Brother who turned in the Unabomber: 'I want him to know that the door's open'

David Kaczynski's book Every Last Tie aims to set the record straight about his relationship with brother Ted who waged a deadly 17-year mail bomb campaign

Michelle Dean

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David Kaczynski wants you to know that when he alerted the FBI about his suspicion that his brother, Ted, was the Unabomber, he wasn't acting alone. He wants you to know that half the credit – perhaps more than half – belongs to his wife, Linda Patrik.

It was Linda who first voiced suspicion, and Linda picked up on Ted's voice in the Unabomber's rambling anti-technology manifesto the Washington Post published in 1993. It was Linda who talked him through the subsequent feelings of anguish and fear. And it was Linda that the press subsequently cut out of the story, which bothered him, in favor of a narrative summed up in a New York Times headline about the fallout from the Unabomber case: "His brother's keeper."

"The emerging story was reductionist, flat, even somewhat trite in its characterization of the two brothers, one bad, one good," Kaczynski writes in his new memoir, Every Last Tie, out this week from Duke University Press.

Yet the notion of David as the "good brother" proves hard to shake. Much of what he has done in the aftermath of the Unabomber frenzy – which consumed a few years of his life – bears a trace of altruism. He spent many years working, for example, as a director of New Yorkers Against the Death Penality. Even the book itself is posited as a kind of public offering. The first chapter ends on a note of fatalistic offering: "May it be of some benefit!"

The book includes an epilogue from a psychiatrist, James L Knoll IV, who argues David is also somewhat reticent to claim any particular enlightenment on the nature of his brother's mental illness. Asked by phone if he thought the process of writing the book had helped him to better understand his brother, Kaczynski demurred.

"The book has a kind of openness or maybe even fragmentary character," he said. "It doesn't have any kind of thesis or analysis of how my brother transformed, it's more of a meditation on the mystery of how that can happen."

That he wrote a book at all comes somewhat as a surprise to him, he says. For a long time he had not wanted to speak of it. But then his mother died in 2011. And he retired from his job. His thoughts flooded with reminiscences of his own family and he began writing them down. Still, when his publishers heard him on radio interviews and asked if he wanted to write a book, he said no. But eventually he changed his mind.

David has given extensive interviews over the years, including to this newspaper, and some stories in the book are familiar. For example, we already knew that as the sons of two middle-class Polish immigrants, the Kaczynski brothers had a relatively calm, uneventful childhood. We already knew that David Kaczynski had liked his brother and had in some sense shared some of his individualist values, even briefly living in wild isolation himself in south-west Texas.

We also already knew that the one formative event that seems to explain why Ted Kaczynski descended into isolation and schizophrenia happened when he was nine

months old. He had developed a rash, and the hospital would not let his parents stay with him. He was often pulled, screaming, from his mother's arms. Wanda Kaczynski believed that that event had caused a lot of Ted's problems, and had gone so far as to point it out to the FBI the first time she was interviewed by them.

But the perspective on these events is obviously somewhat different when offered directly from a family member, not filtered through the eyes of a reporter. David describes his brother's early strangeness with the eye of a younger sibling looking up to his older brother, admiring without seeming naive or insensitive. "I had no idea he needed anything from people," David writes. "I thought of him as emotionally self-sufficient, free from my 'weakness' for human companionship, my need for social validation."

He also has a son's reverence to chart out his mother's sometimes complicated reaction to Ted's crimes. David says that when he first told his mother about his suspicions, she blurted out: "Oh. Don't tell anyone!" But then she quickly comforted her second son, saying she knew he had only reported his brother because he had to.

David himself admits he was surprised by his mother's strength. "I thought all of this would utterly crush mom," he told me. But in the end he found himself relying on her for strength. He tells me that at one point in the lead-up to Ted's trial, the attorneys had had to tell him and his mother one night that Ted had tried to commit suicide. "And I was just totally devastated. I mean I was crying, I was sobbing," David said. "My only hope here was that somehow we could preserve my brother's life and it was something he didn't even want. And here was my mother speaking to me soothingly, trying to comfort me, trying to encourage me to accept what I couldn't change and she really had a sense when her children were in need."

"She really was quite a remarkable person," he added.

He also succeeds at the most difficult task of a book like this, writing about his brother's victims with sensitivity and restraint. Many of them, he says, refused to meet with him. One family that did suddenly found themselves in the uncomfortable place of receiving what even David calls a "lecture" from his mother, on schizophrenia.

The widow of the victim finally cut her short: "He knew what he was doing!" His mother apparently felt ashamed, for she replied: "I wish he had killed me instead of your husband."

I asked David why he thought his mother, unlike the mothers of other serial killers – say, Sue Klebold – had not been demonized by the press. "We'd had the opportunity to perhaps foresee future violence we were able to show our family's values, we'd kind of immunized or inoculated ourselves against some of the stigma that falls on family members of murderers," he said. "Most of these families never even have that opportunity."

When David told the FBI that he suspected that Ted might be the man who had been sending mail bombs around the country for 17 years, killing three people and injuring many more, he unwittingly became eligible for the $1m reward the Department of Justice was offering in the case. Upon receiving the check, he promptly promised

to give it away to the Unabomber's victims. He even spent a week lobbying Congress to get a tax exemption for the reward so he would have more money to give away. "It got held up in a committee. I was actually told by a staff person of the head of that committee that if I weren't so vocal against the death penalty, maybe they would have approved this exemption of taxation on the victims," he told me. "I thought, 'Oh my God what a crock of shit this is.' They didn't want to reward me because they didn't like my politics."

He briefly sank into a depression before finding his calling in anti-death penalty activism. It was, again, Linda who suggested he try working for New Yorkers Against the Death Penalty. "I think that put me into a process where I felt I could do something constructive. I could tell my story in a context that could mean something to people and perhaps could be translated into a change in the law in New York," David said. "Suddenly I felt I had a community of kindred spirits again and that meant a lot to me."

But one spirit was forever gone from his life. In the book, David admits he hasn't heard from his brother once since he was arrested. He recounts, third hand, Ted's reaction at hearing that it was David who had identified him for the FBI. "That's impossible," Ted was reported to say. "David loves me. He'd never do that."

"I sent him a Christmas card again this year," David said. "I don't write to him as often as I did when mom was alive but I still write to him. I want him to know that the door's open if he ever wants to reach out to me."

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