David Kaczynski and the ties that bind

Violet Snow

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The hardest decision David Kaczynski ever made was resolving to tell the FBI that there was a good chance his brother was the Unabomber, who had killed three people and injured 23 others in the name of Luddite activism. Kaczynski credits Buddhist beliefs and his wife, Linda Patrik, with helping him struggle through the decision and deal with the painful aftermath of turning in his own brother in 1996.

Five years later, Kaczynski became executive director of New Yorkers Against the Death Penalty (NYADP), the nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that succeeded in abolishing capital punishment in New York State, while educating people about mental illness. From 2012 to 2015, he served as executive director of KTD, the Karma Triyana Dharmachakra monastery in Woodstock, with Patrik taking the role of director of operations. While there, Kaczynski wrote the memoir *Every Last Tie: The Story of the Unabomber and His Family*, recently published by Duke University Press.

One of his reasons for writing the book, he said in a phone interview, was to explain how vital his wife's role had been throughout the experience. A professor of ethics and Eastern religion at Union College in Schenectady, Patrik is a long-time practitioner of Buddhism. "I frequently went with her to teachings at KTD throughout the '90s, getting more attuned to the Buddhist perspective," Kaczynski said. "I wasn't raised religious, so faith didn't mean a lot to me until I understood better what faith is, through turning in my brother, trying to save his life, meeting with his victims."

It was Patrik who first suspected that Kaczynski's brother, Ted, had written the Unabomber's manifesto published in the *New York Times*. Once she convinced him that she might be right, an even bigger question loomed. "What do we do now?" he remembers wondering. "If we might know the identity of a serial killer, it's horrific in the sense that any choice we make could lead to someone's death. If we said, 'It's not our job,' and maybe it's him, and someone else is killed, we'd spend the rest of our lives with blood on our hands. I also realized if we turned him in, he could get the death penalty. What would it be like to go through the rest of my life with my own brother's blood on my hands?"

The process of working through this excruciating dilemma took place within the couple's marriage. "We think of conscience as invested in the individual," observed Kaczynski, "but in fact, conscience is exercised in the context of relationship." Patrik helped her husband look at the situation through the moral lens of Buddhism. "I'm incredibly grateful to Linda," he said. "She saved lives through her courage in bringing this up and pressing me. She did it with a great deal of sensitivity, aware of what I was going through, as well as the effect on my mother, how difficult it was for her. There was not any point where I didn't have a deep trust in Linda's wisdom and instincts."

He recalled a moment, shortly after the government had announced it would seek the death penalty for Ted, when the couple were sitting in their shrine room for their morning meditation, which helped settle their minds during this tumultuous time. "I was upset," recalled Kaczynski, "as if I was the victim at the center, doing a lot of 'Poor me; this is wrong what the government is doing.' Linda said, 'But David, don't

you understand? Other people are hurting out there. It's about a much bigger picture of suffering in the world.' That woke me up a little bit."

The following morning, when he went into the shrine room, he saw his wife had set up three candles, and he knew they stood for the three people his brother had killed. "To go through the next two years," he said, "preparing for the trial, under tremendous stress, it was important to have my heart opened by meditation in the presence of those candles. Part of the Buddhist teaching is, when you're really in pain, sometimes the most helpful thing is to be sensitive to the pain of other people. It helped me negotiate a very difficult time in my life."

Kaczynski's book gives an account of his relationship with his beloved older brother, a brilliant mathematician who was traumatized by an illness as an infant, resulting in long separations from his parents and possibly contributing to his emotional problems. A chapter is devoted to Kaczynski's mother, offering insights into the torment a family faces when dealing with mental illness. He also describes the effect of the crisis on his marriage.

Patrik and Kaczynski, who have known each other since they were both 11 years old, were friends for decades before they married in 1990. In reaching out to his brother's victims, and in his role at NYADP, said Kaczynski, "I've been connecting with lots of families where a loved one has been murdered. I've also had conversations with families in similar positions to us, where a family member did something terrible. In about half the cases, marriages break up, and half survive. Linda and I had different perspectives. I grew up with my brother and loved him. She had more objectivity about his problems and the ethical duties we were confronted with. If a couple can find a way to work through a traumatic situation, it could well strengthen their bond and their marriage."

Kaczynski already had experience with families from his previous work as assistant director of Equinox, a shelter for runaway homeless youth in Albany. "It was so ironic," he recalled. "I'd been trying to help troubled kids and help families get back together, get the services they need, do counseling with the kids. And it turned out my family was going to be faced with a crisis too. But I think trying to help other people work through their problems was really valuable when it came to facing a crisis in my own life. It gave me more perspective. In social work, they say how important it is to meet people where they are, not where you think they ought to be. Being judgmental doesn't work — you have to see the work through the other person's eyes. That helped me very much when it came to all the tensions and pressures surrounding my brother's arrest and trial."

Ted ended up pleading guilty to the bombings, resulting in life imprisonment instead of execution. Kaczynski "took refuge" — the Buddhist step of commitment to the teachings — with Khenpo Khartar Rinpoche in 1998, soon after his brother was sentenced. "It represented a commitment to making the aftermath of this tragedy as meaningful as possible," he said. After the angst of fearing Ted would get the death penalty, Kaczynski headed up NYADP. Renamed New Yorkers for Alternatives to the Death

Penalty in 2008, the group continues to support effective and humane approaches to the problem of violent crime.

In 2012, the positions at KTD opened up, and Kaczynski and Patrik shifted focus, bringing their Western nonprofit business experience to the operation of the monastery. Their jobs were managerial, not spiritual, but at KTD, there was plenty of opportunity to turn inward. "We would meditate an hour in the morning," he said, "and in the evening we would join a practice on developing compassion." They continued to study with Khenpo Khartar Rinpoche, now 93, a resident teacher at the monastery. "He embodies that Buddhist ideal of wisdom and compassion fused together. I've never met anyone quite so wise as he is. Intelligence without compassion is not wisdom."

A lingering pain results from Ted's refusal to have any contact with his brother. Their mother, who died a few years ago, wrote to Ted almost weekly, but he never responded to any of their letters. "Nowadays what I find out about my brother comes from the media," said Kaczynski. "Early in life, I promised my mother I'd never abandon my brother. I want Ted to know the door is always open if he wants to try to reconcile. I'd talk to him, exchange letters, visit him. But my understanding is, he's written me off. I can't control how he thinks."

When their three-year terms at KTD ended last fall, Kaczynski and Patrik retired to a home in the wilderness, not altogether different from Ted's house in Montana, where he lived off the grid. The couple do have electricity and running water, but they share his love of nature and his dismay at what Kaczynski calls "the threats to wild nature that, in my brother's mind, drove him to the point of violence."

Violet Snow wrote regularly for the Woodstock Times for 17 years and continues to contribute to Hudson Valley One. She has been published in the New York Times "Disunion" blog, Civil War Times, American Ancestors, Jewish Currents, and many other periodicals. An excerpt from her historical novel, To March or to Marry, has appeared in the feminist journal Minerva Rising. She lives in Phoenicia and is currently working with horses, living out her childhood dream.

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