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Interview with David Kaczynski

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, July 19th, 2017

David Kaczynski is known to most as the brother of the Unabomber, whose homemade explosive devices claimed the lives of three people and injured dozens of others. Much less is known about David, the poet who authored a collection of poetry called *A Dream Named You*, the philosopher who loves metaphysics and Heidegger, the high school English teacher, the bus driver, the zinc smelter worker, and Texas desert dweller; David, the activist who worked with at-risk youth in the Capital region, the executive director of the New Yorkers Against the Death Penalty, and the executive director of Karma Triyana Dharmachakra, a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Woodstock; and David, the author of the memoir *Every Last Tie: The Story of the Unabomber and His Family* (Duke UP, 2016).

As a writer, David writes lovingly, with care and attention, with a kind of affection and tenderness that sometimes hurts. If a reader is looking for a shocking, outrageous story about the Unabomber, he won't find it in *Every Last Tie*. Consult Goggle or maybe tune in to TV shows like *C.S.I.*. *Every Last Tie* is David's homage to his family, and a patient, smart reader will find in it a brother's admiration for his older brother, a married couple's unwavering support and love for their children, a husband's love for his wife, and, ultimately, a family that prides itself on education, morality, and the belief that one's purpose in life is to do good for humanity.

I've had the pleasure of knowing David for almost a decade. He is in my poetry group, and he is also my friend. Below is an interview that I conducted over email with David about his memoir.

David Kaczynski and Bunkong Tuon, photo taken by Carol McCord

***Every Last Tie* is comprised mainly of four chapters: the first on your brother, the second on your mother, the third on your father, and the fourth on your wife. Why did you structure the book this way?**

The chapter on my brother was mainly written a few years earlier than the others when independent editor Andrew Blauner solicited me to contribute to an anthology he was putting together on the theme of brotherhood. After my mother died in 2011, I spent a lot of time thinking about her and our relationship, which in turn inspired me to write a memorial portrait. When Gisela Fosado of Duke University Press contacted me about submitting a manuscript for consideration, I originally sent her a mix that included topical essays and poems in addition to the two pieces on my mother and brother. Gisela thought that the family portraits were much more compelling than the poems and essays and so she advised me to flesh out the book in that direction. Coincidentally,

I had already been working on a portrait of my father. The chapter on my relationship with Linda came into existence because I felt the need to complete the series of family portraits and to address the dilemma we faced as a means to bring the story and its themes full circle. To put it more succinctly, *Every Last Tie* was "found" through a somewhat messy, complicated, collaborative process. But once the form of the book began to emerge for me, I felt charmed by its symmetry — the way in which the four individual portraits reflected one another, much as family members do in real life. By following my editor's advice to eliminate the social and political essays, I may have sacrificed an opportunity to contextualize the story. But I think as a result the book became more focused and, in my view, more aesthetically and intellectually inviting. An afterword by forensic psychiatrist Dr. James Knoll offers context from a professional psychiatric perspective.

Chapter 1: "Missing Parts" begins with the following: "I'll start with the premise that a brother shows you who you are—and who you are not." Who is David Kaczynski—and who is he not?

I tend to think that Ted and I are both more similar and more different than most brothers. The similarities might be accounted for by our having grown up in the same family and by my early admiration for my big brother (7 ½ years older), who embodied in my eyes the Kaczynski family ethos. We were raised to prize intelligence, to think independently, and to live with integrity. We were also taught to approach life with a hopeful attitude toward human possibilities, not only keeping in view our own futures but the future of humanity as a whole. But I think Ted and I developed very different strategies for handling disappointment. We were temperamentally different; we were also drawn along divergent intellectual paths – Ted excelled in math and science, whereas I become more interested in art and philosophy. In *Every Last Tie,* I describe Ted's childhood hospital trauma and his experience as an unwitting guinea pig in an abusive psychological experiment at Harvard. Both experiences seem to have affected him profoundly and damaged his ability to manage difficult emotions or to trust others. He never had a close friend. His reaction to feeling demeaned or mistreated and to conflict generally was to isolate himself…and ultimately, unfortunately, to find a means to hit back. After his arrest, Ted was evaluated by a number of psychiatrists who diagnosed him as having paranoid schizophrenia. We all know what anger feels like. But I don't think we can quite imagine how anger echoes endlessly and painfully in a heart that lacks the resources to heal itself. Ultimately, my brother taught me what happens when one travels the path of anger beyond the point of no return.

Who is Ted Kaczynski? What is the story that is missing in the countless books, newspaper articles, and television specials on Ted?

I think Ted's story is still waiting to be told. Despite the subtitle of my book, *The Story of the Unabomber and His Family* (my concession to Duke University Press' marketing department), *Every Last Tie* is much more my story, or rather the memorialization of my unique and personal perspective than it is a narrative about Ted Kaczynski's life. He wrote voluminous diaries during the more than twenty years he spent inside his small cabin in rural Montana. When I read those diaries at the behest of his legal defense team, I was stunned, realizing how thoroughly I had missed seeing the depths of my brother's struggles, his yearning for meaningful human

contact, his loneliness, his profound alienation from all community and culture apart from the books he read, his endless, helpless struggles to balance his hyper-rational mind with unyielding waves of negative, afflictive emotions. If I remember correctly, Ted once commented that his behavior would seem quite normal and reasonable to anyone who lived inside his or a similar reality. What I think we're lacking is a better sense of what that internal reality felt like. If some thoughtful, sensitive writer were to undertake such a project, the world might benefit from experiencing a taste of that reality. We might discover it's closer than we think. At the very least, we'd begin to glimpse Ted Kaczynski the person through more sympathetic eyes.

In discussing the relationship between your brother and mother, you wrote, "In the bond between parent and child there is always a great gulf, an unaccountable element of difference or hidden karma that will inevitably translate the family dynamic into a wider arena. It could that behind every great person or villain there is a powerful, resonant parent-child relationship." (55) What do you see your own role to be in this story?

Sometime after Ted left home for college at the age of 16, my mother told me a story. She said that when I was brought home from the hospital as a newborn, 7-year old Teddy appeared to regard this new member of the family with some suspicion. He had a cold, stony look in his eye and kept a wary distance from the couch where Mom was feeding me. Believing that her elder son suffered from a fear of abandonment as a result of being hospitalized in infancy, she patted the couch seat next to her and cheerfully called him over. Teddy reluctantly complied. Mom explained and showed him how to hold a baby with great care. Then she placed me in Teddy's arms. She took his hand in hers and demonstrated how to caress a baby. She said, "This is your little brother. He's very small and helpless so we have to care for him and protect him." As Mom put it, "From that day onward, Teddy was hooked!" I think in some part of Ted's mind, he always saw me as the vulnerable baby of the family. This strong, formative impression facilitated our early relationship beautifully, yet it may have limited our relationship over time. Whereas Mom and Dad loved watching me grow and develop independence, I sensed that Ted was less comfortable with the changes he saw in his kid brother. I never experienced any struggle to free myself from Mom and Dad. On the contrary, as I developed, I saw how open they were to learning from their children. Not so with Ted, however. He loved the baby in me above all.

Could you share with *Cultural Weekly* readers your mother's lesson on sympathy and empathy? How could this lesson be applied to life's challenging situations?

Once, when I asked Mom, "What's wrong with Teddy?" she responded by describing what she called my brother's "hospital trauma" i.e. his hospitalization at the age of nine months for a body rash that was never diagnosed. Since the hospital at that time restricted parental visitation to two hours-three times per week, my brother was essentially left alone with strangers who, among other things, poked him with needles. Mom remembered seeing a photograph in Ted's medical file of her son held spread-eagled between two nurses on an examination table, his eyes crossed in terror as medical personnel made use of a camera to document his symptoms. It was then that Mom told me, "Don't ever abandon your brother because that's what he fears the most." On another occasion, she explained to me the meaning of a word in a book she was reading me: *empathy*. Empathy is different from sympathy, she said, because it means feeling *with* rather than merely *for*

someone in pain. It was a subtle semantic and emotional distinction for a child to understand, but I must have understood something or I wouldn't have remembered the interaction so many years afterwards. What she was basically implying is that Self and Other are not so separate as we tend to assume. (Years later, I encountered more sophisticated versions of the same idea in Buddhist teachings on "emptiness" or the non-duality of self and other.) As a social worker in training, I also remember hearing a catchphrase that rang true to me: "Hurt people hurt people." It requires no leap of logic to appreciate that hurting people who hurt people only compounds human suffering.

Why are you an opponent of capital punishment? Have you found your mother's lesson on empathy useful in your thinking about the death penalty? If so, where does forgiveness fit in?

Where do I begin? If we take an honest look at our legal system and its fallibilities, we can see the absurdity of using an imperfect system to achieve an outcome that demands perfection. More than 150 innocent people (that we know of) have been convicted and sent to death row in the US only to have their convictions overturned, often after many years spent in prison awaiting execution. A few more innocent people (again, only those that we know of) have been put to death. The debate over capital punishment should end there. In addition, pervasive racial and class disparities are well documented. One of my friends, Bill Babbitt, turned in his brother to the police and 18 years later witnessed his brother's execution by the state of California. His brother was a Vietnam vet with a severe case of PTSD, a piece of shrapnel lodged in his brain, and a veteran, too, of mental institutions. Like my brother, he was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. He assaulted his victim with his fists while in the throes of a traumatic flashback to his service in Vietnam. There was no evidence he intended to kill her, and in fact the official cause of death listed in the coroner's report was "heart failure." Bill's brother was African-American; his court-appointed lawyer had never tried a criminal case before. The jury was all white; the victim was also white. Prosecutors pandered to jurors' fears during the crime wave of the early 1980's when politicians routinely turned tough on crime rhetoric into predictable votes. In the last 30 years, California has spent a couple of billion dollars on its death penalty system. It has succeeded in putting to death 13 people — one of whom was Bill's brother Manny Babbitt, a purple-hearted veteran who enlisted in the Marines to serve his country in time of war.

Setting aside the serious flaws of the death penalty system, I don't think taking human life can be ethically justified as a form of punishment. Our religious and spiritual traditions urge forgiveness, counterintuitive as that remedy may appear when we are feeling most hurt and angry. Scriptures caution that we judge others at our own peril. When we kill, we kill part of our own spirit as well. One of my brother's surviving victims, Gary Wright, looked my brother in the eye during his victim impact statement and told him that he forgave him. "Otherwise," he said, "I would just be kindling to your cause." Gary pointed out that by letting go of resentment and anger, he spared himself the burden of those painful emotions. More importantly, he did it for his children. He didn't want them to grow up seeing their father as an embittered man.

I often argue that punishment per se has no *intrinsic* value. While punishment can be useful in deterring some harmful behaviors (studies by criminologists, by the way, have failed to establish that the death penalty has any deterrent effect), punishment in such cases only serves as a means to an end, not as an end in itself. Before resorting to punishment, we should ask ourselves if punishment is really the most skillful tool at hand or merely the easiest one to reach when we are feeling angry or lazy or both.

Throughout *Every Last Tie*, but especially in the chapters "Life Force" and "The Ghost Within Me," you wrote movingly about your parents. How has your upbringing shaped you? In what way was Wanda Kaczynski a "life force"? How has Ted Kaczynski, Sr. continued to live "within" you?

Having a mother is a universal experience, so we may tend to see in our own mother a universal type. My mother loved her children in a manner that was both gentle and fierce. I remember her telling me when I was a child, "I would die for you or Teddy without hesitation if it came to that." By this declaration she represented to me the ultimate subordination of self to other. As much as I struggled to understand such love, I never doubted that my mother embodied it. On one hand, I thought, "Gee, I must be really special if my mother would be willing to die in my place." On the other hand, I wondered if I'd be capable of any similar self-sacrifice. Mom had a hard childhood. She invested the energy of her own painful experiences to imagine a far better future for her children. Her investment was such that I couldn't imagine her being able to deal with the tragedy that ensued – her son a serial murderer. But she turned out to be much stronger than I imagined, able to face reality when it hurt the most. She never gave up on loving Ted despite his rejection of her and despite his terrible crimes. As for me, she gave me love, understanding and trust when I needed them most.

In Western culture, we tend to think and behave as if we each have a Self – a more or less separate, autonomous ego, distinct from other egos, our self-consciousness functioning as a gatekeeper to the external world. But that uncritical view doesn't hold up under analysis; nor does it outlast our contemplation of the meaning of simple self-awareness or being. What we call a "self" has no precise boundary. Maybe Walt Whitman sounded like an egotist when he claimed to contain the whole universe inside himself. But is Whitman's claim really so different from what Jesus meant when he said "The Kingdom of God is within you"? To put it metaphorically, we all have countless "ghosts" living inside us, including many – probably an infinite number – that we're not aware of. But my father is one ghost I can easily name; I'll always think of him with gratitude. Both of my parents, I believe, were gifted teachers in their own way. I remember when I was about nine years old they brought me to the Art Institute of Chicago. It was the first time I'd ever come face to face with an abstract painting. I stood in front of one such painting and asked my dad, "What's this supposed to be a picture of?" In response, my father told me that he, too, had been skeptical of modern art, but with the guidance of an artist friend of his he had learned to appreciate it. He said that the painting in question was not meant to represent an outer reality of identifiable forms, but rather an "inner reality" of feelings and impressions. He said that this inner reality that the artist hoped to bring out was as important, if not more important than the outer reality of objects and forms, which after all could be captured even better in a photograph. Then he told me that abstract paintings create a space in which the artist and the viewer are allowed to meet. The best abstract paintings, he said, welcome the viewer in as co-creator of the work. Before this exchange with my father, I never imagined that mere looking could involve creativity or lead to self-understanding. The very idea felt empowering and liberating to a small boy.

***Every Last Tie* treads on several thematic terrains: abandonment, responsibility, and love. At several points in the book, you wrote about David, the narrator, being torn between responsibility to his brother Ted and responsibility to the human community. What is the**

fine line between responsibility and abandonment?

I find it helpful to distinguish between “reacting” and “responding.” When we react to a situation, we do so reflexively, often triggered and driven by negative emotions. By contrast, responding to a situation requires thought and skillful means; the idea being to creatively rearrange a pre-existing pattern so that new possibilities can emerge. So how do we behave responsibly in a world, in a society, in a community, in a family, or in a relationship fraught with negative patterns? I like to tease apart the word “responsibility” to suggest “an ability to respond” i.e. “response-ability.” When I fired Ted from his factory job over his harassment of a fellow employee, I was being reactive, giving way to anger that largely overrode any consideration of my brother’s motives and desperate feelings, lumping his abuse of a colleague together with his abuse of our parents which had disturbed me greatly. Perhaps no other action was possible under the circumstances, but I know that my process was wrong, involving too much anger and too little empathy. Eighteen years later, when we suspected Ted of being the Unabomber, the stakes were much higher: Ted’s life as well as the lives of potential future victims were at risk. Meanwhile, there were few alternative actions to explore: confront my brother – or not; turn him in to the authorities – or do nothing and hope for the best. The sense of being locked in a tight dilemma with so much at stake – a question of life and death, literally – felt incredibly oppressive. By now I was a little wiser perhaps, more aware that my brother was sick and unable to control himself, sobered into reflection and self-examination by the very enormity of the dilemma. But the main difference is that now I had Linda. A point I want to underscore is that taking responsibility, making what amounts to a moral decision – contrary to common belief and the bulk of Western ethical analysis – seldom happens inside the mind of one person, least of all within the autonomous, fictive self of our mythology. Rather the process of ethical decision-making typically occurs in the context of relationship, often through intimate exchanges between people in pre-existing relationships. I don’t feel that in my shared decision-making with Linda I abandoned my brother or gave preference to one set of loyalties over another. Though it might sound strange given what happened to Ted and what might have happened to him, our need to stop the violence was closely linked with our wish to save Ted from himself. I do believe that we affirmed Ted’s humanity at every stage and were committed to protecting him as best we could.

The book depicts different types of love: brotherly love, parental love, and, for a lack of a better word, romantic love (i.e. love shared between partners). Could you talk a little bit about the third type of love? How is it different from the first two types of love?

Every intimate relationship is unique. I’m hardly qualified to generalize. Nevertheless, a kind of structural distinction occurs to me: We don’t get to choose the family we’re born into; we’re simply born into a state of committed relationship with our family members. The element of volition is missing, or at any rate different with respect to relationships within our birth family. But in most cultures we are allowed to choose a mate. It could be argued that this element of choice involves a higher level of commitment. It is more personal and “free,” so to speak. Ideally, it evokes equality (as opposed to dependence) as the basis for commitment. “Self” and “other” become intertwined with no expectation of any future relaxation of emotional bonds. In romantic love, the notion of “choice” seems a little mysterious. Perhaps we feel as if we’ve always known this other person, as if they were a lost treasure suddenly rediscovered. Perhaps we see in them a rare ability to reflect back to us our own best selves. Of course, romantic love represents fertile ground for fantasies – mere projections of our unmet emotional needs, in which case we might fail

to see the other person at all and what they reflect back to us is nothing but a narcissist's dream. But let us suppose that we authentically "choose" or "find" someone to love for "who they are." In this case, we have freely committed ourselves to love another human being. Just as we are not an isolated, autonomous self, nor is our lover an isolated, autonomous self. So, in loving even one person we commit ourselves to loving a whole universe of relationships that happen to abide within this other person. For as long as you are able to love this person the world will always be between you, not as a separation or barrier but rather as an essential element of the experience of love. Thus, when you embrace your loved one, you implicitly embrace the world. At least, that's my theory. My Buddhist teacher, Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, says that if you are able to authentically love even one person, then you are already halfway to achieving Buddhahood.

Has Buddhism helped you deal with loss and suffering? If so, how and in what ways has it helped?

Buddhist practice has helped me to develop greater patience and to identify ways in which I might be unconsciously contributing to conflict in my relationships. It also provides me with hope by representing a plausible antidote to the problems that afflict humanity globally and by recognizing the subtle and potentially far-reaching power of good intentions and virtuous conduct. I find it inspiring to meet authentic, insightful, humble teachers who've committed their entire lives to the goal of benefitting all sentient beings "with none left behind"; and to feel surrounded at times by others who share similar aspirations and values and who've taken responsibility to the extent of working to embody such values. It's certainly helped me to understand that my suffering, Ted's suffering, the suffering of our parents and of Ted's victims is not unique; that we have an opportunity to transform our own suffering into empathy for others.

Did writing the book help you heal the pain resulting from your brother's actions and recover the joy of being a Kaczynski?

I feel good about the book, expecting that it might offer a gift to some readers – perhaps those who've struggled with similar issues, such as mental illness in the family, or stigmatization for any reason. On my own side, I feel that the book has some life to it; that it brings forth an "inner reality" such as my father described to me when, as a young boy, I puzzled over an abstract painting until, with Dad's help, I found a way "in."

(Featured photo by Alexis Rhone Fancher.)

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