

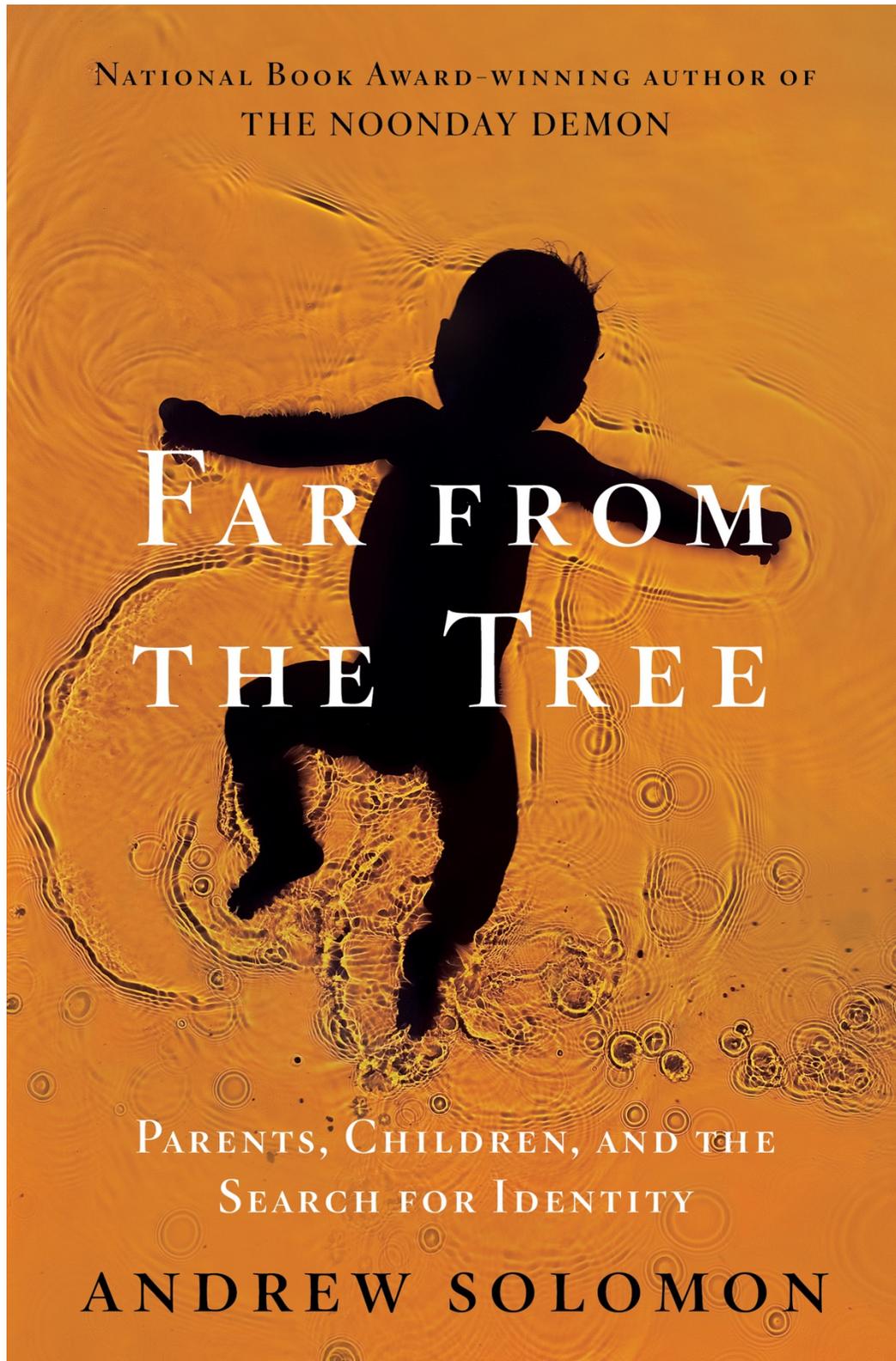
Lesson Plan

Far from the Tree

Parents, Children,
and the Search for
Identity

By Andrew Solomon

Far From the Tree: Parents, Children, and the Search for Identity
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Cover design by Rex Bonomelli and Cover photograph by Adam Fuss
Lesson Plan designed by Dr. Gabrielle M.W. Bychowski, Ph.D.

On his website, the photographer describes himself and his art this way:

“Adam Fuss is a contemporary British photographer. Known for his ethereal images created using a photogram technique in which objects are placed directly on light-sensitive paper, Fuss achieves a poetic sense of detachment and wonder throughout his work.”

Question 1: What does “ethereal” mean? What is ethereal about this image?

Question 2: Why would the publishers select a photographer known for creating images with “detachment” and “wonder” for a book like *Far From the Tree*? What would this suggest is the goal for the book?

Question 3: The photographer combines the images of a child with drops and ripples in a liquid surface to create the cover. What meaning can you create by putting these images together?

On the back cover, the book states the thesis: “difference is what unites us”

Question 1: What are the forces that encourage us to believe that difference divide us? How might differences become ways for people to come together?

The back cover makes the observation: “the experience of difference within families is universal”

Question 2: In your experience, how do differences within families manifest and express themselves? What are the results of these differences for individuals and for the collective family dynamics?

The back cover continues asks the question: “to what extent should parents accept their children for who they are, and to what extent they should help them become their best selves?”

Question 3: How do you believe your parents or families you know have responded to this question? How might you respond to this question with your own children?

2013 Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards Ceremony



Watch the acceptance speech of Andrew Solomon for *Far From the Tree*

Question 1: Solomon begins with a story about his mother homophobically encouraging him as a boy to get a blue balloon instead of a pink balloon, concluding, “the fact that my favorite color is now blue and I am still gay gives evidence for my mother’s influence and its limits.” What are experiences from your life that evidence the influence of your parents and what of your personality persisted despite your parents’ influence?

Question 2: What are the tools that parents and society use to shape, change, and correct children?

Question 3: Solomon speaks of his own experience as a father, teaching him how a child's "identity of necessity" can also become an identity in which parents share. How might parents of a child with Autism, a child who is transgender, or a little person find themselves participating in the culture of these identities?

Question 4: Solomon concludes his speech by saying, "until all of us are free, none of us are free." What does he mean? How was he influenced by movements of the past? What are his hopes for future generations?

Reading

The first chapter, “Son,” gives the biography of the author and the genesis of the book’s project. Within this chapter, he explains his goals, his thesis, and his methods.

Please read the chapter.

Question 1: Opening sentences of books are important. What does Solomon mean when he says, “there is no such thing as reproduction?” Why we do use the word “reproduction?” What word should we use instead?

Question 2: The title of the book is also explained within this chapter. What does the saying mean, “the fruit doesn’t fall far from the tree?” Explore the metaphor. What happens when a fruit does fall far from the tree?

Question 3: How did Solomon feel different from his own parents? How did his family respond to this difference? How did he respond to their parenting of him?

Question 4: What does Solomon mean by a “vertical identity?” What traits might be described as vertical? How do parents and family treat vertical traits? How are vertical identities reinforced over generations?

Question 5: What does Solomon mean by a “horizontal identity?” What traits may be described as horizontal? How do parents and family treat horizontal traits? Are horizontal traits reinforced in the same way?

Question 6: if horizontal identities are formed outside of the family, where do people develop them? Who are people who help nurture horizontal identities? How might families relate to these identity communities?

Reading

The first chapter, “Son,” gives a breakdown of the chapters and how the various groups were selected. Review this section along with the chapter titles in the Table of Contents.

Question 1: the introduction explains that not every group represented by a chapter in the book were happy to be put alongside other groups who also got chapters. What groups do you commonly see associated? What groups are not usually connected together? Why did Solomon decide to bring them all together?

Question 2: the book seeks to deconstruct how we define “illness” and how we define “identity.” In your experience, what are major differences? What are the major similarities. Make a chart or a Venn diagram.

Question 3: how has social and medical progress changed what groups we see as identities and what groups we see as illnesses? What might move a group from one definition to the other?

Chapter 2 - Deaf

The second chapter, “Deaf,” explores the Deaf community, the spectrum of hearing, implants and aids, as well as the role of signing languages in creating community. Read the chapter.

Question 1: What is the difference between “deaf” and “Deaf?” How has Deaf communities articulated themselves as an identity and not an illness? How did they exchange “deficiency” language for “difference?”

Question 2: What role does American Sign Language (ASL) and other Deaf language groups played in developing this horizontal identity group? What about the role of Deaf Colleges?

Question 3: How has hearing implants and devices affect Deaf culture? Why do some discourage these technologies, especially for infants? How does it reinforce tensions across the spectrum of deafness?

Chapter 8 – Prodigies

The eighth chapter, “Prodigies,” considers differences between parent and child that are not necessarily considered “negatively charged” differences or disabilities. Read the chapter.

Question 1: Why did Solomon include a chapter about prodigies with exceptional abilities in a book full of people with disabilities? What does this say about humanity diversity and alienation within family systems?

Question 2: What are a few of the forces that lead to unhappiness and stagnation among prodigy children? What are the negative effects on the socialization and psychology of child prodigies?

Question 3: How do their experiences in their youth differ from their experiences as adults? What roadblocks emerge for prodigies to continue in their gifted profession? What are the roadblocks for changing jobs?

Chapter 11 – Transgender

The eleventh chapter, “Transgender,” surveys a diverse range of transgender persons and considers problems with traditional gender roles and binaries. Read the chapter.

Question 1: Clarify the terms transgender, trans man, trans woman, intersex, cisgender, and non-binary. What do each mean? Why are terms like transsexual, transvestite, and tranny not generally acceptable?

Question 2: What are biological components of being transgender? Being trans is not a mental illness, disability, or disorder. Yet why does the trans community continue to work with doctors and diagnostics? What gender-specific healthcare do cis men and women sometimes need?

Question 3: What are the social components of being transgender? How young do trans people tend to know their gender? What does it mean to be stealth and why would some choose not to disclose their trans status? How is school, family, and work complicated by cisgender binaries and transphobia?

Far From the Tree (2018)

Directed by Rachel Dretzin



Watch the Documentary.

Relate to chapters from the book: Down Syndrome, Dwarfs, and Autism.

Chapter 3 – Dwarfs

The third chapter, “Dwarfs,” studies the lives of Little People as well the various conditions collected under the identity. Read the chapter and watch the film about the little persons.

Question 1: Loini goes from isolation to community at the Little People of American Annual Convention, making friends, dancing, and even modeling on a fashion show. This is a place where people go “to be seen” and “to disappear.” How does the LPA fashion show re-train the way people look at LPs?

Question 2: Leah is part of an organization that opposes the push to “cure” dwarfism. Why do they resist it? What is the cost/benefit analysis of the cure? What is the cost/benefit analysis of refusing the cure?

Question 3: Leah and her husband Joe are struggling to have a baby and hope to have a little person. How are Leah and Joe changing the narrative of what it means to be born a little person or to have an LP child?

Chapter 4 – Down Syndrome (Part 1)

The fourth chapter, “Down Syndrome,” unpacks the traits of people with Down Syndrome, noting the importance of early intervention. Read the chapter and watch the film about “Jason.”

Question 1: Disability studies asserts that “ability” is relative to one’s environment. What are jobs, communities, or situations in which Jason would excel?

Question 2: Jason’s brain processes experiences, emotions, and ideas in distinct ways. Describes ways that Jason may be working through grief over his father.

Question 3: Jason loves the Frozen films. Watch the “Let It Go” scene from Frozen. Describe three visual or physical details in the scene that may metaphorically connect with Jason’s experiences.

Chapter 4 – Down Syndrome (Part 2)

The fourth chapter, “Down Syndrome,” includes a poem written by Jason’s mom called “Welcome to Holland” that imagines what it is like to parent a child with disabilities.

Read the poem and discuss.

Question 1: The poem uses Holland/Italy as metaphors for disability/able-bodiedness. What are physical differences in each place? What are cultural differences? What physical and cultural things could be shared?

Question 2: The poem discusses all the ways people are prepared to go on a trip for Italy, even though not everyone arrives there. What are ways that society trains parents and children for able-bodiedness?

Question 3: The poem concludes with the hardships but also the joys of arriving in Holland or raising a child with a disability. What are some of those joys? What stands in the way of more people enjoying Holland?

Chapter 5 – Autism

The fifth chapter, “Autism,” goes into neurodiversity, neurotypicality, and neurodivergence within the spectrum called autism. Read the chapter and watch the film about “Jack.”

Question 1: In what ways has Jack lived his life in isolation? In what ways might he have enjoyed or tolerated it and in what ways might it have been frustrating for him?

Question 2: Flip the script on neurotypicality. What if neurodiversity was the standard? In what ways is neurotypical thinking or talking disordered from the point of view of people on the spectrum?

Question 3: How important is the ability to communicate or understand language in specific ways to how we judge someone as: civilized, disabled, a good employee/student, smart?

Visualizing Far From the Tree

Inspired by themes and chapters of Far From the Tree, invite students to create a piece of art.

Draw a tree with roots, branches, and fruits based on the book Far From the Tree.



Inspired by the diverse families in *Far From the Tree*, draw an image that expresses what family means.

