

**Far From the Tree**  
**A dozen kinds of love**  
**Parents, children and the search for identity**

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The book „Far From the Tree” of the journalist and psychiatry lecturer at the Cornell University, Andrew Solomon, is a comprehensive study about the relationship between parents and their children with special needs. The volume is the result of interviewing more than 300 families over a period of ten years and of a rigorous documentation on wide-ranging topics. The author writes about children affected by deafness, dwarfism, Down syndrome, autism, schizophrenia, severe disabilities, but also about gifted children, about those conceived through rape, children with gender identity disorders or juvenile delinquents. Each of these categories is addressed in a separate chapter that includes recent studies on the subject, testimonials and histories of the families in question, and a placement in a social context of each issue, thus achieving an overall view on every issue. The book is built on a round frame, as it starts and ends with the accounts of the author’s personal experiences from the perspective of a son (who was perceived differently because of dyslexia and then homosexuality) and that of a parent.

The families faced with caring of a child, be it a disabling disease or on the contrary, or whose problems are generated by unfavourable developmental environment are sharing the challenge of coping with a child that differs from the majority and who differs most often from those who brought him/her to life.

Solomon calls this lack of identifying innate or acquired features of children in their own parent’s *horizontal identity*: „Horizontal identities can be articulated around some recessive genes, random mutations, prenatal influences or values and preferences that the child does not share with his/her genitors. Being gay is a horizontal identity. [...]. In its turn, physical disability tends to be horizontal, like genius. Psychopathy also is often horizontal; so that many who become criminals are not raised by mobsters and must invent stratagems by themselves. A child conceived through

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rape will face emotional problems that the mother does not know, although they originate directly from her trauma.” (p. 12).

By introducing this notion of horizontal identity, who is an original concept of the author, Andrew Solomon raises the question to what extent the common perception of deficiency as a disease that should be cured or alleviated is useful or not. Sometimes, the acknowledgement of the „defect” as an integral part of an individual identity is an important step in overcoming existing prejudices. Homosexuality, gender identity disorders have evolved from the status of a disease to their acknowledgement as identity. The author admits in line with his critical spirit that this approach has clear limits of moral nature, because one cannot claim that the members of a gang or anorexics are seeking their identity, but he confesses honestly not knowing where these limits are. We are invited to undergo an extremely valuable reflection exercise in order to make the anachronistic concept of disability as fundamental flaw that should be removed or alleviated at all costs, where possible, more flexible.

A powerful illustration of this idea is the chapter dedicated to those with hearing impairment and deafness. The deaf using sign language have created over time strong communities around large universities, which are destined exclusively to their education, such as the Lexington Center in New York or Gallaudet University in Washington. Proclaiming themselves as part of an identity and culture that are based on the language they use, many of them consider themselves free of any deficiency, being perfectly able to communicate and express themselves. The discovery of the cochlear implant, a technological innovation that can partly restore hearing to children born deaf, was considered by this community as a threat to their existence and identity. The question of whether „restoring the hearing of a deaf person, we allow him/her to express his/her individuality in a more complete manner or we are compromising his/her identity” remains an interrogation that each particular case has to answer, but for those looking from the outside it is a priceless broadening of perspective.

In the chapter on schizophrenia, this theory of identity is losing ground, that the author himself considers a „peculiar trauma, lacking any positive aspect”. There are voices such as the Mad Pride movement, supporting the right to self-determination of people with schizophrenia and other mental illnesses and attempting to minimize the dependence on psychotropic medications. But the degenerative nature of the disease places it at the opposite end of the other categories presented in the book, assimilating schizophrenia with identity theft, hence the „desperate, nearly unreserved need for treatment” (p. 345).

Between the two extremes presented, deafness as identity and schizophrenia as a disease, one can find in this book a variety of shades and analyses using the latest studies and specialized research to argue one position or another, to raise ethical dilemmas or challenge extremist approaches.

Andrew Solomon introduces us tactfully, with lucidity and empathy in the universe of families facing adversity and difference, who learned to accept and build a meaningful life and, in the end, to discover that, most often, love for their children has very little to do with normality, social standards and even more with the valorisation of an experience as it was given. The stake of this book is that we all have something to learn from the intensive lessons of these parents about resilience and compassion, which is one of the motivations that have animated the author, as he himself confesses: „To understand how they managed to think serenely about their children could motivate us, the rest, to do the same. To look deep into your child's eyes and see in him both yourself and something utterly strange, and then to develop a zealous attachment to every aspect of him, is to achieve parenthood's self-regarding, yet unselfish, abandon. It is astonishing how often such mutuality had been realized - how frequently parents who had supposed that they couldn't care for an exceptional child discover that they can. The parental predisposition to love prevails in the most harrowing of circumstances. There is more imagination in the world than one might think.” (p.17).

This book's major merit is to present in a coherent manner information from related fields like medicine, psychology and sociology, creating an articulated image of difficulties faced by parents with children that are “different”. But beyond that, Andrew Solomon speaks of tolerance, generosity and acceptance – all deeply rooted in filial love, expanding our perception of the human condition, not only able to endure, but also to transcend suffering through love. This hopeful message is conveyed with grace and power in the book and reverberates in the heart of the one reading it for a long time after turning the last page.

### **References**

Solomon, A. (2015). *Departa de trunchi. Douăsprezece feluri de dragoste. Părinți și copii în căutarea identității*. Editura Humanitas, București.