially competent, too—might have withdrawn completely to nurture his soothingly self-inflating fantasies in private.

As Malmquist writes,

[N]arcissistic individuals may develop an indifferent or cool exterior as an initial response to threats to their self-esteem. However, when their composure gives way, it is striking to see the intensity of their anger and their need for revenge... [T]he trigger can be when the narcissistic individual perceives people or organizations as not living up to his or her expectations, following which the narcissistic individual perceives them as behaving badly... Such individuals then develop a sense of self-righteous morality or take up causes to reform others, both of which reactions only thinly conceal their power-seeking needs.

The narcissist's special vulnerability is linked to his conviction that he is someone special and to his vast sense of entitlement. He feels he is supposed to be recognized not only for his remarkable talents and gifts but for his superior qualities; he is someone quite distinctive, far better and brighter than any and all of his peers. But if such recognition isn't forthcoming—if he isn't being endlessly admired or, worse yet, is receiving outright criticism—the stage is gradually set for depressive feelings to leak into consciousness and then perhaps for impulsive acting out to occur. It is at this juncture that the narcissistically compromised person's anger may begin to kindle and eventually erupt in acts that are either curiously destructive to the self (such as Kaczynski's sudden resignation from his academic career) or senselessly destructive to others.

Did Kaczynski impulsively bolt from the Berkeley faculty in 1969 because his need for recognition of his total and complete superiority was not being gratified? Did Kaczynski realize that, while he was a competent and hardworking mathematician, he was never going to be counted among the great mathematicians of our time—to be appreciated as someone who towered, by everyone's reckoning, above all others in the field?

Or did he decide to leave academia because he was so harshly criticized by his students? Assistant Professor Kaczynski's students had complained, in their course evaluations, that his lectures were "useless and right from the book" and that he completely refused to answer questions and ignored the questioners. To the individual suffering from NPD, any criticism, however mild, is experienced as utterly intolerable.

And as forensic expert Malmquist notes, the narcissist's perception that he is being criticized or threatened usually leads him to "singl[e] out someone or something in the external world which becomes viewed as the source of the hostile aggression." That aggressor "might actually be a person or situation that develops because of the narcissistic person's sensitivity."

The narcissist's sensitivities are enormous. Any hint of a negative reaction arouses such intense feelings of shame and humiliation that it may undermine his sense of self profoundly (hence, one supposes, the Unabomber's final withdrawal from a social

world in which we all have to endure our occasional bumps and put-downs). "When narcissistically vulnerable individuals are put in extreme positions where their self-esteem is severely threatened," writes Malmquist, "they seem to respond in two ways: via a shame mechanism that leads to withdrawal and hiding, or via an outburst of rage that leads to some aggressive action."

Perhaps, when the hermit-mathematician struck out in the bizarre fashion that he did, it was his only means of asserting that he was truly alive—of saying, "I am intact, I am special, and I am important." The string of unexplained bombs, the taunting letters and finally the anti-technology diatribe that capped the sequence may well have been part of a desperate attempt to deliver this bulletin: "You'd better recognize me as someone uniquely clever and powerful, because you fail to do so at your own peril."

Was the Unabomber, in the wake of the Oklahoma explosion, feeling isolated and ignored—was he clamoring, at that moment, for some fresh acknowledgement of his own special place in the fantasy life of this nation? His pressing need was to point out the stupidity of others—to let us know that he was not only an immensely gifted person, able to elude an 18-year-old manhunt and force *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* to publish his manifesto—but a gifted person bringing us a special message.

This need, a godlike need—for the theme of grandiosity permeates his behavior—was to educate us and explain how we were going astray. At first, he rained down catastrophes like an angry deity, without telling us what we had done to deserve them. But now—since we didn't seem to be getting the point—he decided to help us out by dispatching more lethal "communications" (bombs, mocking and threatening letters, the manifesto), all of which said, essentially, "Look, stupid, it's technology that's at the heart of this society's problems—what do I have to do to get the message across?"

In paragraph forty-four of his manifesto, the Unabomber writes, "[F]or most people it is through the power process—having a goal, making an autonomous effort and attaining the goal—that self-esteem, self-confidence and a sense of power are acquired. When one does not have adequate opportunity to go through the power process the consequences are... boredom, demoralization, low self-esteem, inferiority feelings, defeatism, depression, anxiety, guilt, frustration, hostility..." This, and other passages in the manifesto, have a self-revealing, deeply tormented quality.

Kaczynski certainly sought, and found, autonomy—a self-imposed solitary confinement (even in prisons, solitary confinement is viewed as punishment) during which his major social engagements consisted, if he is indeed the Unabomber, of murdering people anonymously and from a distance. But his stated moral purpose—to return our technological/industrial society to a state of "wild nature"—was ludicrously inconsistent. For in his tiny 10-by-12-foot cabin the alleged Unabomber had, as we now know, a virtual bomb factory, including books on bombmaking and hand-drawn diagrams, lengths of pipe, soldering wire and chemicals used in explosives, such as potassium chlorate, sulfur, ammonium nitrate and saltpeter. He was not exactly rubbing two sticks together to create fire. No less tellingly, the FBI found a bottle of trazodone

(Desyrel), an antidepressant prescribed for people suffering from agitation, depression and sleep disorders. Wouldn't someone whose goal was to destroy our modern society, and restore a state of pre-industrial simplicity, prefer some kind of plant or herbal remedy for whatever it was that was ailing him?

In fact, if one surveys the Unabomber's trajectory over the years, it seems clear that his actual motivation was not so much to demolish technological society as it was to maim or kill certain individuals who seemed to be flourishing in that society—one in which he had no hope of ever really belonging. Paradoxically, though, it is by virtue of his exposure and capture that the Unabomber is "in the world" again, and once more at the center of our collective attention.

The Ted K Archive

A critique of his ideas & actions



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The New Republic, June 10, 1996, p. 20.

www.thetedkarchive.com