

What Lessons Can We Learn From the Story of Ted's Life?

Theo Slade

Contents

Lifestyle Change	3
Unhealthy outlets	3
Ted's unhealthy outlet	3
Healthy outlets	5
Mental Health & Criminal Justice Reform	9
Wholesale Political Reform & Revolution	11
The burden on the family and friends of both good and evil	
revolutionaries	11
Pragmatism vs. Idealism	12

Lifestyle Change

Growing up as an awkward kid, I learned to value the road less traveled and to form my own conclusions about what makes life meaningful. While I hold high ideals, I'm open to a range of tactics—including strategically engaging with political systems I wouldn't have chosen to exist in their current form.

But I've also met people whose childhood experiences of awkwardness and bullying pushed them toward revenge and fanaticism. For them, the perceived impossibility of winning over a majority led to a cold, authoritarian calculus—where they decided whose lives could be discarded for their version of the greater good.

Unhealthy outlets

I grew up in a hippie corner of North Wales and, at 17, set off on my own to Earth First Gatherings. From there, I got involved in blocking open-cast coal mine planning applications, opening squatted social centers, and organizing meals to “feed the 5000” with refugees in Calais.

But in that world, I also met a primitivist who had embraced a similarly violent ideology to Kaczynski. After years of feeling lost and disconnected, he died young. That experience drives my interest in studying the ideological rabbit holes that lead people down these paths—and, just as importantly, the best arguments for pulling them out.

Knowing that I was once friendly with someone who went from protesting coal extraction to embracing eco-extremist ideas—and then never found his way back—is deeply unsettling. I can't help but wish things had turned out differently for him.

Some former anarchists are drawn to Ted's ideas because they offer a rigid, simplistic way of viewing the world, often leading them to abandon broader struggles. This shift tends to diminish both their own quality of life and the movements they leave behind. I also see parallels between those who move from engaging with diverse anarchist campaigns to focusing almost exclusively on illegalism, propaganda of the deed, and communiqués.

Ted's unhealthy outlet

As a professor at Berkeley during the height of the Vietnam war protests, Kaczynski was very aware of militant campaigns against the draft that even involved bombs going off at universities. He romanticized the anti-hero in Joseph Conrad's novel *The Secret Agent*. So, I think he desired to outcompete leftist rebellion with a more all-encompassing ultra-conservative rebellion of needing to return to a medieval era traditional relationship with technology.

I'm very critical of how he thought he could use violence to at first satisfy an internal pain to enact his suffering on others, and then later how he imagined himself a revolutionary.

I think Ted's difficulty relating to people blinded him to the way a coalition could be built to remediate aspects to the world he grew up in which had harmed him. I think his critique of his wayward followers should also be applied back on him, given his lack of optimism about the possibility of achieving a more ideal society without mass killing and starvation:¹

Kaczynski condemns ITS and accuses the group of misappropriating his ideas. He hurls the charge of leftism right back at them, along with a diagnosis of learned helplessness: 'The most important error that ITS commits is that they express, and therefore promote, an attitude of hopelessness about the possibility of eliminating the technological system'. This attitude of hopelessness gives ITS a more vengeful and nihilistic character than Kaczynski himself.

Kaczynski didn't like mass movements; he had a disgust for the university elite's ideological disconnect from the world. Had the desire to share with the world some useful philosophical theory and some not so useful action i.e. killing various people identified with technology. Because his childhood was about being forced to conform to an ideal of academic success at the expense of mental health and community, he thought he was only one of few people who had woken up to the downside of this conformity, such that any revolution would need to be carried out by a small vanguard playing off many parties against each other.

But, I think that idea reveals a naivety about human potential and a naive optimism about an elite underclass who will always be willing enough to risk their lives to tear down industrial society, to even stop it re-emerging if it ever could be destroyed.

To an extent, social movement membership is tied to events which are hard to predict, like the children who grew up in the formerly fascist countries after WW2 formed the most active left wing militant movements, which can be understood to be in part an anger at their parents generation for buying into fascism. But that's not necessarily a bad thing, it's just about learning those lessons, to counsel people to take only the actions which are ethical and the consequences they are comfortable living with, to make the movement as sustainable as possible.

And obviously sometimes getting caught isn't a total loss to the movement, the publicity received for a worthwhile act of civil disobedience can be a net gain, but it does have to be a struggle people can sympathize with. So, I just don't see people being inspired by primitivist terror attacks ever catching on as this even minor movement.

* * *

There is that really strong us versus them in some parts of the world, especially with religion, kids growing up with the fear that even doubting your own community

¹ Sean Fleming. The Unabomber and the origins of anti-tech radicalism [Essay]. Taylor & Francis. May 7, 2021. Original link. Archived link.

would be an insult to god. It's a hard one, we really need more auditors checking kids are learning to a high standard if they're being home-schooled and are not just being indoctrinated. But, also just leading by example in forming home-schooling networks and meeting other families at gatherings where other parents can hopefully be inspired by how emotionally and intellectually developed your kids are and what's working for you.

What's at the root of a desire for a primitive way of life is often a desire for a more innocent time in one's childhood.

Some activities connecting you to feelings you had as a child can be absolutely essential, like the joy of experimentation where you can more easily enjoy the wonder of a forest by making up which path you'll take as you go along.

Part of recruiting people to our political side on environmental protest sites, was turning the camp into an action playground with low down walkways for people to practice on, for people to get in touch with their younger/animal self again.

Healthy outlets

I'm fascinated by outcasts like Aileen Wuornos and Ted Kaczynski because of their desire to find healing in unconventional lifestyles, before everything goes wrong for them and others.

The surface level fascination is I'm convinced that profound changes in lifestyle are needed, for instance I live a low-impact vegan lifestyle myself. So, unpicking the knot of what went so wrong for some people with their motivation going into into an unconventional lifestyle or aspects to the practical reality of the lifestyle is all really important for me, in order to understand the way it may have negatively impacted their lives, so as to better advise people to avoid those pitfalls.

The deeper level fascination is to understand what meaning they were deriving from their life and unpicking that knot of how any person can get so lost.

Finally, we all walk around with naive assumptions that people we know well could never act in evil ways, if we're ever forced to come face to face with the fact that they are, we have this realization of the ways we were blind to being able to help those people.

For Ted he romanticized nature as a boy in the library, reading books about Neanderthals, and wishing he could escape into that life.

For Aileen she had set off hitchhiking and began living on communes from the age of 15 with the hope of doing some psychological healing away from the circle she was stuck in in Troy, Michigan, where she grew up.

This was also a very romanticized road to take at the time, although I don't think Aileen bought into all of that, as she was simply homeless from the age of 13 and traveling further afield was a nice break from relying on friends in Troy. But she loved the hippie music of the era and cherished every commune she stayed at for the people who attempted a new more compassionate way of relating to one another.

So, for me, that was activist circles, the way people romanticized the activist life on the road, and my participation in it was partly to heal wounds from childhood. So, it left me with the understanding that you don't get a choice in the strange situational reasons that different people will be alienated from society enough to join this or that campaign, but you can make the best of the journey all the same.

The idea of people being commended for being part of nomadic culture today is; if you're able to plug the gaps in various local campaigns, like helping out with cooking for activist soup kitchens and giving workshops, etc.

I set off at 16 for Malaysia on a month long outdoor expeditions trip and got to live with poor rice farmers, and at 17 for earth first gatherings and climate camps, and then was on the road from 19 for many years, going from protest camp to protest camp.

I was looking at environmental groups from tree sitters in California, to Food not Bombs groups in Indonesia. And seeing this movement learning from each other internationally, that had different social and moral norms, which I really wanted to explore and see if I could make that my adoptive community.

The same way some people have the willpower to put up with horrible bosses in order to pursue a passion at work, I was OK with putting up with physical hardships in order to get to explore this more co-operative culture in its grassroots form, still developing, trying to become the mainstream culture and politics.

* * *

Getting hurt as a child also lead me to have a strong skepticism of unjustified authority. Pretty obvious outcome I guess, but it's not how it always goes.

Here's another outcome that can happen:

Something bad happens, and the person thinks; 'this sucks, my pain was totally undeserved, if I could just set an example for how to behave better and encourage everyone to emulate the aesthetics of doing better, then everything would be alright with the world.'

Here's the only way I knew how to accept what happened to me:

Something bad happened, my pain was the almost random result of people existing and then developing essences according to social conditioning, but I can find solace in collaborating with people grappling with similar environmental conditioning and where possible challenge any power that works through these social contracts.

Now, I'm not saying that because of the way the first person dealt with their pain they can't also become strongly skeptical of unjustified authority, I've just noticed a trend whereby it seems many of these people gravitate towards policing other people's behavior according to simple and rigid rules, whereif you act in a way that looks outside the mold enough times you're treated as not being trustworthy.

The way I prefer to go through life is finding unique people precisely in order to scrape the bottom of the barrel of socially uncool mannerisms, to work out whether or

not that socially uncool behavior is something the status quo society was right to have deemed as something you should be ashamed of or not. So as to reason backwards whether the social norms we're enforcing are even good ones to begin with.

How you get convinced as a child that fucked up shit is actually ok is being taught that it's just part of the status quo social norm. And I understand people jumping to the simplest solution, and hedging all their bets on the probability that if someone had only enforced a better social norm and taught their abuser not to be abusive that it wouldn't have happened to them, and I can agree that it wouldn't have in that way, and those remedies are needed, but I can't stop there and open myself up to pain by imaging that we have all the answers for how to put checks and balances in place to make sure everyone is on a good path in life.

Anyway, as well as needing to live in doubt, and do this observation work to question every social norm, even the status quo good ones, I felt the call to adventure to simply rack up as many wild and complicated experiences as I could immediately, saying fuck it to the risks I chose, because at least I was out of the stifling social norms I'd been brought up to believe were healthy and had only hurt me. The steps that lead to someone becoming an abuser are so disgustingly simple and boring that they adequately suit the phrase 'the banality of evil', so at least by adventuring I was racking up complicated experiences which were the opposite of that.

Suffice to say as part of this bare bones existence I got to witness lots of people trying to play by the established rules, and falling behind or never even getting off the ground due to circumstances outside their control, which lead me to desire radical solutions.

* * *

My desire to live this bare bones existence left me with one intuitional bias about what type of activism I think is likely more productive, which people may or may not already find obvious and useful.

It has to do with a kind of harm reduction, welfare-based politics where a group desires to be assimilated into the whole under certain conditions vs. an oppression abolition based politics where a group desires simple autonomy and positive liberties.

I have this skepticism of whether some of the protests done to achieve media attention for the civil rights struggle were well thought out or not, which is a semi-heretical claim to make today. But, I basically align with Malcolm X on this issue, who was the biggest voice given a microphone at the time questioning this.

The logic of the protests were simple, black civil rights activists would attempt to carry out every day civilized activities that white people got up to in their white only spaces where you know you're going to receive abuse and show up to the media the uncivilized nature of the attacker. Thus, making a solid case against restrictions on integration, because the black community have upright social norms and are capable of shouldering their share of the burden of responsibilities in society.

Most famously you have the Montgomery bus boycott after the planned disobedience of Rosa Parks, a middle class, respectably dressed woman. Now an extra piece of trivia to this story that most, but not everyone who knows about the disobedience knows, is that inspiration for the planned disobedience was drawn from the arrest of a Claudette Colvin who wasn't well suited for the media attention as "she did not have 'good hair', she was not fair-skinned, she was a teenager, she got pregnant."

Anyway, this whole back story is to say; I respect more the spontaneous fight that teenager faced than the planned disobedience of Rosa Parks precisely because it was based on a spontaneous desire to confront injustice and do so regardless of any planned strategy. And although I think the way they went about the planned disobedience and boycott was likely a clever strategy, there were also many protests that were ill thought out and failed to get the required media attention. This meant people subjecting themselves to abuse for worse reasons than their own spontaneous choosing. So, I just don't think we should lose sight of the authentic bedrock inspiration for these struggles.

MLK said himself he was disappointed that engagement with the civil rights struggle dropped after the passage of the civil rights amendment, so I can't help wondering if the civil rights movement of the time took a calculated risk not to put so much of their time and money behind the harm reduction politics of asking to be assimilated into respectable society, and instead into the basic means of survival in black communities, like labor and housing unions, then America might be a more equitable society today.

Finally, this calculus has implications for other struggles, like with the legal animal rights movement, whether we need to be cheerleaders for every KFC that offers a vegan option, or whether we should feel more energized about building up our own vegan cafes and forming contentious alliances of our own choosing, not only when it suits a multi-million-dollar companies profit incentive.

So, my advice; live in doubt, try to stay open to holistic problem-solving methods for remedying the foundational issues in society. Observe people's lack of autonomy living under various unjustified hierarchical relationships. Try to live a more frugal existence so as not to get lost in the rat race of consumer capitalism and find happiness in the small things like the fun you can have joking around with friends to get them to accept you for who you are or not to accept you at all, so as to create deeper connections which builds stronger communities:²

It can be annoying or hurtful when others presume they know everything about you. But rather than assert their wrongness and make them defensive, you can acknowledge it as a common human failing and find creative ways to hold a mirror up to what life experiences they've had that lead them to jump to those conclusions.

² Theo Slade. A Love Letter To Failing Upward [Essay]. Activist Journeys. Oct 31, 2020. Original link. Archived link.

One way is a kind of playful authenticity, telling a lie about a lie, to get back closer to the truth. So don't outright challenge the idea, but don't live up to it either, in fact live down to it. Playfully undermine the idea by failing to live up to the glamour of what it would mean to be that person, then find a way of revealing that it was a misunderstanding all along, so they needn't worry about it applying to you.

Finally, an often quoted saying, but a poignant one:³

I am, somehow, less interested in the weight and convolutions of Einstein's brain than in the near certainty that people of equal talent have lived and died in cotton fields and sweatshops.

Mental Health & Criminal Justice Reform

David Kaczynski has often spoken about the need to transform tragedy into a mission. Reflecting on the pain caused by his brother's actions, he said, "The worst thing would be that it's all just sort of meaningless and people died and Ted was lost and mom died broken-hearted."⁴ But instead of succumbing to despair, he hoped that "if we can create a sense of a mission about helping people and understanding the role of family, that would make it somewhat easier to endure."⁵

His work against the death penalty helped him process his brother's crimes, but also connected him to the broader human toll of violence. "A lot of our work against the death penalty has involved reaching out to murder victim family members—whether they're with us or against us—to try to show this isn't about the offender, it's really about all of us... I've really been sensitized over the years to the victims' experience as well, and I'm just very thankful there were no more victims."⁶

David is also reflective about how families cope with mental illness over time. "A family kind of accommodates itself to a person's differences... there's a good side to that... but at the same time, during that process... there can be a loss of perspective... and you don't realize how far out on a limb you've gone and how troubled this person is."⁷

³ Stephen Jay Gould. *The Panda's Thumb: More Reflections in Natural History* [Book]. Norton. Reissued 1992. Original link. Archived link.

⁴ David Kaczynski. *Families as Secondary Consumers of the Mental Health System* [Lecture]. NYS Consumer Affairs. 2012. Original link. Archived link.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Alan Chartock (Host). David Kaczynski | WAMC's In Conversation With [Podcast Interview]. WAMC's In Conversation With. August 12, 2021. Original link. Archived link.

He's clear that he would have acted differently if he'd known more earlier. "If I knew then what I know now, even just about mental illness, forgetting the Unabomber case, I think we would have tried to get help for Ted at an earlier stage in his life."⁸

There's a persistent theme of regret and responsibility. "I hope I was a decent brother. Anything he asked for I tried to give him... The things I had to do that were harmful to him, I believe I was kind of forced to do."⁹ And even though he didn't act with malice, he acknowledges how easily things could have gone differently: "We acknowledge the irrational side [of guilt], but at the same time understand that history might have been different, if we had had just a bit more insight, just a bit more compassion at times when we were challenged."¹⁰

That sense of interconnection runs through David's life and outlook: "We're never really alone. We might feel alone, but we are interconnected in so many ways."¹¹ He credits the support of others—"a mother who loved me unconditionally... a wife who had an ethical compass and a love for me"¹²—for helping him through the hardest moments.

What's disturbing is how much violence could have been prevented with earlier intervention. When federal agents searched Ted's Montana cabin in 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."¹³

And yet the massive law enforcement apparatus—125 agents, millions of dollars—did not solve the case. David noted, "In the end, the case was cracked by Linda, a private citizen unconnected to the massive investigation. She had never met the person responsible for sending the bombs, only his family."¹⁴

Linda, for her part, recalled, "We had only the vaguest idea that Ted might be the Unabomber. Many people would have just put those suspicions out of their minds, but I think that it was the pain of the victims that motivated us to continue."¹⁵

This raises difficult questions: What if our systems had been built around prevention, rather than punishment? What if families could reach out without fearing state violence, or their loved one's execution? What if care—not just surveillance or suspicion—had been the institutional norm?

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ David Kaczynski. David Kaczynski's Lecture on Ethics & Responsibility [Lecture]. Ishkah. April 23, 2019. Original link. Archived link.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ David Kaczynski. Every Last Tie [Book]. Duke University Press. January 8, 2016. Page 25. Original link. Archived link.

¹⁴ David Kaczynski. Every Last Tie [Book]. Duke University Press. January 8, 2016. Page 87. Original link. Archived link.

¹⁵ Unnamed. A Conversation with Linda E. Patrik [Written Interview]. Union College News Archives. July 1, 1998. Original link. Archived link.

Wholesale Political Reform & Revolution

The burden on the family and friends of both good and evil revolutionaries

David Kaczynski had to navigate the surreal experience of staying informed about his brother's prison experience through a 'lady love' of Ted's who was obsessed with Ted—not as a person, but as a dark legend. Even as David reckoned with the pain of turning his brother in, he had to deal with outsiders who saw Ted as something larger than life, an icon rather than the man he had grown up with.

But this kind of estrangement isn't unique to those tied to violent revolutionaries. Even the families of those who fight for noble causes can experience a sense of loss. Imagine the friends of Candy Lightner, founder of Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Before tragedy radicalized her, she might have been someone they talked casually with about books or shared quiet, ordinary moments with. Then, in an instant, her life was consumed by a cause. Her moral urgency created distance—not because she was wrong, but because she had become someone different, someone for whom everything else now seemed secondary.

I feel a novel kind of sympathy for David Kaczynski because this disconnect—the way conviction can reshape relationships—is something I experience too, even when I believe I'm acting with integrity. Holding steadfast to certain character virtues can create an unspoken rift with those living more conventional lives, making it harder to relate in easy, uncomplicated ways.

One way I try to bridge this divide is by adopting the role of an absurdist rebel—someone who critiques from the fringes while still existing deep within the system. But I do so with a sense of humor, resisting both total assimilation and total alienation.

To illustrate, imagine a thought experiment: say someone were to infiltrate a morally compromised institution, such as the police, with the sole intent of seeing how long they could last before being expelled for refusing to uphold unjust orders. Picture them waiting outside a disciplinary board, sitting next to another officer. The other officer asks, "What are you in for?" and they reply, "Oh, you know—refused to evict a family that had been paying predatory loans for 50 years and missed one payment."

Camus is a great teacher here.¹⁶ He reminds us that absurdity is not a reason to give up, but a starting point. He argues that true rebellion is an act of defense rather than conquest. A rebel does not seek to dominate but to impose limits—on authority, on injustice, and most importantly, on themselves. Unlike revolution, rebellion resists the lure of absolute certainty. It insists on human dignity over ideological purity.

This is where Camus and Nietzsche diverge. Nietzsche saw isolation as a virtue, a way to escape the contamination of human interaction. Camus saw it differently: I

¹⁶ David Mikics & Robert Zaretsky. From Solitude to Solidarity; How Camus Left Nihilism Behind [Essay]. VQR Online. Spring 2013. Original link. Archived link.

rebel, therefore we are. Rebellion should not sever human bonds—it should reinforce them. The danger is that all rebellion, no matter how principled, carries the risk of turning cold, of consuming the very empathy that sparked it. This is why Camus warns that rebellion must be practiced with restraint, always mindful of its own limits.

In the end, both love and rebellion are necessary. If we don't rebel, we risk surrendering to injustice. But if we lose our connection to others, we risk becoming what we fight against. The challenge is to do both—to reject absurdity without rejecting each other.

Pragmatism vs. Idealism

Many anarchists hold an optimistic vision of revolution, seeing building up towards a short, decisive period of upheaval as the ideal path to an anarchist society, with prolonged insurrection only as a fallback. They support libertarian socialist experiments like Rojava and the Zapatistas, participate in international solidarity campaigns, and boycott colonial occupation states like Israel, hoping that as more progressive societies grow and succeed, they will pave the way for a peaceful transition to global anarchism.

However, insurrectionary anarchists are often far more pessimistic. Some reject international solidarity altogether, believing that no movement can outpace the collapse of civilization. The bleakest perspectives see anarchism as achievable only in the ruins of nuclear fallout. Others believe anarchist and fascist communities will exist side by side indefinitely, locked in an unresolvable conflict, each willing to defend their existence through asymmetrical warfare.

I am far more optimistic. I believe a fully anarchist world can emerge, in part, through supporting libertarian socialist revolutions that create the conditions for deeper anarchist transformations. Rojava, despite its many contradictions, provides a compelling case study of what this might look like—especially in terms of its approach to women's autonomy.

During an interview with an internationalist, Josh Walker, who had gone out to fight ISIS in Syria, an interviewer asked how feminist ideals were incorporated into the militia units out there.¹⁷ Josh responded by offering an example as to the women's houses that had been established. "They're essentially some sort of mix between a family planning advice center, a domestic violence shelter, and a barracks," Josh explained. These spaces provided direct protection in a society that remained violently patriarchal. "A woman will escape a forced marriage or a violent home and come to the women's house," he said. "Then her father, her brothers, her husband and his family will come to take her back—but when a woman with a machine gun pops up on the roof, they generally reconsider."

¹⁷ Josh Walker. On the Rojavan Revolution with Josh Walker, YPG Veteran | Interview from The Vegan Vanguard #15 [Podcast Interview]. Ishkah. Jun 8, 2018. Original link. Archived link.

Rojava's councils also enforce a strict gender quota. "There's a 40% gender quota in the councils," Josh said. "If a council is 60% women, the remaining 40% must be men, and vice versa. If men show up saying their wives couldn't come because they were busy, the council tells them to go home, do the work their wives were doing, and send the women instead. Otherwise, they won't be helped."

Women's leadership extends into military structures as well. "Most of my best commanders out there were women," Josh noted. At every level of the hierarchy, male and female commanders hold equal rank—but with a crucial distinction. "A woman can give orders to men, but a man cannot give orders to the women's units," he explained. "If a male YPG soldier commits an offense against a YPJ member, it's the YPJ command structure that deals with it. If, hypothetically, a man were to assault a YPJ fighter, they could drag him off and punish him however they saw fit, and we wouldn't be allowed to protest or intervene."

Discipline in Rojava also takes distinct forms. "People joke that if you assault a YPJ fighter, they could just drag you off and shoot you," Josh said. "That's not quite true—but they are more likely to put you through platforming. That's when the offender has to stand in front of all the YPJ fighters in the region while each one lays out exactly why what they did was wrong, in excruciating detail, shaming them in front of everyone. It's a common punishment for intermediate offenses."

Despite the challenges, Rojava's commitment to gender equality is one of its most uncompromising features. "On economic policy, they make compromises," Josh admitted. "But on women's rights? That's the one thing they don't compromise on."

The Ted K Archive

Theo Slade

What Lessons Can We Learn From the Story of Ted's Life?

I wrote most of it three years ago as part of writing a critical biography of Ted. However, the biography ballooned into a 1,000-page timeline of his life, packed with block quotes from primary and secondary sources. I got too attached to the each quote as evidence of a frame of mind, so couldn't nail down how to streamline it.

www.thetedkarchive.com