

Q&A with David Kaczynski

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Emotional, moving, and powerful, *Every Last Tie: A Memoir of the Unabomber and His Family* is the highly personal memoir of David Kaczynski—brother of Ted Kaczynski, aka the Unabomber—in which he discusses his family, comes to terms with his brother’s crimes, and meditates on the possibilities for reconciliation and maintaining family bonds. Now retired, David Kaczynski is the past Executive Director of Karma Triyana Dharmachakra, a Tibetan Buddhist monastery located in Woodstock, New York. An anti-death penalty activist, Kaczynski served as the Executive Director of New Yorkers Against the Death Penalty from 2001 to 2012 and has given hundreds of public talks throughout the United States about mental illness, the death penalty, and healing in the aftermath of tragic violence. He is also the author of the poetry chapbook *A Dream Named You*. Check back here tomorrow to learn about some of David Kaczynski’s upcoming author events.

Why did it take so long for your family to acknowledge that Ted was suffering from mental illness?

I believe there are several reasons. Mental illness carries a heavy social stigma, which was even more pronounced in the 1950’s and 1960’s when the prevailing psychological theory held that schizophrenia is caused by family dysfunction—usually bad parenting. Fortunately, the science has advanced since then, even if social attitudes have lagged behind somewhat. In any case, stigma can lead to denial. What parent wants to acknowledge that their child is mentally sick, especially if doing so means admitting that the whole family is probably sick as well? I also think it’s difficult to connect someone you live with to a clinical diagnosis. To me, Ted was my brother, a unique individual, not a label in a book. We tended to normalize his differences, first of all because that’s what families do—we make adjustments to accommodate and “understand” one another, and in Ted’s case the adjustments we made were incremental because there was no definite, psychotic break, only a developing strangeness abetted by increasing isolation over time. Secondly, Ted was intellectually brilliant, and so his brilliant logical mind tended to mask the emotional chaos that churned beneath the surface. I often felt that Ted might be eccentric *because* he was so smart. His ability to manipulate ideas and concepts provided him with tools to rationalize and justify his erratic behavior. As his younger brother, I thought I could help him by encouraging him to think differently, not realizing that Ted’s problems arose from an underlying mental illness and not from his style of thinking. On top of this, our parents gave their children permission to be different—to discover a positive sense of self that transcended socially constructed identities. While this permission to be different might be just what a healthy child needs, it could also encourage an unhealthy one to overvalue their own thoughts and to discount the views of others.

Many readers may not be aware that Ted was the subject of psychological experiments while he was at Harvard. What do we know about them? How might they have affected Ted? Has any new information surfaced since his trial?



Teddy leaves for Harvard, 1958

Alston Chase's book, *Harvard and the Unabomber*, contains a great deal of information on the Murray experiments at Harvard in which Ted was an unwitting guinea pig. *A Terrible Mistake* by H.P. Albarelli Jr. investigates more widely our government's unethical research in the area of mind control. While I find it plausible that Ted's experience at Harvard might have helped shape his later obsession with technology and mind control, I'm reluctant to blame Ted's violence on Murray, Harvard, and the CIA. To my knowledge, no other participant in Murray's research ended up as an anti-social revolutionary. Reductionist theories tend to be misleading. What happened to Ted—the whole tragedy that affected so many people—arose from a perfect storm of circumstances: Ted's childhood trauma, the re-traumatizing Murray experiments, his social isolation, and a genetic predisposition to mental illness.

In the book you say you and Ted were “almost like disowned parts of each other.” What do you mean by that?

I think Ted and I are more alike than most brothers, but also more different than most brothers. We represent a curious mix of similarities and differences. We both loved nature and we both traveled off the beaten path of American cultural norms regarding lifestyle, career, marriage, and family. For many years I admired Ted and sought to emulate him. Ultimately, however, I rejected his bleak view of culture and people generally as a dead-end road, while he rejected my fundamental optimism about people as wishful thinking.

How did your father's suicide change you and your family? How do you think Ted felt about it?

Ted saw himself as a stoic and a realist, and hence he viewed our father's suicide as a rational act that displayed admirable courage. I, on the other hand, am still somewhat haunted by Dad's suicide. Of course, I can't know what was going on in Dad's mind and emotions at the time, but I'm inclined to think that by killing himself he foreclosed opportunities to face death with more grace, generosity, and kindness toward the people who loved him, especially Mom. Of course, we each die our own death; no one has the right to determine another person's final script. At the same time, I can't help feeling disappointed by the way Dad left us. In life, some things happen that defy understanding and that can never be undone or made right. I guess my father's suicide was my first experience of that hard truth.

How did your and Linda's Buddhist practice help you come to the decision to go to the FBI with your suspicions about Ted?

Linda was originally attracted to the ethical theories in Buddhism. In addition to the moral arguments that Linda used to spur me to action (that my brother was creating incalculable harm, and that we'd share the moral responsibility for his actions if we failed to stop him) she also invoked the Buddhist idea of karma—that a person who hurts others actually does more harm to himself in the long run. In this way she helped me to understand that Ted was damaging himself morally, psychologically, and spiritually with each act of violence. We needed to stop Ted for his own good as well as to protect others.



Davy, Ted Sr. and Teddy on a camping trip, circa 1954

For a long time, you and your family chose not to speak to the media about your brother. What led you to start speaking out?

Our legal advisor and advocate, attorney Tony Biscelglie, sat me down one day and said, “David, if you don’t talk about your brother’s mental illness then the only image people will have of him is the portrait of an irredeemably evil man painted by federal prosecutors. Frankly, if the public doesn’t get a glimpse of Ted through his family’s eyes, then he’ll almost surely get the death penalty.” In other words, opening up to the media was the only means we had to try to save Ted’s life. The one thing I knew above all else is that I didn’t want my brother to die. I also wanted to spare our mother the added suffering and grief that her son’s execution would cause.

After Ted’s sentencing, you and your mother had an awkward meeting with the family of one of his victims. How do you feel about that meeting now? Do you regret it? Have you had any further contact with Ted’s victims?

True, the meeting was awkward, fraught with stress given our differing views of my brother. But now I remember it as one of the most important experiences of my life, because it allowed me to see a victim’s suffering up close and to feel deeply affected by it. At the end of that meeting, the widow of someone my brother had murdered said to our mother: “Mrs. Kaczynski, you don’t deserve this. None of this is your fault. Don’t ever imagine that we blame you.” Those were words that Mom really needed to hear. I was deeply grateful to the widow for saying them, and also in awe of the power of simple human empathy to override our differences.

As a young man, I was deeply influenced by Victor Frankel’s powerful account of surviving a Nazi death camp, and his theory that human beings can transcend the most horrific circumstances through the power of love. In the moment when a victim of Ted’s violence tried her best to comfort the mother of the man who’d murdered her husband, I felt myself in the presence of a something almost sacred, witnessing first hand what Frankel meant when he said that the best in human beings is infinitely more powerful than what is worst in us.

Gary Wright of Salt Lake City—who was almost killed by one of my brother’s bombs in 1986—and I became friends in the aftermath of Ted’s arrest. We still keep in contact and share a strong interest in the topic of healing from trauma.

Twenty years after your brother’s conviction, do you see any improvement in the way we treat the mentally ill in this country? Has your activist work made you hopeful or the opposite?

I’m hopeful, because we are beginning to see a paradigm shift in how we view mental illness in this country. We now have mental health courts in some cities as well as programs designed to divert mentally ill offenders from the criminal justice system toward more appropriate care in the mental health system. Training for police officers to recognize people in psychiatric crisis is becoming more and more standard. Unfortunately, high profile cases like my brother’s tend to reinforce the stigma of mental illness by unfairly and inaccurately equating mental illness with violence. First,

we need to step up our public education about mental illness to dispel the stigma and to encourage greater acceptance of people with mental illness as citizens like anyone else, perfectly capable of functioning and contributing if given appropriate respect and treatment. We also need to be more creative in the ways we engage people with treatment. Currently, there are too many obstacles for people seeking help, and across most of the country substandard, inadequate, under-resourced delivery systems for mental health services are still the rule rather than the exception. But overall, I think we're headed in the right direction. Perhaps cases like my brother's can help awaken us from our apathy by illustrating the worst that can happen when severe mental illness goes untreated. While we can't stop every mass shooting, we know that many of these tragedies are preventable if we did a better job counteracting the social isolation that affects so many people who are mentally ill.

When was the last time you were in touch with Ted? Do you know how he's doing in prison?

I write to Ted two or three times a year. Occasionally I send him books that I think might interest him. What little I know about Ted's current circumstances comes for the media because he doesn't respond to my letters. As a prison inmate, he has a right to privacy, even from his family, and I have to respect that. Perhaps some day Ted may open a door from his own side. It wouldn't be the first time he's surprised me. In the meantime, I have no choice but to accept what does or doesn't happen.

You can order *Every Last Tie* from your favorite local or online bookstore (print and e-editions available), or order directly from Duke University Press. Use coupon code E16TIE to save 30%!

The Ted K Archive

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