

The Unabomber's Brother Turned Him In. Then Spent 27 Years Trying to Win Him Back.

Ted Kaczynski, whose anti-tech rants are finding a new generation of readers, shunned the brother who called the F.B.I. in an effort to halt his campaign of violence.

Serge F. Kovalski

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“We both deserved a chance to look into each other’s eyes and share the truth of our principles and feelings,” David Kaczynski said of his brother.

Jordan Vonderhaar for The New York Times

It was May 1996, and David Kaczynski, a counselor for troubled youth in upstate New York, sat down to write a letter to his brother Ted. A month earlier, his brother had been shockingly unmasked as the shadowy Unabomber, responsible for a 17-year campaign of bombings that had killed and maimed people across the country.

Ted Kaczynski, a brilliant but mentally troubled mathematician who had retreated years earlier to a remote hovel in Montana, had been arrested based on information from a tipster to the F.B.I., ending one of the longest and most expensive manhunts in American history. He was now in custody and facing what would almost certainly be a lifetime behind bars, if not a death sentence.

The tipster was David.

Sitting in his home in Schenectady, N.Y., David began writing the letter. He used a pencil, knowing he might have to erase before he got it right.

“I could only imagine how much Ted resented me,” he recalled in an interview. Would Ted consider allowing him to visit, he wrote, and try to explain? “I wanted to tell him in person that we morally felt an obligation to stop the violence,” he said.

Ted declined to put David on his visitors list, and when he wrote back, it was to turn the fury of his resentment on his brother.

“You will go to hell because, for you, seeing yourself as you really are will truly be hell,” he wrote.

David remembers being stung, but not surprised.

“Ted’s letter confirmed my fear and expectation,” he said. “It felt like the hand of fate falling.”

He tried again, yearning for a different response. David would spend nearly three decades writing to his brother, years marked by nostalgia, regret and intense self-reflection.

In a series of recent interviews with The New York Times, David spoke in detail for the first time about his long correspondence — about the dozens of letters and cards he sent, along with books that he thought Ted would find interesting — all in an attempt to pry back open a line of communication that his decision to approach the F.B.I. had closed.

The letters range from the prosaic to the profound: recollections of childhood softball games, news about David’s retirement, updates on their aging mother’s declining health. Occasionally, there were wistful laments about the demise of the strong bond they had shared in a bygone time.

“I was hoping that I might have an opportunity to meet with Ted and explain to him in person what I’d done and why,” David, 75, said of the correspondence, some of which is archived at the University of Michigan and also includes years of birthday and Christmas cards. “I wasn’t necessarily hoping that Ted would understand my point of view well enough to forgive me. But I thought we both deserved a chance to look into each other’s eyes and share the truth of our principles and feelings.”



The Kaczynski brothers alongside family members in the backyard of their parents' house in Evergreen Park, Ill, around 1964.

via David Kaczynski

Two brothers, one boyhood



David Kaczynski looked up to his big brother when they were growing up.

Jordan Vonderhaar for The New York Times

The Kaczynski brothers, the sons of first-generation Polish Americans, grew up in Evergreen Park, Ill., a working-class suburb of Chicago. Their parents put a premium on intellectual curiosity, academic achievement and leading an ethically principled life.

The family often played music together as a quartet, and the boys developed a love of nature. But David, seven years younger than Ted, was struck by how socially awkward his brother was and that he had no friends other than him. Their mother once observed that Ted was intensely protective of David and that David seemed to be the only person he cared about.

David sometimes reminisced about those years in his letters to Ted.

Undated



The Kaczynski brothers at their home in Evergreen Park, Ill., in 1952.

via David Kaczynski

You were the best big brother I could have had when I was small, and beginning to form a sense of myself and the wider world. I will always hold memories of your kindness close to my heart.

Academically and professionally, the two men's lives took off on different trajectories. Ted, a mathematics prodigy, enrolled at Harvard University at the age of 16 and then earned a master's degree and a doctorate at the University of Michigan. From there, he became an assistant professor of mathematics at the University of California, Berkeley, but struggled with mental health issues and left after a few years. David, who aspired to be a writer, graduated from Columbia University in 1970 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English.

David looked up to his older brother, impressed by his smarts and sense of independence, and wanted to be like him.

The two shared a desire to escape society and seek refuge in nature. In the summer of 1969, Ted invited David to join him on a trip to the Yukon in northwest Canada to scout for a plot of land. They spent weeks roaming through forests and talking over campfires. Later, David would recall the trip in one of his letters to his brother in prison:

Undated

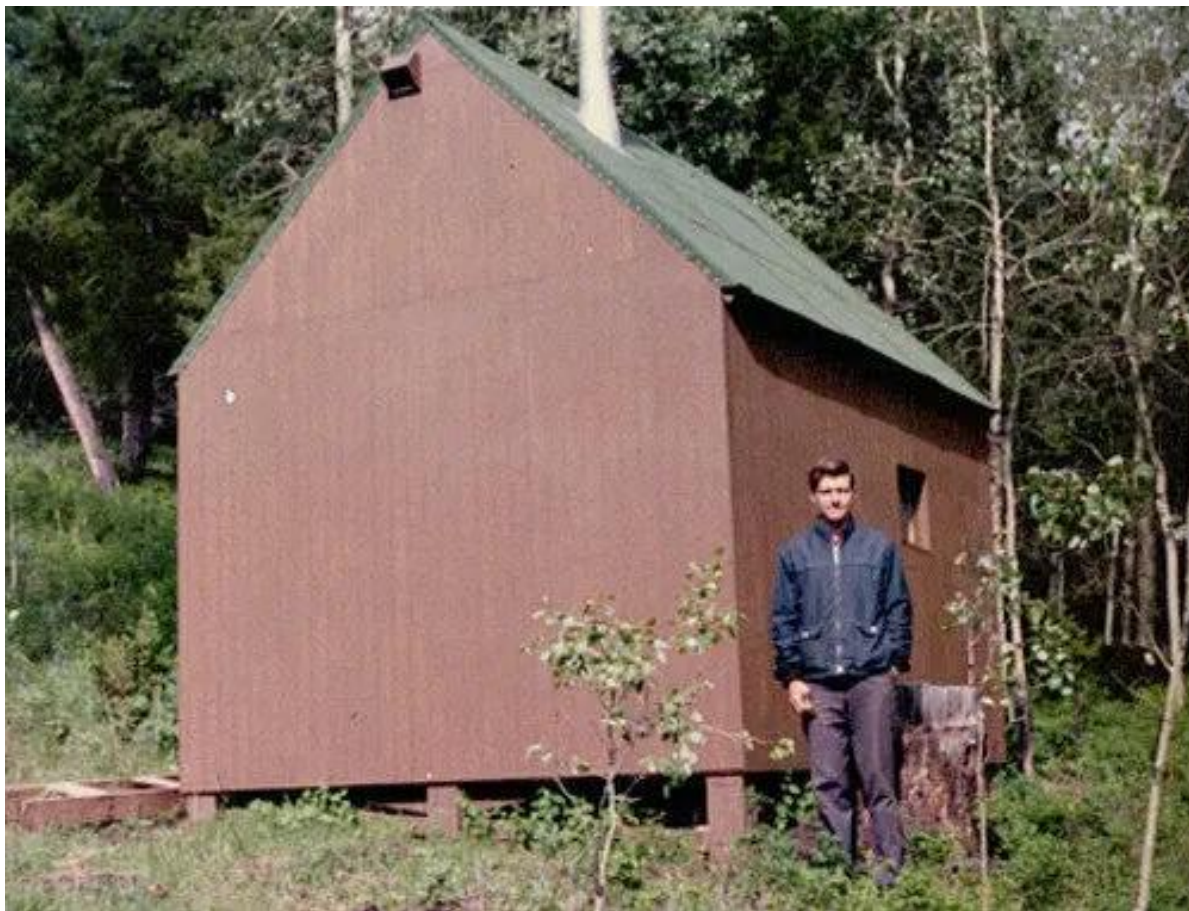
The young, dense forest and rounded, misted mountain tops hovering above the trees. You led the way, as usual, and I wondered where our journey would end.

Soon after that, in 1971, the brothers purchased a 1.4-acre parcel of land outside Lincoln, Mont., where Ted built his new home: a shack with no running water or electricity. David was living roughly 90 miles away in Great Falls and working at a zinc smelter. He was delighted to have Ted closer by. David had a small circle of new friends, and Ted would sometimes join the group to talk philosophy or play basketball or soccer.

There was a balance to their relationship: "Ted led me on hikes, whereas I led Ted in negotiating our social world, as modest as it was," David said. "Not sure I quite realized at the time just how important I'd become in Ted's life as his best and only friend."

But David's stint in Montana would soon come to an end. After losing his job at the zinc smelter in a round of layoffs, he took a position as an English teacher at a high school in the small town of Lisbon, Iowa, where his father had once managed a plant.

David taught there for two years before taking time off to work on a novel. Describing himself as "anti-careerist," he turned his sights on the West Texas desert, which had enchanted him since he first visited on a vacation several years earlier. Inspired by the 20th century German philosopher Martin Heidegger to, in David's words, "explore true



Ted Kaczynski outside his cabin in Lincoln, Mont.

via David Kaczynski

being,” he moved to the desert in 1982 and embraced an isolated and largely primitive life for extended periods over nearly eight years.

He hunkered down in a large rectangular ditch that he had dug and partly covered with pieces of corrugated tin, replacing it later with an 8-by 12-foot cabin.

In a way, he was now living in a parallel universe to Ted’s. The brothers shared their experiences in letters to each other.

A brother’s betrayal



David Kaczynski spoke to the press alongside his mother, Wanda Kaczynski, after his brother pleaded guilty to all charges filed against him in 1998.</sub>

The bombings started on May 25, 1978, when a campus security officer at Northwestern University was injured while investigating a package that had been reported by a professor as suspicious. Another explosive device turned up at the university’s technological institute about a year later. Those bombs would result in only minor injuries; over the course of Ted’s lengthy bombing campaign, three people would be killed and 23 injured by his homemade missives, all directed at what he would later say was the need to call attention to the destructive forces of industrial society.

David and the rest of the Kaczynski family had no idea that Ted's increasing paranoia and isolation were turning violent. By around 1985, Ted had all but cut off contact with his parents, after angrily accusing them of pushing him too hard to excel academically and blaming them for making him a social misfit. He made a few exceptions: He called his mother from a pay phone in 1990 to express his condolences when his father, who had been given a terminal cancer diagnosis, committed suicide.

David had left the desert for New York the previous year to move in with Linda Patrik, an associate professor of philosophy with a personal interest in Buddhism whom he had known since junior high school. When he informed Ted of his marriage plans, Ted, who had never met Ms. Patrik, fumed, and warned him, in what David called a "vicious" letter, that he was making the biggest mistake of his life. Ted then severed virtually all communication with him.

The Unabomber's attacks continued, and the authorities had few leads. But then, in 1995, the elusive perpetrator provided an essential clue: a 35,000-word manifesto, published in *The Washington Post* in collaboration with *The New York Times*, asserting that the world needed to understand that "the Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race."

People were living in a society that made them unhappy and then being prescribed drugs to take away their unhappiness.

David's wife urged him to come with her to the library at the college where she taught and he was able to read half a dozen pages of the manifesto online, the first time he had ever used the internet.

Linda told him about something that had been bothering her: Didn't some of those phrases and ideas sound just like Ted?

Though he had scarcely admitted it even to himself, David was slowly starting to think the same thing.

"Without Linda, I probably would have shoved it in a drawer and tried my best not to think about it," he said.

For three months, David worked with a private investigator and a former F.B.I. behavioral science expert to explore whether Ted could be the Unabomber. Finally, he reached out to a lawyer, who helped him contact the F.B.I.

Ted's arrest, in April 1996, came about six weeks later, David recalled. Eventually, a plea deal averted the death penalty, resulting instead in a life sentence without the possibility of parole.

David wrote to his brother not long after the arrest, and received a blistering three-page reply, in which he accused David of having a "talent for self-deception."

1996

You know me well enough to realize that, above all, I need physical freedom, silence and solitude and that, to me, permanent imprisonment will be a fate far worse than death. ...



Linda Patrik first showed the manifesto to David Kaczynski and shared her suspicions that it might have been written by his brother.

Jordan Vonderhaar for The New York Times

The real reason why you informed on me is that you hate me. ...

And what you hate me for is your own gnawing sense of inferiority. Your suspicion that I was the Unabomber at last gave you your opportunity to get a crushing revenge on big brother for being smarter and more capable than you are.

David — who became a Buddhist after his brother's arrest, finding solace in the tradition's notion that everything is interconnected — was undeterred. In part, he was trying to respect a pledge that their mother, Wanda Kaczynski, had asked him to honor when he was a boy. "Please remember that you must never abandon your brother, because that's what he fears the most," she told him.

Seven months after Ted's arrest, David was still struggling with his own feelings of responsibility, and apologized to him.

October 1996

I have had to glimpse my own cruelty and it is, as you say, a kind of hell.
I do love you. I'm so, so sorry for what I've done and for how it hurts you.

Sometimes, David would reminisce about their time playing summer sports together. "I still remember with great pleasure how we used to bat the ball around," he wrote in 2004. "And the softball game where you went 7 for 7 and I made a great catch. We were something that day."

He had imagined those days might live forever.

May 2005

I just never realized how fragile everything was. I still don't understand your will to sever the past. You must somehow feel that you understand it.

David regularly made deposits in Ted's commissary account to help him pay for small purchases at the prison, and sometimes ordered books for his brother online. At his mother's request, he shipped Ted a book, "Who Ordered This Truckload of Dung? Inspiring Stories For Welcoming Life's Difficulties," as a Christmas gift in 2005.

Ted never acknowledged it, but scratched a note at the bottom of the invoice: "Needless to say, this went straight into the trash, like all books sent by my brother."

In 2007, David notified his brother that their mother was suffering "a serious health crisis." He appealed to Ted to finally reach out to her.

March 2007

I, for one, couldn't live with myself if I couldn't forgive. ...

Mom has never stopped loving you for a moment. ...

In case you don't know, I mean to tell you very clearly that it would mean the world to Mom if you would tell her that you know she loves you.

There was no response, and several years later, when Ms. Kaczynski was near death, David contacted the prison chaplain. “The chaplain never called me back, but instead called Mom’s doctor and said Ted didn’t want to talk,” he recalled. Ms. Kaczynski died in 2011 at the age of 94.

December 2011

‘Memories, memories, memories,’ she intoned while dying. Her vision of memories fading now is mine. ...

‘Beautiful, golden light,’ she told me. To her, it was like a room opening. To me, like a flock of stars rising from her bosom.

Finding new connections



David Kaczynski built a long friendship with Gary Wright, a survivor of his brother’s attacks.

September Dawn Bottoms for The New York Times

Still facing a brick wall when he tried to communicate with his brother, David found himself turning to an unlikely source for friendship.

Gary Wright, one of the Unabomber's victims, was badly injured in 1987 when he picked up an odd-looking object that appeared to be a piece of lumber with nails sticking out of it that had been left in the parking lot of a computer store he owned in Utah. It exploded, and his body was pierced by more than 200 pieces of shrapnel, and the nerves were severed in his left arm. He underwent a dozen operations and treatment for post-traumatic stress.

In the months after Ted's arrest, David and his wife wrote to surviving victims and families of those who had been killed by Ted's bombs, apologizing and asking what they could do to help them cope.

The response was sparse, but later, a private investigator who had seen a TV interview with Mr. Wright, for whom David had had no address, advised David to make an effort to call him. Mr. Wright seemed approachable, the detective said, and not that angry.

David phoned Mr. Wright, and they spoke for about 20 minutes. The two men still remember their first conversation. "David, you have nothing to apologize for," Gary told him. "You did the right thing."

For David, it was a turning point. "It was like a bridge across this abyss between myself and all the families that had been harmed," he said.

The two men went on to meet often through the years, connecting over the country musician Merle Haggard, visiting the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum together, making public appearances to talk about ending the death penalty and the power of friendship and forgiveness.

In 2015, David and his wife made Texas their primary residence after retiring from their jobs at a Buddhist monastery in Woodstock, N.Y., where David was executive director for three years.

David kept writing to Ted, and continued to reflect on the times they had shared in the past and his own spiritual journey. In one of the letters he recalled the trip the two of them had taken to the Yukon.

Undated

Hidden roots, spring blossoms, death's luminous carpet outspread with shadowed branches, new life peeping from dark-ridged joints. I walk knee-deep in clouds upon the sculpted plain. It's said that when the world was born other worlds were promised.

A letter at Christmas

Over the Christmas season in 2021, David was puzzled because a holiday letter he had sent to Ted at the federal supermax prison in Colorado had been returned as undeliverable. David had been sending letters there without a hitch for more than 20 years.

He telephoned the prison and was told that Ted was no longer housed there, but nothing more. He searched the Bureau of Prisons online inmate locator, which showed his brother to be housed at the Federal Medical Center in Butner, N.C., the prison system's largest medical complex.

Anxious to learn what he could about his brother's health, David contacted a lawyer who had represented Ted at his trial. The lawyer told him she had heard that Ted had been diagnosed with late-stage cancer.

On Reddit, he found a letter posted that Ted had apparently written to someone whose name was scratched out, in which Ted disclosed that he was dying from terminal cancer.

2022

I can't expect to live more than two years at the outside, and I may well be dead in less than a year.

David found himself reflecting on the complexities and the tragedy that had beset their brotherhood, and how a family that had once been so close had come apart, and was in fact fading away.

"Maybe I felt like I was now coming to the end of some epic novel — one serious enough and mysterious enough to keep me pondering for all my remaining years," David recalled in an interview.

He stepped up the pace of his letters to Ted.

"I needed to tell him that I loved him, and to recount the ways in which he'd had a positive influence on my life," he said. "But I knew Ted had a very stubborn side, making it highly unlikely I would ever hear from him."

In what turned out to be the last letter he sent to his brother, David told him that the best of his ideas "would outlive all of us."

On a June morning in 2023, David and his wife had just finished a hike and were snacking on crispbreads and cheese at a picnic table in a park near their apartment when David skimmed his cellphone. There was an email from his former lawyer, notifying him of reports that Ted had died. "I am very sorry," it said.

Ted had been found dead in his solitary cell, having killed himself. Unbidden, David's thoughts turned to his father's suicide years earlier.

Even more profoundly, he felt an emptiness. All those years of letters — even without an answer, they had kept a door wedged open. Now it was closed forever.

"A totally one-sided relationship is still a relationship of sorts," David said. "But now, if I am able to find words to describe my feelings and memories that I want to share with Ted, I can only speak those words to myself."

David tried desperately to find out from prison officials whether he could have a role in the handling of his brother's remains, but for weeks, he could not get an answer.

"Dear Sir or Madam, Please, please, PLEASE give me the phone number of someone I can speak with," he wrote in one email. "To hear nothing from you feels dismissively cruel. Does the B.O.P. treat other families so? I loved my brother."

He was finally told that Ted's remains had been handled according to his written wishes and that David would have to file a federal Freedom of Information Act request to learn anything more.

David could barely contain his resentment about the way he'd been treated by prison officials.

"I made the difficult decision to share my suspicions about Ted with the F.B.I., the effect of which was to save lives," he said in one of numerous emails to federal prison officials that mostly went unanswered. "We all worked together for the common good. Now you ignore my simple request to learn whether I can have a role in the disposition of my brother's remains? That is heartless."

It turned out that Ted had left a handwritten will.

December 2014

No person known to be related to me by blood or by marriage shall possess, or have any control over, all or any part of my estate.

David still does not know what became of Ted's body.

New reflections

David has continued to see Mr. Wright, 64, appearing with him at a Yom Kippur event in Santa Monica, Calif., not long after Ted died. David told the gathering that he was struggling with "some grief" over his brother's death. He ruefully explained that Ted "never spoke to me again" after his arrest.

He then looked warmly at Mr. Wright. "It's not the same maybe, but I believe in spiritual brotherhood, too," he said. Putting his arm around Mr. Wright's shoulder, he added, "Gary is my brother in spirit."

Often, he is asked about his brother's writings, which have taken on new currency in recent years.

"It appears that more and more people are taking his ideas seriously," David said in an interview. "Where are we going with things like artificial intelligence? Will it compromise human freedom and poison our basic human capacity for creative, original thinking? And if so, how do we protect ourselves and preserve the very essence of our spiritual being? How do we heal our once-intimate relationship with Mother Nature before it's too late?"

But Ted's prescience, he said, was poisoned by his violence.

"Waves of anger and desperation born of utter helplessness can never be harnessed to produce skillful means for generating social change," David said. "I'm afraid that his violent actions only served to stigmatize his thinking. As a result, his analysis of technology has been dismissed by many as the ravings of a madman."



Mr. Kaczynski and Mr. Wright spoke about forgiveness and atonement.

September Dawn Bottoms for The New York Times

Susan C. Beachy and Kirsten Noyes contributed research.

Serge F. Kovalski is an investigative reporter for The Times, based in New York.

The Ted K Archive

Serge F. Kovaleski

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[<nytimes.com/2025/04/29/us/unabomber-ted-kaczynski-letters.html>](https://nytimes.com/2025/04/29/us/unabomber-ted-kaczynski-letters.html)

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