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DM - I'm Don Merrill and I'm talking with Andrew Solomon. Mr. Solomon is the author of the New York Times bestseller *Far from the Tree*. Mr. Solomon thanks for talking me.

AS - What a pleasure to be here.

DM - Your book talks about parenting and children and how the different kinds of situations that that relationship can encounter end up affecting the relationship. Although many parents will never encounter a lot of situations at each of these parents has to go through, what you say is all of these parents share a common way of parenting. Is that safe to say from the outset?

AS - I would say that the central theme of the book really is the idea that any of these differences individually is quite isolating. There aren't so many people with autism, there aren't so many people who are dealing with kids were criminals or bring up children conceived in rape but that my vision is that in fact the experience of negotiating difference in difficulty within the family is quite consistent and if all of these people with these diffuse experiences can understand that they have common cause they be a lot less lonely is really the jist of it.

DM - That's interesting because it has always seemed to have been the thing that unites people who come from disparate circumstances or situations that they feel they are the only ones. I wanted us start with the question, how did you come on the idea of vertical versus horizontal traits?

AS - So the terms of vertical and horizontal are sometimes used in psychoanalysis the vertical being whatever is hereditary and the horizontal being whatever is learned from siblings or peers. But I was really interested in the idea of applying it to identity and saying there's such a thing as a vertical identity that gets passed on generation to generation, your ethnicity or nationality, your language - all of those things are things you share with your parents that are very defining. There are other things in which a child is born who is expressly different from his parents and the child has to find identity by discovering a peer group. So most deaf children are born hearing parents, most dwarfs are born to parents of full height, most people with schizophrenia are appointed schizophrenics etc. I wanted to look at how all of those identities function and because I'm gay and most gay people are born to straight parents, I had the experience of having what I call the horizontal identity and I wanted to find out who else I have common cause with.

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DM - So was it your idea to apply terms that are normally used in another genre of social study to your book?

AS - It was my choice to yes to take on those terms and to use them in relationship to identity because I feel as though identity politics which is always been very fractured, nobody is previously but I found made this explicit distinction. Why is it that the civil rights movement had to come before the gay-rights movement it's because the people who were African-Americans and were being oppressed came from families who were also dealing with that oppression and so there was communication across the generations and there was the ability of parents to invest their children with pride in who they are. Gay people are born to straight parents know straight parents are not from an early-stage investing them by large in who they are, they are little bit more now than they used to but that makes it more difficult and I wanted to look at what all of those experiences have been common.

DM - You're going to force me to jump around, but what then made you in your research make the connection that people who come from an earlier struggle say and their struggle becomes a model for people in the subsequent struggle. How were you able to determine that the people in the subsequent struggle they do not have the same kind of socioeconomic situations or issues that people from the earlier struggle upon which their struggle is modeled, they don't share it. So how are people able to make that connection? How are they able to make that leap and say I can apply some of their struggle to my struggle?

AS - Well I think everyone in movements toward greater liberty and justice has exploited the model of whoever has come before and whoever has worked well. I think that an civil rights movement drew on some of the work that was done by the suffragettes, I think the gay-rights movement has drawn on civil rights movement, I think the disability rights movement draws on the gay-rights movement as well as the others. The tendency is to articulate a connection to whichever struggle has now been essentially won and to say were just like those people if you like those people you should like me too.

DM - Right and in this matter how much of an affinity is there between those groups?

AS - I think that there's a profound connection in terms of what the nature of the struggle is for being appreciated as equal. I mean I think that the language that gets used a lot of the time especially about people with disabilities but the somewhat dehumanizing language the suggestion that those are secondary or

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lesser lives, that seems to me to be very similar to the language of terrible racism or to the language of anti-feminism in the in the early stages of women's movement.

DM - Right. I really have a lot of questions about your experience and how you applied some of the situations that you encountered to your own life as a gay man, as a partnered gay man, as a parent, because you have like I said, you have made the connection that a lot of the experiences that people go through that they think they're only going through alone actually have a shared relationship with people going through some situations it may not seem similar on the surface but as base are very similar. So, in less than a paragraph, you go from particle physics and philosophy. Did you ever worry that although the subject matter might be easy enough for parents to grasp that the background used to describe it wouldn't be.

AS - You know I think that's a book that insists or that at least asks that people stretch their sense of what's normal. Almost everyone who is in the book in any one chapter had a problem with some of the people were in it in the other chapters, you know, people who would commit crimes that yet but at least were not as weird as those trans people. The trans people said you know how can you compare us to people with Downs Syndrome who are significantly intellectually disabled. There was a kind of constant tension and all of the subjects. I felt like my right to talk about any of this comes out of my experience of being the gay child of straight parents and in part out of my experience of becoming a parent that gives me a sympathy with the people on both sides and I felt that the struggles that I gone through, some of which I think were results of the larger society and some of which were just my own problems but they nonetheless became for me the framing device of the book because they were really the position from which I achieved some degree of empathy with all of these other people in all of their struggles.

DM - Do you think the book is help them achieve empathy with each other or doesn't matter?

AS - You know I had a book party when it was published and I invited everyone I'd interviewed. And I got a message a couple of days later telling me that three people, one of whom was a dwarf, one of whom has schizophrenia and one of whom was the father of an autistic child had all talked at the party and were going out to dinner together and I thought, okay. So for the specific people were in the book I think I've begun to do that and I've now had a lot of letters from people who have received the book and would read the sections about

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themselves and said gee, this is really broadening my sense of my experience and a lot who've said it made me feel less alone.

DM - Well in terms of broadening the experience, has there been or have you heard of any kind of cross-pollination between organizations that focus on dwarfism and organizations that focus on schizophrenia and organizations that focus on, you know, the rehabilitation of people who have committed criminal acts?

AS - Well, I've set up a website at Farfromthetree.com which contains spaces for people from all of these communities to talk to one another and to communicate and I'm hoping people will post their stories and comment on other people's stories and that this will be considered a social movement rather than just a book. But in terms of the formal organizations I'm not aware so far of their having done that. I'd like to think that this book will contribute to a discourse in which that will happen.

DM - With the flood of baby boomers looking down the barrel of their own mortality now, do you think the question of progeny or immortality through ones children has become important cultural level? I mean, was the inevitability that so many of us may soon be winking of existence one of the motivations for your book?

AS - I think everyone having children since the dawn of time has been grappling with immortality. You feel like you are here only temporarily and they somehow carried the line forward, that's an old bit of language. I think the fact that we're the baby boomers particularly contributes to it. I think people have always wanted to have children as a way of sending forth into the world what they represent but I think it's been interesting and in a way perhaps surprising is that there are so many of these people who got conditions which medicine now threatens to eliminate. You know that will have cochlear implants and it won't be functionally deaf, that there are an increasing interventions for various other conditions that I looked at in the book. The sense the medicine might be obliterating them and I think you have not only the individual person's sense of his own children as continuing him forward but you also have cultural communities that are worried about extinction and they want to have a next generation and I think that's a very vivid struggle

DM - But are you talking about a next generation? Lets talk about the cochlear implant for example. For for those people where deafness is a genetically inherited trait, is that the community that you are saying is feeling on the edge of

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it's own elimination? I mean is that to say that being part of the hearing community may not be preferred by people whose subsequent children may not have to be hearing impaired because of some kind of advancement in science or technology?

AS - Most deaf children are born to hearing parents and they mostly grow up with those parents feeling it would be better if they could hear and with the advent of the cochlear implant which is a device that surgically placed in the brain to allow a facsimile of hearing, many at most of the deaf children born to hearing parents are growing up functionally hearing.

DM - So most most deaf children are born hearing parents?

AS - Most of children are born hearing parents. Now there are also deaf children born to deaf parents and their many and the deaf of deaf children tend to have higher self-esteem and to function better than the non-corrected deaf children of hearing parents because their parents actually introduce them into deaf culture much earlier and because they grow up in a signing environment in which their language is the primary language of the household. There are many people within the deaf community who believe that it would be a tragedy and a disaster for deaf culture to disappear and I actually agree with them. The question is in what way it ends up being perpetuated in the face of the medical shift.

DM - Right. Since most of the book or really since all the book is about a connection between parents and children, how do you hope it informs future generations about how to be with each other?

AS - It was a book about tolerance, it's a book about compassion, it's a book about acceptance and ultimately I hope a book about celebrating various kinds of difference. I felt on election day when I was looking at the telecast of the room where Romney was and the room where Obama was, the Romney room was about a version of American that involved everyone trying as hard as they could to be the same and that the Obama room looked to me like it was an explosion of all the kinds of difference that could be contained in the idea of America and that happens to be the vision that I'm attached to and I was glad to see that it made it through the electoral process but I really think that we are moving toward a time in which there will be at least somewhat greater tolerance for the idea that people's lives are very different. Even people's lives are different in ways that look frightening upsetting to us may be valid lives may have value. So at the same time that gay marriage is becoming more widely accepted and recognized not just by gay people but by straight people many of whom would not

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necessarily be so comfortable suddenly being thrust into the gay community but who believe the gay lives are in some measure equal to straight life. So I think similarly there's can be an increasing sense that people with a variety of challenges or unusual qualities may in fact have lives that are as valid as the rest of us.

DM - You said that every person who is suffering from or is a subject to the condition, one a condition that you mention at the front of your book, those people are always resisting other people who were trying to impose their view of how they should be on them and if that's the case who are these normal people? I meet they don't seem to know how they are making life for the people that they are imposing their will on, impose their opinions on. So I guess one question I have is who are these people and why is it still happening.

AS - Right, I think that there are always people who perceive themselves to speak for what they call the mainstream and I think that that mainstream actually does not constitute the majority of Americans. I think it's a small and narrow mainstream but I also think there are many people are different in one way or intolerant of people who are different in another way. I mean there are plenty of gay people who are uncomfortable with disabilities, there are plenty of people with one kind of disability who are disturbed by people with another kind of disability. I think there's a tendency for marginalized populations to be uncomfortable with other marginalized populations. Difference is scary to people. People find it reassuring to think there are some basic laws governing human behavior and to be able to interact on a rational basis with the world by making it full of people who seem like and I think the gay marriage debate has been a sort of holding container for that question about how much people can tolerate difference, how much people can say these people are different for me but it's okay that their different. I think there's an enormous capacity to change but I think it's always a struggle and in a way the societies experience reflects the parents experience because the parent usually begins by being upset or disturbed by child's difference and ultimately comes to attach to that child. That models what I think has to happen in the larger society.

DM - This sort of gets to that. I mean I understand that people are pattern seekers and we want things to be consistent and as a species we're slow to change. But I would think it with our big brains why it so hard for us to understand as you stated that the variation and error is what makes us, not something to be removed from us?

AS - Right, so I think a lot of the time there's some kind of ideal of what a so-

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called normal person would be like and I think that there's a tendency to try to correct everyone into normality and I think in the same way that species diversity is crucial to sustain the planet but so a diversity of human beings and human experiences is likewise crucial to keep the planet up and running. And I think it's dangerous when we begin making declarations about what constitutes normality and what constitutes abnormality and what can be sustained and what needs to be eliminated and I'm particularly struck by how much experience of being gay which was an illness when I was a kid and so defined in the press, TIME magazine when I was little boy wrote that homosexuality was a pathetic second-rate substitute for reality and nothing more than a pernicious sickness. And now you have.

DM - You remembered the quote.

AS - I do, it stuck with me. And now we have a President who's come out in favor of gay marriage. How did that almost inconceivable change take place and what are the things that we can do in the wake of that transformation to support it, to say all right let's open the path to other people to and let's see what else can shift from being an illness to being an identity in that way.

DM - That particular example makes me think that was an inconceivable change on the shoulders of another inconceivable change which was an African-American running for president which was on the shoulder of another inconceivable change, an African American and woman running for president. So I guess you know it's sort of gives a lot of credibility to your point that different struggles become the fuel for future struggles.

AS - Absolutely and I felt very strongly that in seeing, I was asked after Obama's first election to write a piece for Newsweek special inaugural issue about what I thought his election meant for gay people and I said I hope that his election means that we will now have a president that was more sympathetic to the cause of gay people but even if he were to disappoint on that front and wonderfully he did not disappoint on that front but I said even if he did the fact that the United States has shifted enough to elect an African-American president gives hope to gay people that there too there may be shift there may be progress with seems unimaginable racing par for the course. Because I was a kid the idea of having a black president of the United States was really also unimaginable.

DM - You describe what seems to me to be a cruel paradox where to fix the body or make one able or remove the prejudice makes something less acceptable but to make someone more able might be overly painful for the wrong

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reasons and make prejudiced less acceptable might mean homogenizing of you that once led to an important social reform. People seeking change in either area for what they call making the world better, do you think they think about that very deeply?

AS - You know, there has been a problem that there are these two things which are dancing at the same time and are often in opposition and one is social progress toward accepting more and more ways of being and the other is medical progress toward being able to treat more and more conditions and they make us that if sharp crossing. You know we have more understanding of deaf culture than ever before at the exact same moment that we have cochlear implants which the written in effect eliminate deaf culture. We have more and more of an ability to help people with Downs Syndrome rich and rewarding lives, they lived three times as long as they used to, they have educational attainment were previously unimaginable just at the point when prenatal screening is allowing many people to choose not to have children who have the condition. So there's a lot of complexity going on where you have the science and the social progress working together and I think it's important that both advance. I'm no opponent of science and I don't want to hold science back in any way. I just hope that as people make decisions based on science they'll have a deeper understanding of the value of a variety of lives so that they won't make scientifically-based decisions which are only scientific in which don't take into account the cultural questions.

DM - Right and I think that it would be easy for people to be stuck in one of two camps, either they make decisions that are part of the social tide or they make decisions that are based on scientific authority and either one made in isolation leaves out the nuances of the other.

AS - Yes and I think that's why it's important to try to integrate these two models. I finally came to the point where I said, okay everything is an identity and everything is an illness. You can experience your age as an illness, there are lots of things that prevents you from doing the way an illness does. There are lots of disadvantages to pretty much every age you are has some disadvantages to it. There are arguments to be made for saying that you know there's an illness model for your religion whatever is in the way that it constrained you from doing certain things or gives you some values that somehow ...I mean its all can be described as an illness but it all can be described as an identity. Now an identity doesn't always mean it's desirable. I wrote about criminals, criminal identity is real and it exists and we have to contain it and control it. We can't just say its an identity, let's go and celebrated it. But we act out of ignorance and we act

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incompetently if we don't recognize that there is an identity piece to the experience of criminality and that there is an illness piece to it which piece to it which should allow us to treat criminals more humanely because a lot of the criminals I met seemed to me to be having an experience of being helplessly in the grip of something very destructive that was beyond their control and it seemed more like an illness finally than some of the illnesses I'd set out to investigate.

DM - Something else about that, what I was asking you about earlier. What about for people who want these changes for themselves, people who believe that whatever reason they think that following is a social tide or a technological opinion will just make them feel better?

AS - So I think I'm basically a libertarian on these issues. I feel like you want to have surgery go ahead and have surgery. If you want to correct whatever your condition is, go ahead and correct it. My concern is what the social pressures are the calls people to want to correct things that don't necessarily need to be corrected. So you look at limb lengthening for example which is a procedure used with dwarfs, unbelievably painful, takes years and involve breaking the bones in many places inserting screws through the flesh of the leg so that the bones can consistently be pulled apart the result neurological damage and but he can give people up to 13 inches in height and make the difference between being a dwarf and being just a relatively small typical person. I've met dwarfs who were so angry about the very idea that they become apoplectic but I've also met people have the procedure and who say it's really what I wanted and people don't stare at me and I prefer this life to the life I otherwise wouldn't had. And I think that the everyone has to make individual decisions and I would never want the book to be taken as an argument against that autonomy. I only would like to think that those decisions might be better informed if people have looked at the issues that are central to the book. And I'd like to think that the people who are making these choices will feel easier in them and will feel that they have more choices. It's a book that's about opening up choice rather than a book that the closing off.

DM - This is really deep stuff and I mean you've said a couple of times now that one of your purpose is to help people have a deeper understanding. However its a busy world and people who especially people at your highlight in this book are dealing with very practical on the ground real-time issues right now. Do they have time for a deeper understanding?

AS - Oh I think everyone has time for deeper understanding. Yes I think it's

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important to have a deep understanding. These are big decisions that people are making, their deciding how to live in the world had to exist in the world, how to respond to their own children, how to respond to their own parents. These are issues that need to be thought about. Not everyone has the leisure obviously to investigate a whole books worth of stories about them but I really believe that if you are a parent who suddenly has a child who is different for you in some way that if you don't think deeply about how much you're going to accept the child, how much when you try to treat or ameliorate or cure the condition in question and what the implications are for your decisions on those fronts, if you don't think those through, I don't think you're being a very responsible parent.

DM - People you describe like the model with the prosthetic legs or the break dancer with degenerative hip condition, are you holding them up as models for what all of us should be because of their attitude not necessarily because of how they surmount a particular condition? I mean, is it a frame of mind that needs to be striven for by the rest of us or will those who were made better by it just sort of bring the rest of us along?

AS - The book deals with a lot of agonizing conditions and there's a lot of sadness in the stories that it tells and a lot of depictions of pain-and-suffering. I wanted then to look at how people make it through and to talk about the qualities of resilience that I found in some of the people I interviewed and those qualities of resilience were very very compelling and very powerful and they felt very precious to me as I is I negotiated them. I don't want to suggest that everyone is or should be or can be resilient in the way that some of those people including the ones you just alluded to have demonstrated themselves to be. But I'd like to explain how they got to that point of resilience in hopes that that might assist others to follow in those impressive footsteps.

DM - Right because it almost seems to me and it could seem to some people the opposite of what you're talking about before you know, if someone who makes a decision because of social pressure when this case maybe someone is feeling like should I try to have a kind of resilience that these people with the condition I can't even imagine has, and am I less of a person because I don't have that resiliency? It could be the same kind of situation reversed.

AS - Right. No, I really would like to think that what I'm giving are models for resilience and models for coping but never that I'm dictating that this is the way anybody should respond. I mean there are people who experience a condition I have is, I know people for example who were gay for whom it's a tragedy and I know people who are gay for whom it's a calls of celebration and I know people

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are gay for whom it ends up being neutral. I think that the people for whom it's a tragedy would have happier better lives if they felt otherwise but I don't think you can force people into feeling something other than what they feel and I think it can be unbelievably oppressive to say all of these experiences have so much value. You know you have a child with Downs Syndrome, it is really the best thing that could ever happen to you. Well some parents have fallen in love with their DS children and have an amazing relationship but for many parents it remains a sadness and a struggle for the entire length of their lives and I think we do people and injustice if we deny that or if we trivialize it.

DM - How did it affect you as a researcher and author and journalist to talk to these families and in meet these children? Over the years that you came up with a book that has apparently been an inspiration to many many people. But while you were writing it how did you feel when you got home at the end of the day?

AS - You know I came home some of the time utterly drained. I mean there were days when I didn't interview and I came home and I counsel everything for the whole weekend and stay curled up in bed because some of the stories were so difficult. But I also came home some of the time and thought wow who knew the human heart can stretch so far, who knew that people can find so much meaning in terrible and painful situations. And so I kept thinking of a conversation I had many years ago with an oncologist and I said to him how can you stand dealing with all of these people with cancer most of whom died. He said because of the ones I can save and I felt as a stream of research that I could deal with the stories that were very painful because it was also so much that I found genuinely and authentically inspirational in the narratives that people had.

DM - Correct me if I'm wrong but the idea of the wrongful life is fascinating to me because it seems to assume that a born person must either exist or suffer but not both. So cases in the think what were lives that shouldn't have been become and parents sue as if they're saying you have to pay me for this that should not have been. But the problem is that the ancient revulsion people have had to the disease or the damaged is given an update in the courts with a consequence being everybody else could come to see that life the same way not, belonging or deserving to exist is a good thing?

AS - Wrongful life is very problematic: it's a form of lawsuit that brought by parents who essentially are suing for the damage of their child having been born and they usually say that it would've been better for the child not to be borne. It's a big existential question and several judges of said in decisions it's beyond the scope of what courts can determine.

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DM - But some states have dealt with the issue of wrongful life.

AS - Some states have but I think one has to understand that it's primarily an economic issue. So the parents may or may not feel that their child should never been born but if they win a wrongful life case, then they received financial support for the child for the rest of the child's existence from the state and I think if we had a better system of services and if there were services readily available to everyone who needs them there wouldn't be an occasion for bringing these wrongful life cases. I think there's a lot of dense philosophy that got packed in to trying to serve the economic problem. The children with challenges or disabilities are incredibly expensive to take care of and we don't provide the resources that people need to do it properly.

DM - When these wrongful life cases are brought, how old are the children on average by the time they're brought?

AS - Oh they're usually brought for in relation to small children they usually are brought fairly soon after the child's problem or disability is recognized.

DM - So has it been any kind of examination of the emotional connection between parent and child when with the suit was brought? I mean would there be less likely that to be a wrongful life suit if the child had been part of the family's life for a year, two years.

AS - Well I think, again the wrongful life suits are really about money and I think that the parents continue to need money whether the child is been there for two years or hasn't been there for two years.

DM - I guess I'm talking about the emotional ... would there be fewer wrongful life cases if there was more of an emotional connection between parent and child?

AS - I think that as the parents continue to take care of a child the connection grows. How that relates to wrongful life cases per se is hard to determine but I think there are many parents who are at an early stage experience having a child especially grossly disabled child who doesn't have language and doesn't have movement and so on as nothing but that acidic grim horrible appalling thing that happened to them and then partly just through the process of care and a very attached to their children. Love is cumulative and the more time you have with someone in the more experience you have with them the deeper the connection grows.

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DM - Have you found anybody for whom the challenge whether its the challenge of the person with the condition or the person trying to live up the condition is just too much to bear or have all of the 300 families you talked to held up pretty well living and growing with it?

AS - They certainly haven't all held up pretty well. Some of them have fallen apart completely, some of those struggled, some of those ended up being hospitalized for depression. There's one family I profile in which the mother decided to give her daughter away for adoption and she's been very much haunted by that decision. In general with a book like this, the people who kept their children are eager to tell their stories and the people of given up their children are mostly not so eager to tell their stories so there's a kind of built-in bias in that. But I would say there's a real range. Most of the families ended up very attached to their children but some of them not very attached. There was one mother of a child with autism who said I love my children, I do everything for them. If I'd known what they would be like I wouldn't have had them. And I think anyone who tells you otherwise is lying and that I thought was very bracingly honest and refreshingly clear.

DM - Did you have a lot of those refreshingly clear moments because for you to call that one refreshingly clear makes me think it didn't have a lot of them.

AS- I would say most of the people I talked to were people who had ultimately found some kind of meaning in their experience. Now that doesn't mean that they didn't want to help their children as much as they could or that they weren't interested in doing something for them but you know there was a family of a child with Downs Syndrome for instance is said for our son, we'd love to be able to make it go away because he has so many struggles dealing with this for ourselves it opened us into a community that made us better people and afforded us a lot of rich experiences we wouldn't have had otherwise and so speaking for ourselves we wouldn't give it up for anything in the world. And I think that's the point of view that many people arrived,.not all my child has this disability and who cares and it's not a problem but instead thing when child has a disability, my child struggles, I would love to help my child struggle less but within the context of the struggling my child does, I also had an occasion for growth and if you can put a little bit of that positive construction into things, you can deal with your child a whole lot better than if you're only railing against the whole time. So partly that has been with insight and partly it just has to do with self-preservation.

DM - You know when I listen to you and look at you you seem like somebody who's gone through their own journey. I mean have you sort of, the other side of

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something yourself because you seem very not only philosophical but content with not only the book but the secrets the book has revealed to you and how secrets applied to your own life. Is it is a true? Am I seeing what I'm seeing?

AS - You know I think that it's true a lot of what you're seeing. My last book was about depression and I went through a very dark period in my late 20s and early 30s and I know in my late 40s. So I went through a very dark period. I've definitely had moments of darkness. I sort of feel like if someone had shown me a day in my current life back when I was in the throes of that depression, it would have made it so much easier to get through all of that if I'd known this is where I was headed. But you know I now have a husband, we have children, I feel loved, I feel like the messages I want to send out into the world seem to be reaching people I feel as though I've gotten there but gee, the self acceptance took me a long time and I still find myself occasionally in context where I think, here I am I have to kind of come out of the closet again and most of the time it's fine and occasionally I'm talking to a group of elderly people and I have a sigh of, all right there's this again. You know it never is completely resolved but I feel like it's largely resolved in and changed for me and I feel very lucky to have been able to get there. But I was able to get their part because I live in New York which like Portland in fact that is in accepting place where gay people have a lot of possibilities. I feel like I have the life I have because I live in the 21st century when the rights of gay people have changed. I just feel like change has been really good to me and I therefore have an obligation to champion it and to see if it can be good for some other people too.

DM - You said that your homosexuality was more or less your ticket in the mindset that a lot of these people with these lives and identity share. But you also did a lot of research and interviews and professional scholarship too. Does your experience add something that someone not gay wouldn't have been able to add, an empathy, a passion, something?

AS - I think that many many people have dealt with difference of some kind and that you could come in from the standpoint of any sort of difference. You might have a lot of insight because you have grown up in poverty and gone to a middle-class school and felt marginalized because of that. You could have met a sense of all of this because you have been through cancer and in the process of emerging from cancer you gain an insight of what it feels like to be pushed to the edges. My particular window happened to be my being gay. You know who would I identify with if I weren't gay and been someone else completely? Maybe I would've been straight and on the swim team in high school and gone onto be a stockbroker and had a very happy life but it would've been an unimaginably

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different life from the one that I have and I feel like those experiences, and I don't overplay my marginality. I had a very hard time with being gay. It was awful in high school. I felt like I was teased and bullied and all of those things that often happen to gay people. It was kind of grim but compared to some of the lives I was writing about I mean it was a life of opulence luxury and delight because these people are dealing with more prejudice and more cruelty and more disability and so on and so forth than I ever was. But I felt like I could expand from my experience into understanding a little bit of what they might be experiencing.

DM - You talk about intersectionality or the idea that, for example you can direct poverty list address poor education. You say these problems can provide fuel for people of different concerns to work together to solve them. Those people might have been activists for years. What you do with people who suddenly changed their minds or their views because something impacts them personally or they finally see a connection they didn't see before? Is that sincere or however it motivates better understanding doesn't really matter as long as it happens and it's permanent?

AS - I think anything that promotes better understanding is great. I was very moved when gay marriage is being debated in New York by the fact that one of the Congressman who voted or senators anyway the one of the representatives who voted in favor of gay marriage was someone who said that he had an autistic grandchild and it seems struggles of his autistic grandchild made him more sympathetic to the experiences of gay people and I feel like if we can look at all of this as one big struggle and say okay but we don't really live in a fair and just society until everyone is well treated and if for creating more rights for gay people we should create more rights for disabled people because a more tolerant society is the only one in which any of those rights are genuinely secured, then I think we'll make a lot of progress. I feel like when I experience anti-immigrant stuff that comes out in this country, I'm not an immigrant, my family's been here for a while but it still makes me feel vulnerable. I feel like there's a group of people being described as other and being treated unbelievably badly for the public it's very accepting of the cruelty with which they are addressed. And seeing any group treated like that reminds me that I belong to a group that has been treated like that in could be treated like that again. So I feel like if what we want is to have a country, a world in which there's some kind of safety and security for the entire population, then we have to strive toward all of the kinds of safety and security we can.

DM - It reminds me of this saying that I heard; When they came for the Jews, I

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didn't stand up for them. When they came for the blacks, I didn't stand up for them. When they came for the infirmed, I didn't stand up for them. And then they came for me there was no one to stand up for me.

AS - Right. Exactly, and I think sometimes people are very protective of the little bit of turf they've won and they say, for instance, I've seen it in looking at the issues between gay people and transgender people. That there is some gay people who sort of feel like we finally managed yet some rights and if we now start getting those weirdo transgender people in on the whole thing we're just going to lose ground. And I feel like, no actually if we exclude all of those transgender people and say we only have our specific narrowly defined rights our rights remain very fragile and very vulnerable. So we should reach out to the transgender people, a - because it's morally right and it's the kind thing to do but b - because saying we've now escape from prejudice and we don't pull anyone else up out of that land of having prejudice against them, that's a, yeah ...there's nobody there to stand up for you. You've said it perfectly.

DM - You say you began the book as a book to forgive your parents and you end it by being a parent. Did you decide to become a parent because you were sort of compromising with your parents when they wanted to marry a woman have a family or because you wanted to prove yourself that you could raise a child with fewer of the problems you saw other parents giving your own children or because you really wanted one?

AS - You know when I was little, my mother used to say the love for your children is unlike any other love in the world and people don't have children never know what it is like. And when I was little I took that is this huge compliment about how much he loved my brother and me. And then when I was older she kept saying the same thing and I was beginning to think I was gay and at that point gay people didn't have children and I found it created enormous anxiety. And then I came out of the closet and she said the same thing again and at that point it made me furious and I said I'm gay and I'm not going to have a family and stop saying that. I'll have a lot of other life experiences that will be very valuable. And then the world changed. It became possible for gay people to have families and now I have one and I think she's right, I think it's a love that's different from in its very nature any other love and that if you don't have children will never know it. Which is not to say that it's right for everyone or that many people don't have wonderful lives without having children but for me it's been I think the greatest joy of my life. And I worried before I did it and I wasn't sure whether I was doing it just because of all that stuff my mother said to me by now that I've done it-like oh yes this is why did it. I did it because I essentially had a fairly happy childhood

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and I hope that I can create for someone else a happy childhood and passing that along is endlessly gratifying and the affection of children makes one's heart soar.

DM - Your voice breaking up.

AS – Yes

DM - At the end of the book in the chapter called father, you begin by talking about your decision to be a father but then over the next 12 pages, you seem to talk about why genetic abnormalities or personal anxieties are no reason for people suffering from why they can be excellent parents. Then you go back to why you and your partner decided have a child. It sounded like you were sort of like justifying your right to have a child by comparing homosexuality to the conditions of the people that you wrote about?

AS - So again I compare everything to everything. I think that gay people should be able to have children. I think disabled people should be able to have children. I think people who were members of racial minority should be able to have children. I feel as though this question of who should and shouldn't have children is something that shouldn't be being adjudicated. We all have the right to have children if that's what we want to do and yes I feel like part of what I was chronicling is how much cruelty is heaped on disabled people who choose to have children and I feel like it's up to them. If they're going to be able to love and take care of the children than they should have the right to have children and they should have the right to have whatever kind of children they want to have in whatever kind of arrangement they want to help them in.

DM - Just like you should have right to have children in whatever arrangement you want to have them in.

AS - Exactly.

DM - That sounds like quite a family got too.

AS - Oh thank you, yes, they've given me a lot of a lot of headaches and a lot of joy.

DM - When you and John were planning to have George how did you feel about the idea that some of the same technology that made it possible for you to see a woman's egg was related to the same eugenic science that probably prevented a

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lot of other babies from ever being born?

AS - Well I think the technologies are related and I think it's incredibly lucky that I live in an era in which we can actually use artificial insemination and we were able to produce a child so that was really glorious. You know I'm troubled by the kind of eugenic attitude that there is in the area particularly of egg donors where you look at people and they have a list of qualifying traits. But I really think that I found out in working on this book that you can start off with the genes of Superman and Wonder Woman and you can produce someone who is severely compromised in one way or another and so I felt as though there was a kind of false message in the eugenic description of egg donors that suggested in effect if you get an egg from this person your child will live to be 93 and will compete in the Olympics and will argue before the Supreme Court. And my experience is that what comes of anybody's genes mixed with anybody else's genes can be very surprising and unpredictable.

DM - Right but at the same time you would not just pick somebody up in a bar and say you're just as good as someone I can go into the dossier from so ...

AS - No and I try to choose someone, I knew I wanted to have a child who would be as well-equipped as possible to thrive in the world and so I wanted to find someone who appear to have the qualities that were important to me. That is find someone who seemed to be kind, who seemed I also wanted somebody who was bright and who didn't have a long history of difficult and debilitating disease and their family.

DM - Your whole book seems to be an expression and an example of your key point which is that nobody grows up to be who the parents think they'll be, who their parents want them to be. Maybe we aren't even a person ourselves. Up until the end your hard on yourself and your reasons for wanting a child and then you can have a transformation. I mean, was it like a dam breaking or cake baking? What was it where you sort of I guess, got over it?

AS - I have some of what get called counter phobic tendencies. If something is scary to me I frequently find the best way to deal with it is by rushing toward it rather than away from it. So I have a fear of heights and one of the ways I dealt with it was by doing skydiving, that's kind of my tendency. So I think the people in all the categories in this book, they seemed not individually scary but I found these disease entities and these problematical ways of being and the prodigy chapter of course about an exalted way being but still one that comes with a lot of problems, I found all of these people daunting and I didn't feel comfortable or

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at ease with them. And writing the book was in part a way of trying to stretch my own mind and my own heart enough so that I could end up thinking, yes, these are all good and valid ways of being and I can be sincere and celebrating them, does that answer your question?

DM - Yeah, it does and I think a lot of people don't deal with the things that frighten them that way. A lot of people put them off, put them on the shelf, runaway from them, hide them, call them something else so ...

AS - Which may be more sincere.

DM - For 10 years you've been steeped in the science of your book, did religion play any role in your decision to write it? I mean, did religion affect your decision have children and how you and John will raise them?

AS - So religion is a complicated idea for me. I find organized religion by large somewhat alienating, sometimes very beautiful but I find it difficult to believe in a creator who requires incredibly explicit dogma, who actually cares whether you're circumcised or whether you have had holy water sprinkled in an appropriate place. Arriving at all of the rest of the stuff that constitutes religion, I just find all of that slightly, I mean, beautiful as I say. Some of the religious ritual that up in the dogma I find hard to deal with. That being said, I really do think that existence is highly mysterious. I think there are moral imperatives to do good in the world, to give back if you are fortunate and are able to do so. And I very much want to ensure that our children grow up with a moral center, with a sense of purpose and with a sense of the vast unknowability of experience. I don't know if we're here for a reason or if we're not here for a reason. But I'm certainly very open to the idea that we are and I'm interested in the idea that we serve that mystery by trying to lead the best lives we can. So I hate it when people sort of say I'm not really religious but I'm very spiritual but it probably comes down to something like that and in working on the book what I found over and over again was that the worst and most appalling prejudice against some of the people in categories of differences I looked at came out of that various bits of it especially evangelical Christianity but religion across the board that there were a lot of religious ideas of how everyone was supposed to be and people who deviated were somehow wrong so that transgender people for instance, have often been persecuted on grounds of what they're doing is against the will of God. But I also found that the situations of the greatest tolerance and finding of meaning and so on and so forth also came out of religion. I mean I met people whose religion had given them the strength to go and deal with incredibly difficult children and difficult lives. I met people whose religion had been a place that said if you're a human being and if

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you believe in God and love him, then you are welcome here and so I saw religion somehow encompassing both extremes.

DM - You write at the end does artifice creep into this brazen triumphalism. And earlier you talk about a Buddhist monk said Nirvana isn't the absence of pain the balance between the joy ahead in the pain behind. So do you give yourself permission to be happy with where you are right now?

AS - I think they do give myself permission to be reasonably happy. I mean, we live in a broken world and there's a great deal that I'm unhappy about and time passes and we run into all kinds of problems and suffering and so on. But I think I really, I think I really have ended up feeling lucky I think I felt lucky is a child and I think I felt desolate in my early adulthood and now I feel lucky again and I know I may feel desolate again around the corner. It's not that I feel as though I've solved everything and it's all said. You know when there's plenty that's wrong with my life but I just feel as though the, I just feel as though meeting all of these people with lives that are so difficult who nonetheless were able to find meaning in their experience and a reason to get up every day. I mean there was one sister of the schizophrenic who I interviewed and she said my brother's been in the Vietnam war for 25 years. She said he gets up every single day and he gets out of bed and he does a few things, she said. And I have more admiration for him than I do for most anybody and I ended up being awed by a lot of the people I encountered and I wrote about and I ended up being inspired by them and between that inspiration and my own process of maturation as I went along, I did come out in a in a joyful place. As I say not a joyful place where there's no pain but a place that has more joy in it than I used to think I would ever find.

DM - Well Andrew Soloman, it has been a pleasure talking to you about your book *Far from the Tree*. It's on the New York Times bestseller list and I hope it stays there for a really long time because it has some wonderful messages.

AS - Thank you.

DM - Thank you very much for talking me.

AS - A real pleasure thank you.

DM - I'm Don Merrill and I've been talking with Andrew Solomon. Mr. Solomon is the author of the book *Far from the Tree*. Thanks for listening.

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