

**Andrew Solomon on the Heartbreaking Realization of Parental Love**  
(extended interview)

B: Why do you think we're so obsessed with parenting these days?

AS: I think parenting is a natural thing for us to be obsessed with. I think that the way we bring up our children determines the future of the world, so, for people who have children, the question of what constitutes good parenting is as urgent a question as there is out there. I think there was a Freudian period of the 1950s and 60's, the psychoanalytic period in which we came to the conclusion that parents cause everything and are responsible for all aspects of who their children become. Then we switched over to the everything is genetic and it's all in your DNA, which comes from your parents, which you can't really do anything about model. Now we've shifted to a more appropriate balance where we say the DNA determines a lot but how that DNA is activated or functions, or how someone develops as a human being does in fact owe a great deal to parenthood. So I feel like we've kind of rediscovered the urgency and importance of parenthood in determining people's ability to be resilient, to lead a rich and rewarding life, to make progress of any profound kind.

B: So do you feel like the conversations that are happening are helpful?

AS: Like any conversation, it contains helpful and unhelpful elements. But I think it's positive and important that we're paying attention to parenting. I think parenting is terribly important and any society that neglects questions of parenting destines itself to misery and failure. I think there are elements in the conversation that are ludicrous, or embarrassing or immoral or wrong headed, but I think the fact that the conversation is taking place is definitely good.

B: So what about the idea that the middle class is over-parenting? That we're thinking too much about something that's natural?

AS: Well, there are aspects of it that are natural that are aspects of it that can be helped by thinking. The critique of helicopter parenting is one of being too over-engaged or involved in your child's life. And I think there are a lot of disasters associated with so-called attachment parenting in which parents don't set any boundaries or limits, but that doesn't seem to be because we're thinking too much about parenting; it seems to be because we're thinking some things about parenting which are not actually accurate or helpful or correct. We don't need to think about parenting less; but we may need to think about it differently, but I don't think we need to stop thinking about it.

B: Well that's good to hear. But it does get tangled up. I often end up feeling like we're doing something terribly wrong here. We're talking raising kids a lot, but it doesn't seem to be going very well.

AS: Well, I am trying to think whether I think it's going well, all in all. I think it has its good moments and it has its problematical moments, certainly. Are people turning out better than they did 50 years ago? I don't know quite how one makes those comparisons. I feel like people are confronting a world which is in some ways more difficult, a world of cyber-bullying, a world of dealing a lot with machines and mechanisms, a world of violence on television. There are all kinds of things that have made life more difficult. And there are other things that have made life more positive and better. When we talk about all this overthinking of parenting, it really is, by and large, a middle class concern. And I say that not so much in relation to economics, but in relation to time. A lot of these are concerns that can be pursued by people who have the leisure to be doing something more than feeding their children and making sure they have clothes and they get some sleep at night.

B: Right.

AS: There's a great deal of under-thinking of childhood that persists among populations who just simply don't have the access to do the kind of overthinking that those with more time are able to do. I think parenting is very time-consuming. When you talk about the idea are people not turning out better than they used to, there's no question that having a norm in which mothers are working and in which they frequently can't afford or don't have the wherewithal to find people to take really good care of their children, that comes at a price. Which is not by means to say that I think overall it was better for society when women were prevented from working, only to say that I think there are a lot of situations where children aren't getting the attention they need. And I think attention is an enormous piece of this. It almost matters more whether you're actually listening to and are able to accurately see your child than it does what exactly doing on the basis on that.

B: That's one of the things that really came up for me in reading the book. Your book was on my radar, and then a friend of mine who lives at the monastery where I practice, who is on the brink of making a decision about whether or not she wants to have children or be a full-time monastic, came to me and said "you have to read this book. This is blowing my mind and making me think maybe I want to have a kid after all.

AS: Wow.

B: I know.

AS: [Laughs]

B: I know! So I got the book right away. And I started reading it. And at first I wasn't really getting what so moved my friend. But then as I moved through the book, I realized I was looking for the "search for identity" piece from the title, but wasn't feeling satisfied. But then as I kept reading, I felt like the book is more about love and compassion than identity, and that is the part my friend was feeling. That parenthood gave these people, like one of the women who raised a child conceived in rape said, "I gave Pauline life, but in so many ways she gave it to me." And that, to me, is the thing that is just killing me in this book. As a mom, as someone who writes about my struggles, I feel like this book is really a gift to us because, forgetting about the identity part, it's such a deep and compassionate look at the way love happens.

AS: The book is ultimately about the resilience of parental love. A lot of people said to me as I was working on that it's extraordinary that you decided to have a family while you were in the middle of writing a book about everything that could go wrong. And I said, it's actually a book about the fact that parents find love and meaning in their experience *even* when everything appears to be going horribly wrong. And the real essence of the book is about that love and how powerful it can be and how much, ultimately, it can accommodate. Now, of course there are often situations when parental love can't accommodate things that have gone wrong. And I don't want to deny that and say that all parents love their children wonderfully and get sentimental about it. But I think there is a kind of complexity of the experience of parents which, for me, has a lot of meaning in it. And I felt that the book is partly about the kids, it's partly about how all these people with all of these conditions manage to find a sense of identity, it's partly about how the parents manage to find an identity as parents of people with these various conditions and about the way in which finding that identity strengthens their ability to love their children. It is certainly, at its most basic level, a kind of tribute to the ability of parents presented with children who are nothing like what they had in mind when they decided to become parents and discovering there are ways in fact to not only accept those children but also to really love them very profoundly and very truly, even to get to the point at which they feel they wouldn't exchange them for other children without the apparent defect with which they came into the world.

B: For me, the autistic chapter was where the book presented really challenging material that is more than physical, but about who is this person on a spiritual or existential level, and how can I possibly love someone whose smearing their feces on the wall?

AS: Right.

B: That's pretty hardcore. And then moving into the crime chapters and then moving into the crime chapters and about being conceived of rape, to me, those chapters were explicitly about attachment, which was very interesting to me because I then noted that you are getting a PhD in motherhood.

AS: Yes.

B: Which I am very curious about. The idea of attachment, then, is this something that you were thinking of explicitly in writing the book?

AS: I was working on the PhD at the same time as writing the book, and the PhD really does deal in large part with attachment, so that's an area that's been very much present in my mind throughout, and partly because they're separate projects, and partly because the parts of overlap became very clear to me. I felt as though I wanted to include differences which really mostly required parents to accommodate them, such as dwarfism, where you just have to stop thinking it's such a tragedy your child is a dwarf. That's really the task that you would set. And to look at situations like rape and crime where I didn't meet anyone who said "I'm so glad my child is a criminal," and I didn't meet anyone who said, "It was really wonderful being raped." Those aren't things that get cast in a positive light. I did meet people who said, "I so love my child that while I wish my child hadn't committed a crime, I wouldn't want to imagine a life without this child who I love so much, even with the crime that took place. And I met people who said, "Though I was raped, I did get this child out of that, and I love my child and I'm willing to accept the rape if it was the price of having this child," so I wanted to look at the cases in which you can't kind of construe these things in positive terms. Dwarfism, you can say, ok, skeletal issues, a compressed spine, but this person, even though very short, has an extraordinary personality.

BS: It's more benign.

AS: Right. But I found that those situations ended up having a great deal in common. That the ways in which parents said, "I was dragged on a journey I never intended to go on by my child and came out in a different place than I'd ever imagined..." that motif was similar for all of these parents dealing with all of these situations. And in a way, it was the crime and rape chapters, they were so shocking to work on. I mean, I have children and I love them, but if they murdered people, how would I ever come to terms with that? And I thought, well, you don't come to terms with it in the sense of deciding it's ok, and you don't come to terms with it in the sense of ceasing to remember or notice or think about what happened. But if you really and truly have formed this profound attachment to your child, it doesn't go away because of what your child does. In the rape chapter, we see that it is possible to develop that attachment to your child even when your child comes from something horrific and from an experience that you wish you hadn't had.

BS: That chapter is almost unbearable.

AS: It was shocking work to do. And I came home from many of those interviews and just collapsed from what people had endured. The cruelty of rapists toward their victims, the agony those women went through was really extraordinary. I felt like they had, in some way, the steepest journey of anyone.

BS: I experienced that as well. And Sue Klebold, the mother of Dylan Klebold, one of the Columbine shooters.

AS: She of course is one of the people who said she wouldn't want to consider having had any other child than the one I had. Which I suppose is true to her experience. I think she really and truly loved and loves the child she had, even though she's horrified by what he did. But of course, when people say they wouldn't want to imagine having had any other child, it's also not that fruitful imagining having some other child because you didn't, and your imagining it doesn't make it so. So I feel like, on the one hand, many of these people said, I love my child so much and I would never have dreamed of having anyone else and that's true because your child actually exists and you privilege the existing child over the imagined one. But if that person had gotten pregnant a month later and ended up with a genetically different child and had a child who didn't have all those problems, they probably would have been tremendously attached to that child. You know, Sue Klebold can't go back and have a different child. She might as well figure out the ways to love the child she had and to make peace with what her life is.

B: She seems like an extraordinary human being.

AS: Oh, she really is. I felt like she was like a character out of Greek tragedy, and yet she's unpretentious and she's kind; she's a really, deeply kind person, and determined to take all of what had happened and seek the meaning buried in it rather than simply rail against it.

B: You know, one of the issues that arises around that chapter is the idea that, and I'm guilty of this for sure, is this feeling of, you know, I'm raising this great kid, she's really happy, she's so well-adjusted, pat myself on the back, and there really is this deep feeling that we have control over our children's behavior, not necessarily their karmic destiny or DNA; we can appreciate that they come in with a certain set of something, but we really do believe that if we had a killer in the house, we would know. So I want to ask you directly: Do you really believe that such as in the case of the Klebolds, something like being a criminal, could possibly be as much of a physical event as something like dwarfism? Can it really be that disconnected from what we do as parents?

AS: You know, I ended up thinking that criminality felt like more of the disease than a lot of the supposed disease entities that I was examining. And I ended up making a kind of unhappy, but nonetheless profound decision that I had to be prepared for the fact that my own children who seem to be so endlessly delightful and charming and wonderful in every way, might some day prove capable of doing something really, really terrible. And it's very difficult to say, and I don't say it as a means of casting doubt on the children themselves, and I wouldn't want them or anyone else to construe it in that way, but I really thought we have influence, we have an effect, we started this conversation talking about the importance of parenting, and my sense that it's in some ways the most important topic out there, but despite all of that, I think having spent time with the Klebolds, I just feel like you could be a terrific parent with a child who you love and adore and with whom you are doing your best and he could go that way. And maybe you would be able to see it, and maybe you wouldn't. And maybe you'd be able to shift his direction and maybe you wouldn't, and I hope my children won't be anything like that and I hope I'll never confront those issues, but I don't feel safe from them in the way I did before I did this research.

BS: And how did that realization affect you?

AS: Well, it's a heartbreaking realization. The time with Sue Klebold was...shattering, really, and seeing what she's been through and seeing what she's been through and seeing the ways her hopes and her dreams were dashed by the horror of what happened. And she lives in a state of terrible pain. What was striking to me though is that she regrets terribly what happened, but she doesn't, as she said so articulately at the end of the chapter, regret having had children, and I think what I came away from it thinking was I don't know in what way, or under what circumstance, but my children are going to bring me a certain amount of pain and sadness because all children bring a measure of pain and sadness in some stage and in some way to the lives of

their parents. And I hope it won't be too extreme, but I think I will be able to love them whatever it turns out to be. That's really the effect it had on me. I would be quite interested in the way all of this intersects with teachings of Buddhism since that's been part of your study. That idea that there are these things that are profound and true and that these circumstances and the events of life don't alter them.

BS: I guess that's why I am so curious. I am wondering if a spiritual crisis hit after realizing something like this? It's a very disorganizing thought. I think that's why the book is so great. Because it's so disorganizing.

AS: Well thank you. Throwing seeds of chaos everywhere.

BS: Yes! It's hard to do!

AS: But I agree with you. I think disorganizing is a very good word for it, in fact, I wish I had thought of it to use it in writing about the whole thing. It's very disorganizing and what's impressive about Sue Kliebold in a way is that her structure of consciousness was completely disorganized and she's managed to re-organize it. It's different, but it's once again, got a certain coherence to it. And that's not so easy to achieve in the wake of an event like that.

BS: Exactly. And without doing it a false way, like Oh, I'm just going to put myself back together and make sense of the world and have these pat answers. I think that's why I am so compelled by your research and your work. It's very unusual, I find....I get so excited to read new books and especially juicy ones with tons of research about parenting. And it really doesn't take long to get very disappointed because everything comes through this lens of knowing, and this is where my craving for the kind of true exploration of human experience is so deep. I am just longing to get a sense of what is really going on for other parents, and how does it really feel to experience the relationship that I find so challenging, and I am in the most resourced, organized, positive situation that one could come into, and I find it really difficult. And yet there is this whole realm of internal experience that is very difficult to express, and I think you were able to do that and I am really grateful for that.

AS: Well, thank you, what a really kind thing to say.

BS: It's true, and I've learned a lot and it's been really resonant and I think it's a really important book. You don't need me to tell you that. But, just from my perspective of it, the disorganization is its strength and giving Sue her voice is really important.

AS: People asked if it needed to be so long and so involved. And I feel like it did for precisely the reasons you described. That I didn't want to say ok, this all adds up to a very clear directive which is that everyone should do X or everyone should do Y. But rather to show how unbelievably nuanced and in some ways unanswerable the questions are, and it demands a certain amount of patience in readers.

BS: Which people don't have much of these days. So that was really impressive. And I love that you worked on it for so long. Such a good thing.

One of the women from the rape chapter told the story of an over the top series of horrifying rapes and attacks. At one point she is walking from the kitchen to the bathroom and her mother whispers in her ear, "This never happened." Wow.

AS: Yea. That was a story of inter-generationality. The degree to which the person I was interviewing had been subject to her mother's whim and her mother's strange and controlling behavior. The relationship between that vulnerability and her vulnerability to being raped and abused by other people, and then the way in which she attempted to be neither the mother her mother had been, because she recognized

the problems there, nor to act on the feelings she had as a rape victim, whose child reminded her of the rape. How much she had to struggle against not only this one brief episode, but the man, the legacy of her mother. Talk about a full plate.

BS: Indeed. And the way her mother said this never happened, and that really made me think about the porousness of our identities and the power that our parents have to define us.

AS: Yes. That's where I feel like if someone reads the book who is deaf or is a dwarf or falls into any of these other categories, and understands, ok, you didn't create or are responsible for your child's deafness or autism, but you may very well be responsible for how your child feels about his or her condition. You have enormous power in that regard. And so it's sort of a weight off everyone's shoulders that we no longer say your mother caused you to become autistic by being a refrigerator mother. But your mother may have determined whether you are able to like yourself. Or whether you are able to function. And I think that's one of the big points of the book, it's interesting that you tie it to that statement in the rape chapter because I feel it comes up in a way in every chapter. How do you give your child enough self-esteem to deal with whatever the situation your child is in. And it comes up with the physical disabilities and the intellectual ones as much as anything else.

BS: You talked about going to Rwanda and visiting this woman and this is a quote: "The woman who asked me how to love her daughter more." You said you were so shocked you didn't know what to say, and that you wanted to write her back later. What did you want to say to her?

AS: I think what I would have said to her later was that there's a lot of love in that very question. That if you're struggling and trying to love your child, you're doing that from a place of love. And that she should go a little easier on herself in that regard. That the ambition to love and the fact of loving are not very far apart.

BS: All of this stuff about attachment and love and compassion, which is a very important part of the book, how do you understand that in connection to the more horizontal identity piece of the book. for instance your understanding of yourself as a "gay" parent. And just as someone who is channeling this endless river of parental love. Are they two separate issues, that you are in a certain identity as a "gay parent" and then there's this other stream of love and compassion that's universal, human. How do we understand that as parents and children of our parents. So as you come back from writing this book and work in your own life as a parent, how much of this is about you as someone with an identity as "gay parent" in this particular family constellation, and how much are you really just coming into parenting as a human parent?

AS: Well I hope I'm coming into parenting as a human parent! [laughs]. I'm very aware that the fact that my children have gay parents is going to be a reality in their lives. And I remember the freshman year of college and the way everyone in which everyone talked about their background as a kind of defining thing and I think I was very much defined by the lives my parents led and my children will be very influenced by the life that I've led. And I think it's important to be awake to that, and to be aware as you're going through the complicated business of parenting that who you are is going to have an effect on your children's experience of life. Not only because of your direct influence on them, but because of the way that the larger society perceives your family. I feel like it's important that we have a somewhat different family structure, but we're very lucky to have a joyful loving one and all the rest of that stuff that can sound pat and banal if one catalogues it all.

But I hope that they will grow up with an intact sense of self-esteem and that my love will have been one of the things that helps them do that, but they have to grow up with a sense that we do have an identity as a family, that we share it with, at this point, quite a lot of other families that we may or may not particularly surround ourselves with other gay families. We haven't especially but we should be aware

that they're out there. It's important I think for the children to grow up knowing some other kids who have got two dads, and certainly some other kids who have got two moms. And I think they need to be able to understand this experience as an identity. And if they don't actually feel that strongly about it being their identity, then they don't need to, but we at least allowed for that as a possibility.

In all the conversations I've had since the book came out, the one thing I wish I had included that I didn't were a few more stories of people who chose to terminate pregnancies of the kind that I wrote about people keeping. I feel like for some people it's the right choice to have the child even though he or she has Down Syndrome, or the product of rape, and for some people it's the wrong choice. And I wrote a certain amount about people who had done these things and then struggled with them, but I didn't write about the fact, as explicitly as perhaps I should have, the fact that there are many people who have terminated such pregnancies and gone on to have other children, and never have a day of regret looking back.

BS: What do you see as the role of a book like this, other than just as a good read?

AS: The most gratifying letters I have gotten from people are the ones who say, "This book made me a better person, and made me able to cherish my child in a way I didn't previously." And so if the book can in any regard increase the bulk of love in the world, then I feel I've done my job."