

Time Magazine's Interview with Ted Kaczynski

Stephen J. Dubner

Contents

Introduction	3
Preliminary Questions	3
Daily Routine	3
Celebrity Row	4
Facing life imprisonment	4
Relationship to brother	5
Happy memories	5
Sad memories	5
Ted's brother turning him in	5
Brother worship	6
Past shared worldview	8
Desire to be a leader	10

Introduction

STEPHEN (VO): I interviewed Ted Kaczynski in 1999, three years after he was arrested for the crimes that earned him the name the Unabomber. He was in the same prison then as he is today, a federal supermax in Florence, Colorado.

I had been writing a magazine article about his brother, David, the hero of the Unabomber story if there was such a thing. Then I learned that Ted was writing a book – a book that wound up never being published. The book spent most of its time attacking David — as intellectually dishonest and resentful of his brilliant big brother. I requested an interview with Ted, even though he didn't do that kind of thing – and, to my surprise, he agreed.

We talked for several hours. He sat on a concrete bench in a concrete room, a wall of reinforced glass between us. ... one stipulation was that he wouldn't talk about his actual crimes, since he was still hoping for a retrial. In prison, his neighbors were a who's who of 1990's terrorism – Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber; Ramzi Yousef, from the first World Trade Center bombing.

Preliminary Questions

STEPHEN: Okay. Do you deny — in the context of this interview, do you deny that you committed the crimes attributed to the Unabomber?

TED: I can't comment on that.

STEPHEN: Tell me, do you consider yourself insane?

TED: I'm confident that I'm sane, personally ... I don't get delusions and so on and so forth...I mean, I had very serious problems with social adjustment in adolescence, and a lot of people would call this a sickness. But it would have to be distinguished between an organic illness, like schizophrenia or something like that.

Daily Routine

STEPHEN: Just in terms of your life in prison again, I'm just wondering a little bit about your daily routine. Do you get eight hours of sleep a day?

TED: Yeah. Usually not all at once. ... The food here, believe it or not, is pretty good. Sometimes it's oatmeal... ... Let's say it's a Thurs — I take a shower every other day, rather than every day. Because I have sensitive skin.

Celebrity Row

TED: See, I'm in a range of cells where there are eight cells. And they call this celebrity row. These people are not what you would think of as criminal types. I mean, they don't seem to be very angry people. They're considerate of others. Some of them are quite intelligent.

STEPHEN (PS): Among them, he says, are Ramzi Yousef, the mastermind of the World Trade Center bombing, and Timothy McVeigh. One can only imagine this bombing trio's conversations. Kaczynski says McVeigh (who has recently been transferred to another prison) lent him one of the most interesting books he's read lately, *Tainting Evidence: Inside the Scandals at the FBI Crime Lab*, by John F. Kelly and Phillip K. Wearne.

TED: I mean, I knew from my own experience that they were crooked and incompetent, [shaking his head and laughing]. But according to this book, they're even worse than what I thought.

Facing life imprisonment

TED: Well, obviously I'm not optimistic about life in general, if I were, then maybe you would have a case for concluding that I was mentally ill. I'm not depressed or downcast. It's — let me see. Let's see if I can explain this. There's sort of — different levels of how you feel about your life. Let me try to explain it this way. When I was living in the woods, there was sort of an undertone, an underlying feeling that things were basically right with my life. That is, something might go wrong, I might have a bad day, I might screw something up, I might break my axe handle and do something else, and everything would go wrong. But still somehow underneath the superficial unhappiness or bad feelings there was an underlying feeling that my life was right. I was able to fall back on the fact that here I was a free man in the mountains surrounded by forests and wild animals and so forth. And that this made my life right even if things were for the time being going badly. Here it's the other way around. I'm not depressed or downcast, and I have things to do that I can do that I consider productive, like working on getting this book out. And yet the knowledge that I'm locked up here and likely to remain so for the rest of my life is — it ruins it. The undertone in this case is an extremely bad one. And I don't want to live long. I would rather get the death penalty than spend the rest of my life in prison.

STEPHEN: Would you take your own life given the opportunity?

TED: I will not comment on that. I mean, on a superficial level it isn't really that bad. But just the knowledge that I'm locked up and I'm not free sort — to me it's just not a life worth living.

Relationship to brother

Happy memories

STEPHEN (VO): If you are a man, or a boy, and you have a brother, especially an older brother, then you know that the bond between brothers is unlike any other. Sometimes that bond is almost impossibly wonderful:

TED: We used to, very often we used to go out and play catch, or one of us would hit the ball with the bat and the other one would catch it. And I remember one time when we were throwing that ball. We were as far apart as we could get and still reach each other with the ball. We were throwing that ball as hard as we could, and as far as we could. And, of course, the ball was thrown very inaccurately, because we were trying so hard to throw it. And so we would — we were making these running, leaping catches. We made more fantastic catches that day than I think we did in all the rest of our years together. That was more fun.

Sad memories

STEPHEN (VO): And sometimes the brotherly bond is toxic:

TED: I don't know that it's exactly true that he wanted me to suffer exactly. It's more as if he wanted to score a victory over me. Defeat me. Put himself in the victorious position and me in the position of the one who's defeated and humiliated.

Ted's brother turning him in

STEPHEN: Were you surprised when you learned that it was David who had turned you in? Were you surprised?

TED: Not terribly surprised.

STEPHEN (PS): Beneath David's love for him, he argues, lay "a marked strain of resentment," and "jealousy over the fact that our parents valued me more highly."

TED: It's quite true that he is troubled by guilt over what he's done, but I think his sense of guilt is outweighed by his satisfaction at having finally gotten revenge on big brother.

STEPHEN: Right. If the roles had been reversed... if you had suspected David of being the Unabomber... right?... after all the years that you haven't been communicating very regularly... What would you have done?

TED: I would have kept it to myself.

STEPHEN: Is that what you feel he should have done?

TED: Yeah.

STEPHEN: And what was the first — what was your reaction to that when you first hear that David is involved in turning you in? What does that feel like?

TED: Well, obviously I resented it. There was another strain to my feelings there. I don't know if I can explain it properly. But in a way I was almost glad because my own brother turning me in in a sense made me look good.

STEPHEN: How so?

TED: Well, I mean, it's —

STEPHEN: That you had eluded everyone but someone who knew you close —

TED: Well, I didn't say I eluded anyone for anything. I mean, I have not — I mean, I pled guilty, but that was because I was forced to do so. But it was that — I mean — if someone — I mean, if A screws B, then it tends to make B look good, even if otherwise he might look so great. I don't know.

STEPHEN: Right, right.

TED: So maybe that's — That was perhaps an ignoble thought on my part. But that thought was present, I have to admit.

STEPHEN: Right. What do you say — if you have a re-trial and are acquitted, and have your life back, what do you say to society to relax them, to not let them worry about the Unabomber is at large?

TED: Well, I don't know that I would have to relax them. Just let them worry.

STEPHEN: Ok. If David were to come visit you, if David's in the room now, what do you want to say to him?

TED: Nothing. I just wouldn't talk to him. I would just turn my back and wouldn't talk to him.

STEPHEN: Yeah. Do you still love him?

TED: No.

Brother worship

STEPHEN: Is it fair to say that your relationship with David over the years — which obviously had a lot of peaks and valleys — is it fair to say that that was the most profound personal relationship you'd ever had?

TED: I would say it's the most — the deepest personal relationship that I ever had between — oh, let's say between my teens and about 1990, when I finally broke off with him.

STEPHEN: Right. In terms of you and David, how do you think that you two are most alike?

TED: That's a tough one.

STEPHEN: Yeah.

TED: Over many years we shared a great many values.

STEPHEN: Right.

TED: And it's not clear to me to what extent this was simple imitation of me on his part. And if it was simple imitation on his part, you wouldn't really call it a similarity.

STEPHEN: Right.

TED: But there are some similarities apart from that. I think we're both basically quiet, somewhat introverted types. Both a little on the shy side. Another similarity between us would be that generally speaking, I think he's a very honest person.

STEPHEN: You wrote that his adulation of you disgusted you at certain points over the course of your relationship.

TED: Yeah.

STEPHEN: Did you try to communicate that to him? Did you say to him, Dave, this is not a healthy way to be? I'm glad you like me. I'm glad you respect me, but be your own person. Did you ever try to have that kind of conversation with him?

TED: No.

STEPHEN: Why not? I mean —

TED: It would have been very painful for him to have me say that. And it probably wouldn't have done any good. I mean, I could... in one way or another he would appear to be over-valuing me, but it wasn't something that was so explicit that I could be sure that it was really that.

STEPHEN: Right. In your dreams... literally, in your dreams and in your thinking... it sounds as if you really felt protective of David for many, many years, yes?

TED: Yes.

STEPHEN: Do you think at some point that he ever began to feel protective of you... do you think that as he moved into adulthood — especially after you had cut off communication, do you think that he ever began to feel protective of you?

TED: No.

STEPHEN: You don't. In what ways, if any, do you think he was jealous of you?

TED: He was probably jealous of the fact that I got more attention from our parents. He was jealous of the fact simply that I was dominant in our relationship. Jealous of the fact that I was smarter than he was. I could do most things better than he could. Athletics are one exception.

STEPHEN: In what ways, if any, were you jealous of Dave?

TED: I don't... the only way I can think that I might have been somewhat jealous of him was that when he was in high school he always had lots of friends... he was socially successful. And I wasn't. And I may have had some jealousy about that. But I don't clearly remember that.

STEPHEN: What do you regret most in retrospect about your relationship with David? About the way the relationship devolved, I guess.

TED: Well, I would say basically that I didn't break off with him 20 years earlier.

Past shared worldview

TED: I mean, he was certainly alienated from the mainstream system of values. He just particularly hated Reagan and that whole political bunch. And yet I wouldn't say exactly he had sympathy for Hinckley or for radicals in general. And there was a resentment there, and yet here was never any hope or ambition on his part to actually do anything active or take radical measures.

STEPHEN: In other words, as Ted Kaczynski sees it, his younger brother David wasn't radical enough to be taken seriously. And then, even worse, he went totally mainstream. He got married – to a woman named Linda Patrik, who found Ted creepy, maybe even dangerous. David tried to keep up his relationship with Ted, writing long, heartfelt letters. But eventually Ted shut him out.

STEPHEN: What do you regret most in retrospect about your relationship with David? About the way the relationship devolved, I guess.

TED: Well, I would say basically that I didn't break off with him 20 years earlier.

STEPHEN: So you still feel that way?

TED: Yeah. I mean, I got a lot of satisfaction out of corresponding with him. I mean, it was a good relation — it was in many respects, not in all respects, but in many respects a positive relationship from my point of view. But I don't think it was from my brother's point of view. And in the end it turned out to be disastrous from my point of view, as you can see.

STEPHEN: Right. What do you think would have changed in his life if you had broken off earlier?

TED: Well — I mean — let me put it this way. I think that his attempt to — his sense of rivalry with big brother, his attempt to equal big brother and to win big brother's approval, with very limited success, I think all this was very hard on him. I think that his self esteem would have been in much better shape if he hadn't had me to compete with or compare himself with. And I think he would have — and he always had an easy time making friends. He would have had close relationships with other people, so he didn't really need that relationship with me.

STEPHEN (PS): David's feelings for Ted, in fact, bordered on worship. He was particularly smitten by Ted's belief that modern man was being corrupted by society in general and technology in particular. "Knowing him as I do," Ted writes, "I am certain that if Dave had known of the Unabomber before 1989"—the year David moved in with Linda Patrik—"he would have regarded him as a hero."

David adamantly disputes this—he deplores violence, he says—but he doesn't seem surprised to hear Ted say it. "I think every person is a mystery, and it's strange to

me that a person I grew up with and was very close with remains one of the biggest mysteries of all.” David’s manner is as gentle as Ted’s is brisk, and he speaks with a great earnestness. (The teenagers he counsels call him Mr. Rogers.) When he talks about his brother, however, his voice is full of resignation, the sort felt by someone who has watched a relationship curdle beyond recognition.

Desire to be a leader

STEPHEN (PS): In the Unabomber's mind, society was in desperate need of a brave and brazen savior who wouldn't let murder stand in his way.

TED: Well, let me put it this way, I don't know if violence is ever the best solution, but there are certain circumstances in which it may be the only solution.

STEPHEN (PS): To anarchists who advocate violence, Kaczynski has become a hero. He is flattered but notes that:

TED: [A] lot of these people are just irrational. [P]eople who are reasonably rational and self controlled and are seriously dedicated to getting rid of the technological system. And if I could be a catalyst for the formation of such a movement, I would like to do that.

STEPHEN (PS): Toward the end of our interview, I ask Kaczynski what he would do if, against all odds, he should someday get out of prison. He mentions an anarchist in Oregon with whom he has corresponded.

TED: He has given some talks at colleges about technology and about the Unabomb case, and he's had a very positive response. And if he can get an audience, I could get one much more easily, now that I've been publicized.

The Ted K Archive

Stephen J. Dubner

Time Magazine's Interview with Ted Kaczynski

The podcast transcript & recording. Plus, the Time magazine article.

www.thetedkarchive.com