



The Heartbreaking Realization of Parental Love

An Interview with Andrew Solomon

by Bethany Saltman Illustration by Annie Internicola

Andrew Solomon is a writer and lecturer, winner of the National Book Award, researcher, and activist. In other words, he is a public intellectual—that rare person who truly lives with ideas. His most recent book, *Far from the Tree: Parents, Children, and the Search for Identity* (Scribner, 2012) is a stunner. In it, Solomon shows us the lives of extraordinary families where children are born with any variety of radical differences from their parents. As grim as some of the stories are, this is a truly hopeful book.

Solomon's opening chapter of this encyclopedic text is called "Son." In it, he describes his own coming of age as a gay youth in a family that was loving, even doting, but had trouble accepting his sexuality. After receiving a writing assignment to study and report on deaf culture, and discovering that many of these folks had come to actually appreciate and identify with their deafness, he made a connection: "The reasonable corollary to the queer experience is that everyone has a [real or perceived] defect, and everyone has an identity, and they are often one and the same."

From this realization, Solomon develops his overarching premise. First he describes how we understand our offspring through "vertical" identity—

the traits and traditions that are passed down the generational ladder: eye color, race, certain propensities, culture, etc. And then there are those aspects—physical, emotional, and circumstantial—that create what he calls a "horizontal identity," in relation to parents, a set of attributes that may stem from diseases, gifts, misfortunes, or a mysterious source, such as with transgenderism. These parents are left asking that perennial question—*Where did this kid come from?*—in the extreme.

How do parents relate to such a child, and the child to the parent? This is the searching question of *Far from the Tree*. In order to study this question Solomon spent 10 years with families who are living with horizontal identities like deafness, dwarfism, autism, prodigies, criminality, and children conceived in rape. While these are clearly people dealing with profound challenges and anguish, as well as transcendent joy and acceptance, this is ultimately a book that strikes to the heart of parenthood itself—that no-holds-barred, real, live, messy human connection, and the ways it is forged, broken, healed, and held.

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

Andrew Solomon: I think that the way we bring up our children determines the future of the world, so the question of what constitutes good parenting is as urgent as there is. There was the Freudian period of the 1950s and '60s, 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-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 owes a great deal to parenthood.

BS: What about the idea that the middle class is overparenting and overthinking something that is supposed to be natural?

AS: Well, there are aspects of parenting that are natural, and aspects 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; we're thinking some things about parenting which are not accurate or helpful.

BS: I read your book because a friend of mine who lives at a Zen monastery was making a decision about whether or not she wants to have children or be a full-time monastic, and she came to me and said, "This book is blowing my mind and making me think maybe I want to have a kid after all."

AS: Wow.

BS: I know. When I first started the book I didn't know what she meant, but then I realized this is a deep and compassionate look at the way love happens, and I could see why she was tempted into this life.

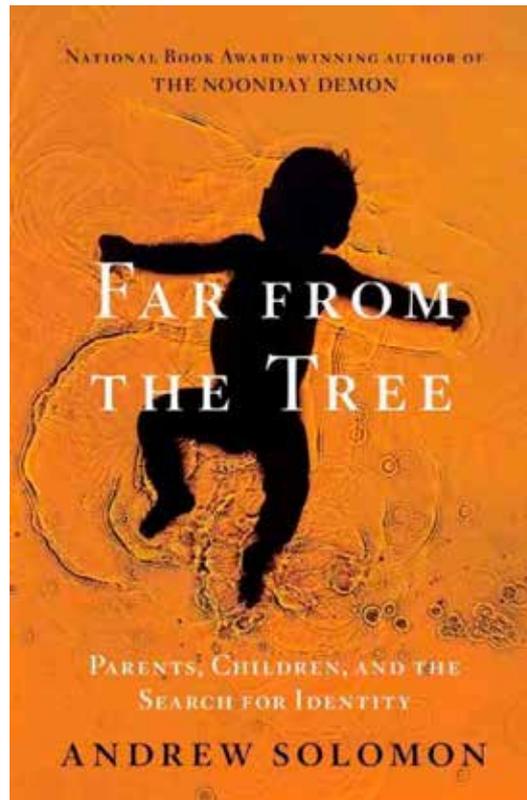
AS: Yes. The book is ultimately about the resilience of parental love, and how powerful it can be and how much, ultimately, it can accommodate. Now, of course there are often situations when parental love can't accommodate things that have gone wrong. And I don't want to deny that and say that all parents 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.

BS: I thought the autistic chapter was where the book presented really challenging material about love on a spiritual or existential level, like, how can I possibly love this person who is smearing their feces on the wall?

AS: Right.

BS: And you write a lot about attachment—not the Dr. Sears, baby-wearing approach, but the biological basis for bonding that happens between child and parent.

AS: I was working on the PhD at the same time as writing the book, and the PhD does deal in large part with attachment, so that's an area that's been



very much present in my mind throughout. 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 okay, or by ceasing to think about what happened. If you really 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.

BS: And Sue Klebold, the mother of Dylan Klebold, one of the Columbine shooters—she seems like an extraordinary person.

AS: Oh, she really is, like a character out of Greek tragedy. And unpretentious and kind. She is one of the people who said she wouldn't want to consider having had any other child than the one she had.

BS: It's difficult to shake the idea that if we had a killer in the house, we would know it. You write that being a criminal could possibly be as much of a physiological event as something like dwarfism. Can criminality really be that disconnected from what we do as parents?

AS: I ended up thinking that criminality felt like more of a disease. 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, might someday prove capable of doing something really, really terrible. You and I 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 feel like you could be a terrific parent with a child who you love and adore, and he could go that way. 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, 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 regret having had children.

BS: 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. 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 in writing about the whole thing. What's impressive about Sue Klebold is that her structure of consciousness was completely disorganized and she's managed to reorganize it. It's different, but it's once again got a certain coherence to it.

BS: One of the women from the rape chapter told the story of a series of horrifying rapes and attacks, which involved various family members. One random day, the victim walks from the kitchen to the bathroom and her mother whispers in her ear, "This never happened." Wow. That really made me think about the porousness of our identities and the power that we have as parents to define our children.

AS: Yes. We didn't create or are responsible for our child's condition, but we may very well be responsible for how our child feels about his or her condition. We have enormous power in that regard.

BS: What do you see as the role of a book like this?

AS: The most gratifying letters I have gotten from people are the ones who say, "This book 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. ©