ANDREW SOLOMON

WHO ARE YOU—REALLY? What does "me" indicate? We count on our ability to understand ourselves, but what do we know for certain?

Questions about identity lie at the heart of Andrew Solomon's writing. By all accounts, Solomon was raised in a happy home with loving parents. Once he graduated from Yale, he went to Cambridge University, which awarded him the top first-class degree, the only time the honor had ever been bestowed on a foreign student. After Solomon met with such success, happiness should have been his lot in life, but when he was only 25, his mother died from cancer. It would be conventional to say that Solomon "fell into a deep depression," but the malady that overcame him unfolded in such a strange, oblique way that he had no sense of what was happening: "A loss of feeling, a numbness, infected all my human relations. I didn't care about love, my work, family, friends. My writing slowed, then stopped.... I was losing my self and that scared me." This experience of losing himself led to Solomon's third book, *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression* (2001), which won the National Book Award for Nonfiction and has been translated into 24 languages. The story it tells is quite harrowing, but depression gave Solomon a much deeper sense of what it means to be or to have a self. As he told one interviewer, "It seems to me that who other people are is always mysterious. What I realized in the wake of depression is that who I am is fully mysterious to me."

Solomon's book *Far from the Tree: Parents, Children, and the Search for Identity* (2012), from which the following selection is taken, might be read as an attempt to explore the self in another way, not through the labyrinth of the mind but through our relations to others. As a gay man, Solomon is fascinated by how we each create ourselves, sometimes in ways our parents dislike. Most prospective parents start out convinced their children will embrace the lives mapped out for them, but the unexpected often happens. Solomon's own mother could never accept his sexuality, and his experience of her disapproval brought him closer to other children whose arrival in the world thwarted parental expectations: deaf people, dwarves, those born with Down syndrome, autism,

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Biographical details are from Andrew Solomon's site <http://andrewsolomon.com>. Quotation on depression is from Andrew Solomon, *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression* (New York: Scribner, 2001) 45. Quotation on the self is from "The Soul in Depression," *On Being*, February 26, 2009 <http://www.onbeing.org/program/soul-depression/transcript/1332>.

schizophrenia. Solomon understands that many loving parents want their children to be "normal," but he argues that our differences can teach us all how to think and love more inclusively.

Son

There is no such thing as reproduction. When two people decide to have a baby, they engage in an act of production, and the widespread use of the word *reproduction* for this activity, with its implication that two people are but braiding themselves together, is at best a euphemism to comfort prospective parents before they get in over their heads. In the subconscious fantasies that make conception look so alluring, it is often ourselves that we would like to see live forever, not someone with a personality of his own. Having anticipated the onward march of our selfish genes, many of us are unprepared for children who present unfamiliar needs. Parenthood abruptly catapults us into a permanent relationship with a stranger, and the more alien the stranger, the stronger the whiff of negativity. We depend on the guarantee in our children's faces that we will not die. Children whose defining quality annihilates that fantasy of immortality are a particular insult; we must love them for themselves, and not for the best of ourselves in them, and that is a great deal harder to do. Loving our own children is an exercise for the imagination.

Yet blood, in modern as in ancient societies, is thicker than water. Little is more gratifying than successful and devoted children, and few situations are worse than filial failure or rejection. Our children are not us: they carry throwback genes and recessive traits and are subject right from the start to environmental stimuli beyond our control. And yet we are our children; the reality of being a parent never leaves those who have braved the metamorphosis. The psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott once said, "There is no such thing as a baby—meaning that if you set out to describe a baby, you will find you are describing a *baby and someone*. A baby cannot exist alone but is essentially part of a relationship." Insofar as our children resemble us, they are our most precious admirers, and insofar as they differ, they can be our most vehement detractors. From the beginning, we tempt them into imitation of us and long for what may be life's most profound compliment: their choosing to live according to our own system of values. Though many of us take pride in how different we are from our parents, we are endlessly sad at how different our children are from us.

Because of the transmission of identity from one generation to the next, most children share at least some traits with their parents. These are *vertical* identities.

Attributes and values are passed down from parent to child across the generations not only through strands of DNA, but also through shared cultural norms. Ethnicity, for example, is a vertical identity. Children of color are in general born to parents of color; the genetic fact of skin pigmentation is transmitted across generations along with a self-image as a person of color, even though that self-image may be subject to generational flux. Language is usually vertical, since most people who speak Greek raise their children to speak Greek, too, even if they inflect it differently or speak another language much of the time. Religion is moderately vertical: Catholic parents will tend to bring up Catholic children, though the children may turn irreligious or convert to another faith. Nationality is vertical, except for immigrants. Blondness and myopia are often transmitted from parent to child, but in most cases do not form a significant basis for identity—blondness because it is fairly insignificant, and myopia because it is easily corrected.

Often, however, someone has an inherent or acquired trait that is foreign to his or her parents and must therefore acquire identity from a peer group. This is a *horizontal* identity. Such horizontal identities may reflect recessive genes, random mutations, prenatal influences, or values and preferences that a child does not share with his progenitors. Being gay is a horizontal identity; most gay kids are born to straight parents, and while their sexuality is not determined by their peers, they learn gay identity by observing and participating in a subculture outside the family. Physical disability tends to be horizontal, as does genius. Psychopathy, too, is often horizontal; most criminals are not raised by mobsters and must invent their own treachery. So are conditions such as autism and intellectual disability. A child conceived in a rape is born into emotional challenges that his own mother cannot know, even though they spring from her trauma.

In 1993, I was assigned to investigate Deaf culture for the *New York Times*. My assumption about deafness was that it was a deficit and nothing more. Over the months that followed, I found myself drawn into the Deaf world. Most deaf children are born to hearing parents, and those parents frequently prioritize functioning in the hearing world, expending enormous energy on oral speech and lipreading. Doing so, they can neglect other areas of their children's education. While some deaf people are good at lipreading and produce comprehensible speech, many do not have that skill, and years go by as they sit endlessly with audiologists and speech pathologists instead of learning history and mathematics and philosophy. Many stumble upon Deaf identity in adolescence, and it comes as a great liberation. They move into a world that validates Sign as a language and discover themselves. Some hearing parents accept this powerful new development; others struggle against it.

The whole situation felt arrestingly familiar to me because I am gay. Gay people usually grow up under the purview of straight parents who feel that their children would be better off straight and sometimes torment them by pressing them to conform. Those gay people often discover gay identity in adolescence or afterward, finding great relief there. When I started writing about the deaf, the cochlear implant, which can provide some facsimile of hearing, was a

recent innovation. It had been hailed by its progenitors as a miraculous cure for a terrible defect and was deplored by the Deaf community as a genocidal attack on a vibrant community. Both sides have since moderated their rhetoric, but the issue is complicated by the fact that cochlear implants are most effective when they are surgically implanted early—in infants, ideally—so the decision is often made by parents before the child can possibly have or express an informed opinion. Watching the debate, I knew that my own parents would gamely have consented to a parallel early procedure to ensure that I would be straight, had one existed. I do not doubt that the advent of such a thing even now could wipe out most of gay culture. I am saddened by the idea of such a threat, and yet as my understanding of Deaf culture deepened, I realized that the attitudes I had found benighted in my parents resembled my own likely response to producing a deaf child. My first impulse would have been to do whatever I could to fix the abnormality.

Then a friend had a daughter who was a dwarf. She wondered whether she should bring up her daughter to consider herself just like everyone else, only shorter; whether she should make sure her daughter had dwarf role models; or whether she should investigate surgical limb-lengthening. As she narrated her bafflement, I saw a familiar pattern. I had been startled to note my common ground with the Deaf, and now I was identifying with a dwarf; I wondered who else was out there waiting to join our gladsome throng. I thought that if gayness, an identity, could grow out of homosexuality, an illness, and Deafness, an identity, could grow out of deafness, an illness, and if dwarfism as an identity could emerge from an apparent disability, then there must be many other categories in this awkward interstitial territory. It was a radicalizing insight. Having always imagined myself in a fairly slim minority, I suddenly saw that I was in a vast company. Difference unites us. While each of these experiences can isolate those who are affected, together they compose an aggregate of millions whose struggles connect them profoundly. The exceptional is ubiquitous; to be entirely typical is the rare and lonely state.

As my parents had misapprehended who I was, so other parents must be constantly misapprehending their own children. Many parents experience their child's horizontal identity as an affront. A child's marked difference from the rest of the family demands knowledge, competence, and actions that a typical mother and father are unqualified to supply, at least initially. The child is expressly different from most of his or her peers as well, and therefore broadly less understood or accepted. Abusive fathers visit less abuse on children who resemble them physically; if you are born to a bully, pray that you bear his features. Whereas families tend to reinforce vertical identities from earliest childhood, many will oppose horizontal ones. Vertical identities are usually respected as identities; horizontal ones are often treated as flaws.

One could argue that black people face many disadvantages in the United States today, but there is little research into how gene expression could be altered to make the next generation of children born to black parents come out with straight, flaxen hair and creamy complexions. In modern America, it is sometimes hard to be Asian or Jewish or female, yet no one suggests that Asians,

Jews, or women would be foolish not to become white Christian men if they could. Many vertical identities make people uncomfortable, and yet we do not attempt to homogenize them. The disadvantages of being gay are arguably no greater than those of such vertical identities, but most parents have long sought to turn their gay children straight. Anomalous bodies are usually more frightening to people who witness them than to people who have them, yet parents rush to normalize physical exceptionalism, often at great psychic cost to themselves and their children. Labeling a child's mind as diseased—whether with autism, intellectual disabilities, or transgenderism—may reflect the discomfort that mind gives parents more than any discomfort it causes their child. Much gets corrected that might better have been left alone.

Defective is an adjective that has long been deemed too freighted for liberal discourse, but the medical terms that have supplanted it—*illness, syndrome, condition*—can be almost equally pejorative in their discreet way. We often use *illness* to disparage a way of being, and *identity* to validate that same way of being. This is a false dichotomy. In physics, the Copenhagen interpretation defines energy/matter as behaving sometimes like a wave and sometimes like a particle, which suggests that it is both, and posits that it is our human limitation to be unable to see both at the same time. The Nobel Prize–winning physicist Paul Dirac identified how light appears to be a particle if we ask a particle-like question, and a wave if we ask a wavelike question. A similar duality obtains in this matter of self. Many conditions are both illness and identity, but we can see one only when we obscure the other. Identity politics refutes the idea of illness, while medicine shortchanges identity. Both are diminished by this narrowness.

Physicists gain certain insights from understanding energy as a wave, and other insights from understanding it as a particle, and use quantum mechanics to reconcile the information they have gleaned. Similarly, we have to examine *illness* and *identity,* understand that observation will usually happen in one domain or the other, and come up with a syncretic mechanics. We need a vocabulary in which the two concepts are not opposites, but compatible aspects of a condition. The problem is to change how we assess the value of individuals and of lives, to reach for a more ecumenical take on *healthy*. Ludwig Wittgenstein said, "All I know is what I have words for." The absence of words is the absence of intimacy; these experiences are starved for language.

The children I describe here have horizontal conditions that are alien to their parents. They are deaf or dwarfs; they have Down syndrome, autism, schizophrenia, or multiple severe disabilities; they are prodigies; they are people conceived in rape or who commit crimes; they are transgender. The timeworn adage says that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, meaning that a child resembles his or her parents; these children are apples that have fallen elsewhere—some a couple of orchards away, some on the other side of the world. Yet myriad families learn to tolerate, accept, and finally celebrate children who are not what they originally had in mind. This transformative process is often eased and sometimes confounded by identity politics and medical progress—both of which have infiltrated households to a degree that would have been inconceivable even twenty years ago.

All offspring are startling to their parents; these most dramatic situations are merely variations on a common theme. Much as we learn the properties of a medication by studying its effect at extremely high doses, or look at the viability of a construction material by exposing it to unearthly supertemperatures, so we can understand the universal phenomenon of difference within families by looking at these extreme cases. Having exceptional children exaggerates parental tendencies; those who would be bad parents become awful parents, but those who would be good parents often become extraordinary. I take the anti-Tolstoyan view that the unhappy families who reject their variant children have much in common, while the happy ones who strive to accept them are happy in a multitude of ways.

Because prospective parents have ever-increasing options to choose against having children with horizontal challenges, the experiences of those who have such children are critical to our larger understanding of difference. Parents' early responses to and interactions with a child determine how that child comes to view himself. These parents are also profoundly changed by their experiences. If you have a child with a disability, you are forever the parent of a disabled child; it is one of the primary facts about you, fundamental to the way other people perceive and decipher you. Such parents tend to view aberrance as illness until habituation and love enable them to cope with their odd new reality—often by introducing the language of identity. Intimacy with difference fosters its accommodation.

Broadcasting these parents' learned happiness is vital to sustaining identities that are now vulnerable to eradication. Their stories point a way for all of us to expand our definitions of the human family. It's important to know how autistic people feel about autism, or dwarfs about dwarfism. Self-acceptance is part of the ideal, but without familial and societal acceptance, it cannot ameliorate the relentless injustices to which many horizontal identity groups are subject and will not bring about adequate reform. We live in xenophobic times, when legislation with majority support abrogates the rights of women, LGBT people, illegal immigrants, and the poor. Despite this crisis in empathy, compassion thrives at home, and most of the parents I have profiled love across the divide. Understanding how they came to think well of their own children may give the rest of us motive and insight 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 has 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.

I had dyslexia as a child; indeed, I have it now. I still cannot write by hand without focusing on each letter as I form it, and even when I do so, some letters are out of order or omitted. My mother, who identified the dyslexia early, began to work on reading with me when I was two. I spent long afternoons in her lap, learning to sound out words, training like an Olympic athlete in phonetics; we

practiced letters as though no shapes could ever be lovelier than theirs. To keep my attention, she gave me a notebook with a yellow felt cover on which Winnie-the-Pooh and Tigger were sewn; we made flash cards and played games with them in the car. I reveled in the attention, and my mother taught with a sense of fun, as though it was the best puzzle in the world, a private game between us. When I was six, my parents applied for my admission to eleven schools in New York City, and all eleven turned me down on grounds that I would never learn to read and write. A year later, I was enrolled in a school where the principal grudgingly allowed my advanced reading skills to overrule test scores that predicted I would never learn to read at all. The standards of perpetual triumph were high in our house, and that early victory over dyslexia was formative: with patience, love, intelligence, and will, we had trounced a neurological abnormality. Unfortunately, it set the stage for our later struggles by making it hard to believe that we couldn't reverse the creeping evidence of another perceived abnormality—my being gay.

People ask when I knew I was gay, and I wonder what that knowledge entails. It took some time for me to become aware of my sexual desires. The realization that what I wanted was exotic, and out of step with the majority, came so early that I cannot remember a time preceding it. Recent studies have shown that as early as age two, male children who will grow up to be gay are averse to certain types of rough-and-tumble play; by age six, most will behave in obviously gender-nonconforming ways. Because I could tell early on that many of my impulses were unmasculine, I embarked on further acts of self-invention. When, in first grade, each of us was asked to name his favorite food and everyone else said ice cream or hamburgers or French toast, I proudly chose *ekmek kadayiff* with *kaymak*, which I used to order at an Armenian restaurant on East Twenty-Seventh Street. I never traded a baseball card, but I did recount the plots of operas on the school bus. None of this made me popular.

I was popular at home, but I was subject to corrections. My mother, my brother, and I were at Indian Walk Shoes when I was seven, and as we were leaving, the salesman asked what color balloons we'd like. My brother wanted a red balloon. I wanted a pink one. My mother countered that I didn't want a pink balloon and reminded me that my favorite color was blue. I said I really wanted the pink, but under her glare, I took the blue one. That my favorite color is blue but I am still gay is evidence of both my mother's influence and its limits. She once said, "When you were little, you didn't like to do what other kids liked to do, and I encouraged you to be yourself." She added, only half-ironically, "I sometimes think I let things go too far." I have sometimes thought she didn't let them go far enough. But her encouragement of my individuality, although doubtless ambivalent, has shaped my life.

My new school had quasi-liberal ideas and was supposed to be integrated—which meant that our class included a few black and Latino kids on scholarship who mostly socialized with one another. My first year there, Debbie Camacho had a birthday party in Harlem, and her parents, unacquainted with the logic of New York private education, scheduled it for the same weekend as homecoming. My mother asked how I would feel if no one attended my birthday party,

and insisted that I attend. I doubt many kids in my class would have gone to the party even if there hadn't been such a convenient excuse, but in fact, only two white kids went out of a class of forty. I was frankly terrified of being there. The birthday girl's cousins tried to get me to dance; everyone spoke Spanish; there were unfamiliar fried foods; and I had something of a panic attack and went home in tears.

I drew no parallels between everyone's avoidance of Debbie's party and my own unpopularity, even when, a few months later, Bobby Finkel had a birthday party and invited everyone in the class but me. My mother called his mother on the assumption that there had been a mistake; Mrs. Finkel said that her son didn't like me and didn't want me at his party. My mother picked me up at school on the day of the party and took me to the zoo, and for a hot fudge sundae at Old-Fashioned Mr. Jennings. It's only in retrospect that I imagine how hurt my mother was on my behalf—more hurt than I was, or let myself notice I was. I didn't guess then that her tenderness was a bid to compensate for the insults of the world. When I contemplate my parents' discomfort with my gayness, I can see how vulnerable my vulnerabilities made her, and how much she wanted to preempt my sadness with the assurance that we were our own good time. Forbidding the pink balloon must be held as partly a protective gesture.

I'm glad my mother made me go to Debbie Camacho's birthday party—because I think it was the right thing to do and because, though I couldn't see it at the time, it was the beginning of an attitude of tolerance that allowed me to stomach myself and find happiness in adulthood. It's tempting to paint myself and my family as beacons of liberal exceptionalism, but we weren't. I teased one African-American student in my elementary school by claiming he resembled a picture in our social studies book of a tribal child in an African *rondavel*. I didn't think that this was racist; I thought it was funny, and vaguely true. When I was older, I remembered my behavior with deep regret, and when the person in question found me on Facebook, I apologized profusely. I said that my only excuse was that it was not easy to be gay at the school, and that I'd acted out the prejudice I experienced in the form of prejudice toward others. He accepted my apology, and mentioned that he was also gay; I was humbled that he had survived, where so much of both kinds of bias were in play.

I floundered in the tricky waters of elementary school, but at home, where bias was never tinged with cruelty, my more intractable deficits were minimized and my quirks were mostly humored. When I was ten, I became fascinated by the tiny principality of Liechtenstein. A year later, my father took us along on a business trip to Zürich, and one morning my mother announced that she'd arranged for us all to drive to Liechtenstein's capital, Vaduz. I remember the thrill that the whole family was going along with what was clearly my wish and mine alone. In retrospect, the Liechtenstein preoccupation seems peculiar, but the same mother who forbade the pink balloon thought up and arranged that day: lunch in a charming café, a tour of the art museum, a visit to the printing office where they make the country's distinctive postage stamps. Although I did not always feel approved of, I always felt acknowledged and was given the latitude of my eccentricity. But there were limits, and pink balloons fell on the wrong side of them. Our family

rule was to be interested in otherness from within a pact of sameness. I wanted to stop merely observing the wide world and inhabit its wideness: I wanted to dive for pearls, memorize Shakespeare, break the sound barrier, learn to knit. From one angle, the desire to transform myself can be seen as an attempt to unshackle myself from an undesirable way of being. From another, it was a gesture toward my essential self, a crucial pivot toward who I was to become.

Even in kindergarten, I spent recess making conversation with my teachers because other children didn't get it; the teachers probably didn't get it, either, but they were old enough to be polite. By seventh grade, I ate lunch most days in the office of Mrs. Brier, secretary of the head of the lower school. I graduated from high school without visiting the cafeteria, where I would have sat with the girls and been laughed at for doing so, or with the boys and been laughed at for being the kind of boy who should really sit with the girls. The impulse to conformity that so often defines childhood never existed for me, and when I began to think about sexuality, the nonconformity of same-sex desires thrilled me—the realization that what I wanted was even more different and forbidden than all sex is to the young. Homosexuality felt to me like an Armenian dessert or a day in Liechtenstein. I nonetheless thought that if anyone found out I was gay, I would have to die.

My mother didn't want me to be gay because she thought it wouldn't be the happiest course for me, but equally, she didn't like the image of herself as the mother of a gay son. The problem wasn't that she wanted to control *my* life—although she did, like most parents, genuinely believe that her way of being happy was the best way of being happy. The problem was that she wanted to control *her* life, and it was her life as the mother of a homosexual that she wished to alter. Unfortunately, there was no way for her to fix her problem without involving me.

I learned to hate this aspect of my identity profoundly and early because that crouching posture echoed a family response to a vertical identity. My mother thought it was undesirable to be Jewish. She had learned this view from my grandfather, who kept his religion secret so he could hold a high-level job in a company that did not employ Jews. He belonged to a suburban country club where Jews were not welcome. In her early twenties, my mother was briefly engaged to a Texan, but he broke it off when his family threatened to disinherit him if he married a Jew. For her, it was a trauma of self-recognition, because until then she had not thought of herself as a designated Jew; she had thought she could be whomever she appeared to be. Five years later, she chose to marry my Jewish father and live in a largely Jewish world, but she carried the anti-Semitism within her. She would see people who fit certain stereotypes and say, "Those are the people who give us a bad name." When I asked her what she thought of the much sought-after beauty of my ninth-grade class, she said, "She looks very Jewish." Her method of rueful self-doubt was organized for me around being gay: I inherited her gift for discomfort.

Long after childhood, I clung to childish things as a dam against sexuality. This willful immaturity was overlaid with an affected Victorian prudery, aimed not at masking but at obliterating desire. I had some farfetched idea that I would

be Christopher Robin forever in the Hundred Acre Wood; indeed, the final chapter of the *Winnie-the-Pooh* books felt so much like my story that I couldn't bear to hear it, though I had my father read me all the other chapters hundreds of times. *The House at Pooh Corner* ends, "Wherever they go, and whatever happens to them on the way, in that enchanted place on top of the Forest, a little boy and his Bear will always be playing." I decided that I would be that boy and that bear, that I would freeze myself in puerility, because what growing up portended for me was too humiliating. At thirteen, I bought a copy of *Playboy* and spent hours studying it, trying to resolve my discomfort with female anatomy; it was much more grueling than my homework. By the time I reached high school, I knew I had to have sex with women sooner or later and felt that I couldn't do so, and thought often about dying. The half of me that wasn't planning to be Christopher Robin playing forever in an enchanted place was planning to be Anna Karenina throwing myself in front of a train. It was a ludicrous duality.

When I was in eighth grade at the Horace Mann School in New York, an older kid nicknamed me Percy as a shorthand for my demeanor. We were on the same school-bus route, and each day when I boarded, he and his cohort would chant, "Percy! Percy! Percy!" I sometimes sat with a Chinese-American student who was too shy to talk to anyone else (and turned out to be gay himself), and sometimes with a nearly blind girl who was also the object of considerable cruelty. Sometimes, everyone on the bus chanted that provocation the entire ride. "Per-cy! Per-cy! Per-cy! Per-cy!" at the top of their lungs for forty-five minutes: all the way up Third Avenue, along the FDR Drive, across the Willis Avenue Bridge, the length of the Major Deegan Expressway, and onto 246th Street in Riverdale. The blind girl kept repeating that I should "just ignore it," and so I sat there pretending unconvincingly that it wasn't happening.

Four months after it began, I came home one day and my mother asked, "Has something been happening on the school bus? Have other students been calling you Percy?" A classmate had told his mother, who in turn had called mine. When I admitted it, she hugged me for a long time, then asked why I hadn't told her. It had never occurred to me: partly because talking about something so degrading seemed only to reify it, partly because I thought there was nothing to be done, and partly because I felt that the qualities for which I was being tortured would be abhorrent to my mother, too, and I wanted to protect her from disappointment.

Thereafter, a chaperone rode on the school bus and the chanting stopped. I was merely called "faggot" on the bus and at school, often within hearing distance of teachers who raised no objections. That same year, my science teacher told us that homosexuals developed fecal incontinence because their anal sphincters were destroyed. Homophobia was ubiquitous in the 1970s, but the smug culture of my school delivered a sharply honed version of it.

In June of 2012, the *New York Times Magazine* published an article by Horace Mann alumnus Amos Kamil about some male faculty members' predatory abuse of boys at the school while I was a student there. The article quoted students who developed addiction issues and other self-destructive behavior in

the wake of such episodes; one man had committed suicide in middle age as the culmination of despair that his family traced to the youthful exploitation. The article made me profoundly sad—and confused, because some teachers accused of such acts had been kinder to me than anyone else at my school during a desolate time. My beloved history teacher took me out to dinner, gave me a copy of the Jerusalem Bible, and talked with me during free periods when other students wanted nothing to do with me. The music teacher awarded me concert solos, let me call him by his first name and hang out in his office, and led the glee club trips that were among my happiest adventures. They seemed to recognize who I was and thought well of me anyway. Their implicit acknowledgment of my sexuality helped me not to become an addict or a suicide.

When I was in ninth grade the school's art teacher (who was also a football coach) kept trying to strike up a conversation with me about masturbation. I was paralyzed: I thought it might be a form of entrapment, and that if I responded, he'd tell everyone that I was gay, and I'd be even more of a laughingstock than I already was. No other faculty member ever made a move on me—perhaps because I was a skinny, socially awkward kid with glasses and braces, perhaps because my parents had a reputation for protective vigilance, perhaps because I assumed a self-insulating arrogance that made me less vulnerable than some others.

The art teacher was removed when allegations against him emerged soon after my conversations with him. The history teacher was let go and committed suicide a year later. The music teacher, who was married, survived the ensuing "reign of terror," as one gay faculty member later called it, when many gay teachers were ousted. Kamil wrote to me that the firings of nonpredatory gay teachers grew out of "a misguided attempt to root our pedophilia by falsely equating it with homosexuality." Students spoke monstrously of and even to gay teachers because their prejudice was so obviously endorsed by the school community.

The head of the theater department, Anne MacKay, was a lesbian who quietly survived the recriminations. Twenty years after I graduated, she and I began corresponding by e-mail. I drove to the east end of Long Island to visit her a decade later when I learned she was dying. We had both been contacted by Amos Kamil, who was then researching his article, and had both been unsettled by the allegations he shared. Miss MacKay had been the wise teacher who once explained gently that I was teased because of how I walked, and tried to show me a more confident stride. She staged *The Importance of Being Earnest* my senior year so that I could have a star turn as Algernon. I had come to thank her. But she had invited me to apologize.

At a previous job, she explained, word had got around that she lived with another woman, parents had complained, and she'd gone into a kind of hiding for the rest of her career. Now she regretted the formal distance she'd sustained and felt she had failed the gay students to whom she might have been a beacon—although I knew, and she did, too, that if she'd been more open, she'd have lost her job. When I was her student, I never thought to wonder about greater intimacy than we had, but talking decades later, I realized how forlorn we'd both been. I wish we could have been the same age for a while,

because who I am at forty-eight would be a good friend for who she was when she was teaching young me. Off campus, Miss MacKay was a gay activist; now, I am, too. When I was in high school, I knew she was gay; she knew I was gay; yet each of us was imprisoned by our homosexuality in a way that made direct conversation impossible, leaving us with only kindness to give each other instead of truth. Seeing her after so many years stirred up my old loneliness, and I was reminded of how isolating an exceptional identity can be unless we resolve it into horizontal solidarity.

In the unsettling online reunion of Horace Mann alumni that followed the publication of Amos Kamil's story, one man wrote of his sadness for both the abuse victims and the perpetrators, saying of the latter, "They were wounded, confused people trying to figure out how to function in a world that taught them that their homosexual desire was sick. Schools mirror the world we live in. They can't be perfect places. Not every teacher will be an emotionally balanced person. We can condemn these teachers. But this deals with a symptom only, not the original problem, which is that an intolerant society creates self-hating people who act out inappropriately." Sexual contact between teachers and students is unacceptable because it exploits a power differential that clouds the demarcation between coercion and consent. It often causes irrecoverable trauma. It clearly did so for the students Kamil interviewed and described. Wondering how my teachers could have done this, I thought that someone whose core being is deemed a sickness and an illegality may struggle to parse the distinction between that and a much greater crime. Treating an identity as an illness invites real illness to make a braver stand.

Sexual opportunity comes often to young people, especially in New York. One of my chores was to walk our dog before bedtime, and when I was fourteen, I discovered two gay bars near our apartment: Uncle Charlie's Uptown and Camp David. I would walk Martha, our Kerry Blue terrier, on a circuit that included these two emporiums of denimed flesh, watching the guys spill out into Lexington Avenue while Martha tugged gently on the leash. One man who said his name was Dwight followed me and pulled me into a doorway. I couldn't go home with Dwight or the others because if I did, I'd be turned into someone else. I don't remember what Dwight looked like, but his name makes me wistful. When I eventually had sex with a man, at seventeen, I felt that I was severing myself forever from the normal world. I went home and boiled my clothes, then took a scalding, hour-long shower, as though my transgression could be sterilized away.

When I was nineteen, I read an ad in the back of *New York* magazine that offered surrogate therapy for people who had issues with sex. I still believed that the problem of whom I wanted was subsidiary to the problem of whom I didn't want. I knew the back of a magazine was not a good place to find treatment, but my condition was too embarrassing to reveal to anyone who knew me. Taking my savings to a walk-up office in Hell's Kitchen, I subjected myself to long conversations about my sexual anxieties, unable to admit to myself or the so-called therapist that I was actually just not interested in women. I didn't mention the busy sexual life I had by this time with men. I began "counseling" with people I

was encouraged to call "doctors," who would prescribe "exercises" with my "surrogates"—women who were not exactly prostitutes but who were also not exactly anything else. In one protocol, I had to crawl around naked on all fours pretending to be a dog while the surrogate pretended to be a cat; the metaphor of enacting intimacy between mutually averse species is more loaded than I noticed at the time. I became curiously fond of these women, one of whom, an attractive blonde from the Deep South, eventually told me that she was a necrophiliac and had taken this job after she got into trouble down at the morgue. You were supposed to keep switching girls so your ease was not limited to one sexual partner; I remember the first time a Puerto Rican woman climbed on top of me and began to bounce up and down, crying ecstatically, "You're in me! You're in me!" and how I lay there wondering with anxious boredom whether I had finally achieved the prize and become a qualified heterosexual.

Cures seldom work swiftly and completely for anything other than bacterial infections, but it can be hard to see that when social and medical realities are in rapid flux. My own recovery has been from the perception of illness. That office on Forty-Fifth Street shows up in my dreams: the necrophiliac who found my pale, sweaty form close enough to a corpse to float her boat; the mission-driven Latino woman who introduced me to her body with so much jubilation. My treatment took only two hours a week for about six months, and it gave me an ease with women's bodies that was vital to subsequent heterosexual experiences I'm glad to have had. I truly loved some of the women with whom I later had relationships, but when I was with them, I could never forget that my "cure" was a distilled manifestation of self-loathing, and I have never entirely forgiven the circumstances that disposed me to make the obscene effort. Stretching my psyche between Dwight and those catwomen made romantic love almost impossible for me during my early adulthood.

My interest in profound differences between parents and children arose from a need to investigate the locus of my regret. While I'd like to blame my parents, I have come to believe that a lot of my pain came from the larger world around me, and some of it came from me. In the heat of an argument, my mother once told me, "Someday you can go to a therapist and tell him all about how your terrible mother ruined your life. But it will be *your* ruined life you're talking about. So make a life for yourself in which you can feel happy, and in which you can love and be loved, because that's what's actually important." You can love someone but not accept him; you can accept someone but not love him. I wrongly felt the flaws in my parents' acceptance as deficits in their love. Now, I think their primary experience was of having a child who spoke a language they'd never thought of studying.

How is any parent to know whether to erase or celebrate a given characteristic? When I was born in 1963, homosexual activity was a crime; during my childhood, it was a symptom of illness. When I was two, *Time* magazine wrote, "Even in purely nonreligious terms, homosexuality represents a misuse of the sexual faculty. It is a pathetic little second-rate substitute for reality, a pitiable flight from life. As such it deserves fairness, compassion, understanding and, when possible, treatment. But it deserves no encouragement, no glamorization, no rationalization, no fake status as minority martyrdom, no sophistry about simple difference in taste—and, above all, no pretense that it is anything but a pernicious sickness."

When I was growing up, we nonetheless had close family friends who were gay—neighbors, and surrogate great-uncles to my brother and me, who spent holidays with us because their own families would not have them. I was always bewildered that Elmer had gone off to World War II halfway through medical school, fought on the Western Front, and then opened a gift shop when he came home. For years, I heard that the terrible things he saw in the war had changed him, and that he didn't have the stomach for medicine after his return. It was only after Elmer died that Willy, his partner of fifty years, explained to me that no one would have considered going to an openly gay doctor in 1945. The horrors of war had propelled Elmer into integrity, and he paid its price by spending his adulthood painting amusing bar stools and selling crockery. Elmer and Willy were a great romance in many ways, but an undertone of sadness for what might have been informed their lives. The gift shop was an apology for medicine; Christmas with us was an apology for family. I am humbled by Elmer's choice; I do not know that I would have had the courage to choose likewise, nor the discipline to keep regret from undermining my love had I done so. Though Elmer and Willy would never have seen themselves as activists, their galvanizing sorrow and that of others like them was the precondition of my happiness and that of others like me. When I understood their story more richly, I recognized that my parents' fears for me were not simply the product of overactive imaginations.

In my adulthood, being gay is an identity; the tragic narrative my parents feared for me is no longer inevitable. The happy life I now lead was unimaginable when I was asking for pink balloons and *ekmek kadayiff*—even when I was being Algernon. Yet, the trifecta view of homosexuality as a crime, an illness, and a sin remains potent. I sometimes felt that it was easier for me to ask people about their disabled children, their children conceived in rape, their children who committed crimes, than it would have been to look squarely at how many parents still respond to having children like me. Ten years ago, a *New Yorker* poll asked parents whether they would prefer to see their child gay, happily partnered, fulfilled, and with children, or straight, single or unhappily partnered, and childless. One out of three chose the latter. You cannot hate a horizontal identity much more explicitly than to wish unhappiness and likeness for your children over happiness and difference. In the United States, new anti-gay laws emerge with monotonous regularity; in December 2011, Michigan enacted the Public Employee Domestic Partner Benefit Restriction Act, which bars gay employees' partners from health-care coverage, despite allowing city and county employers to provide health-care coverage to all other family members, including uncles, nieces, and cousins. Meanwhile, in much of the larger world, the identity I inhabit remains unimaginable. In 2011, Uganda came close to passing a bill that would have made some homosexual acts punishable by death. An article in *New York* magazine about gay people in Iraq includes this information: "The bodies of gay men, often mutilated, began turning up on the street.

Hundreds of men are believed to have been killed. Gay men's rectums had been glued shut, and they had been force-fed laxatives and water until their insides exploded."

Much of the debate around sexual-orientation laws has turned on the idea that if you choose homosexuality, it should not be protected, but if you are born with it, perhaps it should. Members of minority religions are protected not because they are born that way and can't do anything about it, but because we affirm their right to discover, declare, and inhabit the faith with which they identify. Activists got homosexuality removed from the official list of mental illnesses in 1973, yet gay rights remain contingent on claims that the condition is involuntary and fixed. This cripple-like model of sexuality is depressing, but as soon as anyone posits that homosexuality is chosen or mutable, lawmakers and religious leaders try to cure and disenfranchise the gay people in their purview. Today, men and women continue to be "treated" for homosexuality at religious reform camps and in the offices of unscrupulous or misguided psychiatrists. The ex-gay movement in evangelical Christianity deranges gay people by the tens of thousands by seeking to persuade them, contrary to their experience, that desire is wholly volitional. The founder of the antihomosexual organization MassResistance has argued that gays should be made specific targets of discrimination, due to the supposedly voluntary nature of their ostensible perversion.

Those who think that a biological explanation of gayness will improve the sociopolitical position of gay people are also sadly mistaken, as the response to recent scientific findings makes clear. The sexologist Ray Blanchard has described a "fraternal birth order effect," which holds that the chance of producing gay sons goes up steadily with each male fetus a mother carries. Within weeks of publishing this data, he was called by a man who had decided against hiring a surrogate who had borne previous boys, saying to Blanchard, "That's not really what I want ... especially if I'm paying for it." The arthritis drug dexamethasone is used off-label to treat women at risk for producing daughters with a condition that partially masculinizes their genitalia. Maria New, a researcher at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York, has suggested that dexamethasone given in early pregnancy will also reduce the chances that such babies will grow up to be lesbian; indeed, she has described the treatment as making girls more interested in childbearing and homemaking, less aggressive, and more shy. It has been posited that such therapy might curb lesbianism even in the general population. In animal studies, prenatal exposure to dexamethasone seems to cause many health problems, but if any medication can actually limit lesbianism, researchers will come up with a safer one. Medical findings such as these will continue to have serious social implications. If we develop prenatal markers for homosexuality, many couples will abort their gay children; if we come up with a viable preventative drug, many parents will be willing to try it.

I would no more insist that parents who don't want gay children must have them than I would that people who don't want children at all must have them. Nonetheless, I cannot think about Blanchard's and New's research without feeling like the last quagga. I am not evangelical. I don't need to verticalize my identity onto my children, but I would hate for my horizontal identity to vanish. I would hate it for those who share my identity, and for those who lie outside it.

I hate the loss of diversity in the world, even though I sometimes get a little worn out by being that diversity. I don't wish for anyone in particular to be gay, but the idea of no one's being gay makes me miss myself already.

All people are both the objects and the perpetrators of prejudice. Our understanding of the prejudice directed against us informs our responses to others. Universalizing from the cruelties we have known, however, has its limits, and the parents of a child with a horizontal identity often fail at empathy. My mother's issues with Judaism didn't make her much better at dealing with my being gay; my being gay wouldn't have made me a good parent to a deaf child until I'd discerned the parallels between the Deaf experience and the gay one. A lesbian couple I interviewed who had a transgender child told me they approved of the murder of George Tiller, the abortion provider, because the Bible said that abortion was wrong, and yet they were astonished and frustrated at the intolerance they had encountered for their identity and their child's. We are overextended in the travails of our own situation, and making common cause with other groups is an exhausting prospect. Many gay people will react negatively to comparisons with the disabled, just as many African-Americans reject gay activists' use of the language of civil rights. But comparing people with disabilities to people who are gay implies no negativity about gayness or disability. Everyone is flawed and strange; most people are valiant, too. The reasonable corollary to the queer experience is that everyone has a defect, that everyone has an identity, and that they are often one and the same.

It's terrifying to me to think that without my mother's sustained intervention, I might never have learned fluency in letters; I am grateful every day for the sufficient resolution of my dyslexia. Conversely, while I might have had an easier life if I had been straight, I am now wedded to the idea that without my struggles, I would not be myself, and that I like being myself better than I like the idea of being someone else—someone I have neither the ability to imagine nor the option of being. Nevertheless, I have often wondered whether I could have ceased to hate my sexual orientation without Gay Pride's Technicolor fiesta, of which this writing is one manifestation. I used to think that I would be mature when I could simply be gay without emphasis. I have decided against this viewpoint, in part because there is almost nothing about which I feel neutral, but more because I perceive those years of self-loathing as a yawning void, and celebration needs to fill and overflow it. Even if I adequately address my private debt of melancholy, there is an outer world of homophobia and prejudice to repair. Someday, I hope this identity may devolve into a simple fact, free of both party hats and blame, but that's some ways off. A friend who thought Gay Pride was getting a bit carried away with itself once suggested we organize Gay Humility Week. It's a good idea, but its time has not yet come. Neutrality, which appears to lie halfway between shame and rejoicing, is in fact the endgame, reached only when activism becomes unnecessary.

It is a surprise to me to like myself; among all the elaborate possibilities I contemplated for my future, that never figured. My hard-won contentment reflects the simple truth that inner peace often hinges on outer peace. In the gnostic gospel of St. Thomas, Jesus says, "If you bring forth what is within

you, what is within you will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what is within you will destroy you." When I run up against the antigay positions of modern religious bodies, I often wish that St. Thomas's words were canonical because his message embraces many of us with horizontal identities. Keeping the homosexuality locked away within me nearly destroyed me, and bringing it forth has nearly saved me.

Although men who murder usually target people not related to them, nearly 40 percent of women who inflict death kill their own babies. Reports of human children discarded in dumpsters and the overburdened foster-care network point to the ability of human beings to detach. Oddly, this seems to have at least as much to do with the infant's appearance as with its health or character. Parents will usually take home a child with a life-threatening internal defect, but not one with a minor visible defect; at a later stage, some parents will reject even children with severe burn scars. Manifest disabilities affront parents' pride and their need for privacy; everyone can see that this child isn't what you wanted, and you must either accept the world's pity or insist on your own pride. At least half of the children available for adoption in the United States have disabilities of some kind. Half of those available for adoption, however, still constitutes only a small proportion of disabled children.

Modern love comes with more and more options. For most of history, people married only members of the opposite sex, from their own class, race, denomination, and geographical location—all increasingly disputed boundaries. Similarly, people were supposed to accept the children given to them because one could do little to choose or change them. Birth control and fertility technologies have severed the bond between sex and procreation: intercourse does not necessarily engender babies, nor is it requisite to produce them. The analysis of embryos prior to implantation and the expanding domain of prenatal testing give parents access to a wealth of information to help them decide whether to initiate, continue, or terminate a pregnancy. The choices are broadening every day. People who believe in the right to opt for healthy, normative children refer to *selective abortion*; people to whom that idea is anathema refer to *commercial eugenics,* evoking a world stripped of variety and vulnerability. A vast industry of pediatric medicine implies that responsible parents should revamp their children in various ways, and parents expect doctors to correct their children's perceived defects: to administer human growth hormone to make the short ones taller, to fix a cleft lip, to normalize ambiguous genitalia. These optimizing interventions are not exactly cosmetic, but they are not necessary for survival. They have led social theorists such as Francis Fukuyama to speak of a "post-human future" in which we will eliminate the variety within mankind.

Yet while medicine promises to normalize us, our social reality remains a miscellany. If the cliché is that modernity makes people more similar, as tribal headdresses and frock coats alike give way to T-shirts and jeans, the reality is that modernity comforts us with trivial uniformities even as it allows us to become more far-flung in our desires and our ways of realizing them. Social mobility and the Internet allow anyone to find others who share his quiddities.

No closed circle of French aristocrats or farm boys from Iowa has been tighter than these new clusters of the electronic age. As the line between illness and identity is challenged, the strength of these online supports is a vital setting for the emergence of true selves. Modern life is lonely in many ways, but the ability of everyone with access to a computer to find like-minded people has meant that no one need be excluded from social kinship. If the physical or psychic place to which you were born wants no more of you, an infinitude of locales of the spirit beckons. Vertical families are famously breaking down in divorce, but horizontal ones are proliferating. If you can figure out who you are, you can find other people who are the same. Social progress is making disabling conditions easier to live with just as medical progress is eliminating them. There is something tragic about this confluence, like those operas in which the hero realizes he loves the heroine just as she expires.

Parents willing to be interviewed are a self-selecting group; those who are bitter are less likely to tell their stories than those who have found value in their experience and want to help others in similar circumstances to do the same. No one loves without reservation, however, and everyone would be better off if we could destigmatize parental ambivalence. Freud posits that any declaration of love masks some degree of odium, any hatred at least a trace of adoration. All that children can properly require of their parents is that they tolerate their own muddled spectrum—that they neither insist on the lie of perfect happiness nor lapse into the slipshod brutality of giving up. One mother who lost a child with a serious disability worried in a letter to me that if she felt relieved, her grief was not real. There is no contradiction between loving someone and feeling burdened by that person; indeed, love tends to magnify the burden. These parents need space for their ambivalence, whether they can allow it for themselves or not. For those who love, there should be no shame in being exhausted—even in imagining another life....

In 2011, gay marriage became legal in New York State after several Republicans in the state Senate agreed to support it. One of them, Roy J. McDonald, said that he had changed his stance on gay marriage because he had two autistic grandchildren, which had caused him "to rethink several issues." Jared Spurbeck, an autistic adult, thought his own quirks were "a sign of sinfulness" when he was growing up in the Mormon faith; when he started reading about gay Mormons, he found their experience much the same as his. "I couldn't ignore the parallels between autism and homosexuality. Once I'd accepted the one, I couldn't not accept the other."

I encountered activists of every stripe while I did this research and admired them even when I occasionally found their rhetoric expedient. The changes they sought seemed, individually, restricted to their particular province and experience, but as a group, they represent a rethinking of humanity. Most parents who become activists do so because they want to spur social change, but that impulse is never unalloyed. Some find it a relief because it gets them out of the house and away from their child without their having to feel guilty about it. Some use activism to distract themselves from grief; parents often laud what they rue most about

their children to defend against despair. But just as belief can result in action, action can result in belief. You can gradually fall in love with your child, and by extension with that child's disabilities, and by further extension with all the world's brave disadvantages. Many of the activists I met were determined to help other people because they couldn't help themselves. Activism successfully displaced their pain. By teaching their learned optimism or strength to parents reeling from a recent diagnosis, they fortified it in their own families.

I understand this strategy firsthand, because writing this book addressed a sadness within me and—somewhat to my surprise—has largely cured it. The best way to get through these horizontalities is to find coherence, and in the wake of these stories, I recast my own narrative. I have a horizontal experience of being gay and a vertical one of the family that produced me, and the fact that they are not fully integrated no longer seems to undermine either. Some impulse toward anger at my parents evaporated, leaving only trace residue. In absorbing stories of strangers' clemency, I realized that I had demanded that my parents accept me but had resisted accepting them. Once I did, I was glad to have their ubiquitous company. The playwright Doug Wright once said that family inflicts the deepest wounds, then salves them the most tenderly. When I realized there was no refuge from my parents' meddling, I learned to value it over loneliness and call it love. I started my research aggrieved; I ended it forbearing. I set off to understand myself and ended up understanding my parents. Unhappiness is a constant grudging, and in these pages, happiness served as a spur to amnesty. Their love always forgave me; mine came to forgive them, too.

I know that who I was appalled my mother and concerned my father, and I used to be furious at them for not embracing this horizontal part of me, for not embracing the early evidence of it. Writing has been a lesson in absolution, because I have seen the valiance love takes. Acceptance was always easier for my father than it was for my mother, but that was not particular to me; he accepts himself more readily than she did herself. In her own mind, she always fell short; in my father's own mind, he is victorious. The interior daring of becoming myself was my mother's gift to me, while the outer audacity to express that self came from my father.

I wish I'd been accepted sooner and better. When I was younger, not being accepted made me enraged, but now, I am not inclined to dismantle my history. If you banish the dragons, you banish the heroes—and we become attached to the heroic strain in our personal history. We choose our own lives. It is not simply that we decide on the behaviors that construct our experience; when given our druthers, we elect to be ourselves. Most of us would like to be more successful or more beautiful or wealthier, and most people endure episodes of low self-esteem or even self-hatred. We despair a hundred times a day. But we retain the startling evolutionary imperative of affection for the fact of ourselves, and with that splinter of grandiosity we redeem our flaws. These parents have, by and large, chosen to love their children, and many of them have chosen to value their own lives, even though they carry what much of the world considers an intolerable burden. Children with horizontal identities alter your self painfully; they also illuminate it. They are receptacles for rage and joy—even for salvation.

When we love them, we achieve above all else the rapture of privileging what exists over what we have merely imagined.

A follower of the Dalai Lama who had been imprisoned by the Chinese for decades was asked if he had ever been afraid in jail, and he said his fear was that he would lose compassion for his captors. Parents often think that they've captured something small and vulnerable, but the parents I've profiled have been captured, locked up with their children's madness or genius or deformity, and the quest is never to lose compassion. A Buddhist scholar once explained to me that most Westerners mistakenly think that nirvana is what you arrive at when your suffering is over and only an eternity of happiness stretches ahead. But such bliss would always be shadowed by the sorrow of the past and would therefore be imperfect. Nirvana occurs when you not only look forward to rapture, but also gaze back into the times of anguish and find in them the seeds of your joy. You may not have felt that happiness at the time, but in retrospect it is incontrovertible.

For some parents of children with horizontal identities, acceptance reaches its apogee when parents conclude that while they supposed that they were pinioned by a great and catastrophic loss of hope, they were in fact falling in love with someone they didn't yet know enough to want. As such parents look back, they see how every stage of loving their child has enriched them in ways they never would have conceived, ways that are incalculably precious. Rumi said that the light enters you at the bandaged place. This book's conundrum is that most of the families described here have ended up grateful for experiences they would have done anything to avoid.

NOTES

1. Winnicott's statement is in the paper "Anxiety associated with insecurity," on page 98 of *Through Paediatrics to Psycho-analysis* (1958).
2. My investigation of Deaf culture resulted in an article, "Defiantly deaf," *New York Times Magazine,* August 29, 1994.
3. The Cochlear corporation website (http://www.cochlear.com) contains numerous instances of the word *miracle;* see also, for example, Aaron and Nechama Parnes's report from the 2007 Cochlear Celebration, "Celebrating the miracle of the cochlear implant," at http://www.hearingpocket.com/celebration1.shtml. For the other side of the story, see Paddy Ladd, *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood* (2003), page 415: "In the 1990s, genetic engineering has initiated the process of trying to identify 'the deaf gene,' thus bringing within theoretical reach what might be termed the 'final solution'—that of eradicating Deaf people altogether." Harlan Lane likened attempts to eliminate deafness to attempts to eliminate ethnic groups in Paul Davies, "Deaf culture clash," *Wall Street Journal,* April 25, 2005.
4. Studies establishing a heightened risk of abuse for children who do not resemble their fathers include Rebecca Burch and George Gallup, "Perceptions of paternal resemblance predict family violence," *Evolution & Human Behavior* 21, no. 6 (November 2000); and Hongli Li and Lei Chang, "Paternal harsh parenting in relation to paternal versus child characteristics: The moderating effect of paternal resemblance belief," *Acta Psychologica Sinica* 39, no. 3 (2007).

5. The theologian John Polkinghorne reported this interpretation in keeping with what he had learned from Dirac. From page 31 of Polkinghorne, *Science and Theology: An Introduction* (1998): "Ask a quantum entity a particle-like question and you will get a particle-like answer; ask a wave-like question and you will get a wave-like answer."
6. "All I know is what I have words for" comes from part 5.6 of Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922): "Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt." C.K. Ogden translates the sentence as "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world"; that version occurs on page 149 of Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* translated by C.K. Ogden (1922).
7. From the entry "apple" in *The Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs,* edited by Jennifer Speake (2009): "The apple never falls far from the tree: Apparently of Eastern origin, it is frequently used to assert the continuity of family characteristics. Cf. 16th cent. Ger *der Apfel fellt nicht gerne weit vom Baume.*"
8. From the opening of Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*: "Happy families are all alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." The line is the first in the book and occurs on page 5 of the following edition: Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina,* translated by Constance Garnett (2004).
9. Early development of gay children is discussed on pages 16–21 of Richard C. Friedman, *Male Homosexuality: A Contemporary Psychoanalytic Perspective* (1990).
10. For more information on gender-atypical color preference as a predictor of homosexuality, see Vanessa LoBue and Judy S. DeLoache, "Pretty in pink: The early development of gender-stereotyped colour preferences," *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 29, no. 3 (September 2011).
11. The unforgettable last line, "Wherever they go, and whatever happens to them on the way, in that enchanted place on the top of the Forest a little boy and his Bear will always be playing," occurs on pages 179–80 of A.A. Milne, *The House at Pooh Corner* (1961).
12. See Amos Kamil, "Prep-school predators: The Horace Mann School's secret history of sexual abuse," *New York Times Magazine,* June 6, 2012.
13. The quotation about "wounded, confused people" is from a Facebook post by Peter Lappin.
14. For more information on surrogate partner therapy, see the website of the International Professional Surrogates Association, http://surrogatetherapy.org/.
15. The gay-damning quotation comes from "The homosexual in America," *Time,* January 21, 1966.
16. Hendrik Hertzberg, "The Narcissus survey," *New Yorker,* January 5, 1998.
17. On December 22, 2011, Michigan governor Rick Snyder signed House Bill 4770 (now Public Act 297 of 2011), the Public Employee Domestic Partner Benefit Restriction Act. The text and legislative history of House Bill 4770 can be found on the website of the Michigan legislature, http://www.legislature.mi.gov/mileg.aspx?page=getobject&objectname=2011-HB-4770.
18. On Uganda, see Josh Kron, "Resentment toward the West bolsters Uganda's anti-gay bill," *New York Times,* February 29, 2012; and Clar Ni Chonghaile, "Uganda anti-gay bill resurrected in parliament," *Guardian,* February 8, 2012; see also, three notes down, reference to Scott Lively.

19. The description of torture and murder of gays in Iraq comes from Matt McAllester, "The hunted," *New York,* October 4, 2009.
20. The *This American Life* episode "81 Words" at (http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/204/81-Words) is an absorbing account of the removal of homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders;* see also Ronald Bayer, *Homosexuality and American Psychiatry: The Politics of Diagnosis* (1981).
21. The passage references Scott Lively, *Redeeming the Rainbow: A Christian Response to the "Gay" Agenda* (2009). Scott Lively has recently been sued by a Ugandan gay rights group, who have accused him of fomenting persecution of gays in their country; see Laurie Goodstein, "Ugandan gay rights group sues U.S. evangelist," *New York Times,* March 14, 2012.
22. The response of the surrogate-shopper to Ray Blanchard appears in "Fraternal birth order and the maternal immune hypothesis of male homosexuality," *Hormones & Behavior* 40, no. 2 (September 2001), and is described in Alice Domurat Dreger, "Womb gay," *Hastings Center Bioethics Forum,* December 4, 2008.
23. The debate over Maria Iandolo New's administration of dexamethasone to expectant mothers is chronicled in Shari Roan, "Medical treatment carries possible side effect of limiting homosexuality," *Los Angeles Times,* August 15, 2010.
24. For an example of African-American objections to the language of civil rights being used by gay people, see this statement by North Carolina minister Rev. Patrick Wooden, quoted in David Kaufman, "Tensions between black and gay groups rise anew in advance of anti-gay marriage vote in N.C.," *Atlantic,* May 4, 2012: "African-Americans are appalled that their Civil Rights movement has been co-opted by the so-called Civil Rights movement of the homosexuals. It is an insult, it is angering when LGBT groups say there is no difference between being black and being homosexual."
25. "If you bring forth what is within you ..." is Saying 70 in Elaine H. Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (2003), page 53.
26. Maternal infanticide statistics occur on page 42 of James Alan Fox and Marianne W. Zawitz, "Homicide trends in the United States" (2007), in the chart "Homicide Type by Gender, 1976–2005." See also Steven Pinker, "Why they kill their newborns," *New York Times,* November 2, 1997.
27. Parental rejection of visibly disabled children is discussed on pages 152–54 of Meira Weiss, *Conditional Love: Parents' Attitudes Toward Handicapped Children* (1994). For a dated, albeit useful, review of literature on familial adjustment to severe burn scars in children, see Dale W. Wisley, Frank T. Masur, and Sam B. Morgan, "Psychological aspects of severe burn injuries in children," *Health Psychology* 2, no. 1 (Winter 1983).
28. A recent study from the CDC found that the majority of adopted children have significant health problems and disabilities. The report was put together by Matthew D. Bramlett, Laura F. Radel. and Stephen J. Blumberg and published as "The health and well-being of adopted children," *Pediatrics* 119, suppl. 1 (February 1, 2007).
29. The first occurrence of the term *commercial eugenics* appears to occur in M. MacNaughton, "Ethics and reproduction," *American Journal of Obstetrics & Gynecology* 162, no. 4 (April 1990).
30. Personal communication with Doug Wright.

31. See Ann Whitcher-Gentzke, "Dalai Lama brings message of compassion to UB," *UB Reporter,* September 21, 2006.
32. This Western naïveté about nirvana was explained to me by Robert Thurman in 2006.
33. Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (Maulana), *The Essential Rumi* (1995), page 142: "Don't turn away. Keep your gaze on the bandaged place. That's where the light enters you."

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QUESTIONS FOR MAKING CONNECTIONS WITHIN THE READING

1. "Son" explores two different kinds of identity—vertical identities like the ones that connect us to the members of our families, and the horizontal identities we form on the basis of characteristics we share with our contemporaries. Why do the two so often seem to conflict, and how do they conflict in Solomon's own life? What solutions does he find? As you re-read, pay particular attention to what Solomon observes about illness and identity. Can we apply to identities his analogy to the physics principle known as the Copenhagen interpretation, which holds that energy can be described as either a particle or a wave but not both at once? Must we choose between our vertical and horizontal identities, or can they somehow be combined? Do all identities actually include vertical and horizontal elements?
2. "Parenthood," Solomon writes, "abruptly catapults us into a permanent relationship with a stranger, and the more alien the stranger, the stronger the whiff of negativity." What role does negativity play in Solomon's development, and what role does it often play in cross-generational encounters? How does Solomon account for the pervasiveness of negativity? In what ways was he disapproved of by his family, his friends, and his fellow students? Did Solomon disapprove of himself? Can negativity ultimately lead to a deeper understanding of others and our own nature? Can you identify distinct stages in the journey from negativity to acceptance?
3. Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina* famously begins with the declaration, "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." But Solomon declares his position to be anti-Tolstoyan. Why? What reasoning does he supply in defense of the conclusion that happy families will embrace their differences, whereas unhappy families insist on a single, definitive identity? If families are not defined by one basic identity, are they really families at all? Does "Son" offer an implicit argument for seeing families in a different light?

QUESTIONS FOR WRITING

1. Do we have a right to our identities, and, conversely, does society have a right to limit the ways we choose to define ourselves? Does Solomon's thinking imply that we have no obligations to society, to the past, or to tradition? How would you respond to the claim that he had made an argument for the principle that "Anything goes"—for the idea that any way of life is permitted and should be acceptable? Does "Son" elevate the author's personal desires above the good of the whole society, or is Solomon's celebration of differences a profoundly ethical stance? What role does understanding play in the encounter with differences? Is Solomon arguing for tolerance, or something deeper?
2. A key insight of "Son" has to do with the possibilities for freedom and fulfillment in an unsupportive or even hostile world. "My hard-won contentment," Solomon writes, "reflects the simple truth that inner peace often hinges on outer peace." Even though we might prefer to think that we hold the key to our own happiness, to what degree do we actually depend on the support of our whole society? If our happiness depends on supportive conditions, what might be the social or political implications? In order to make the world a better place, do we have a responsibility to bring our personal search for happiness into public view? Can inner peace survive without the proper outer conditions?

QUESTIONS FOR MAKING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN READINGS

1. How might Solomon respond to Susan Faludi's "The Naked Citadel"? Think about The Citadel in terms of the potential conflicts between vertical

and horizontal identities. Would it be accurate to say that The Citadel only tolerates identities of a vertical kind, and if so, what effects follow from such systematic repression? Does the culture of The Citadel drive horizontal identities underground? Why haven't the cadets undergone the same learning process that Solomon experienced in his life? Given the conspicuous failure of most cadets to change or evolve, how might Faludi's narrative complicate Solomon's thinking? Can a way of life grow so rigid that transformation becomes impossible?

2. Solomon's family appears to be an extremely healthy and supportive one, despite his mother's reluctance to embrace her son's gay identity. But in what ways might the experience of trauma, as described by Martha Stout in her discussions of Julia and Seth, have made Solomon's insights far more difficult to achieve—perhaps even unattainable? In your discussion you might take note of the way that repetition weakens our capacity for change:

> Deepening the mire of our divided awareness, in the course of a lifetime ... "protective" mental reactions acquire tremendous *habit strength*. These over-exercised muscles can take us away even when traumatic memory fragments have not been evoked. Sometimes dissociation can occur when we are simply confused or frustrated or nervous.

Does Stout's argument suggest that Solomon is overly sanguine about the prospects for personal and social change? Does his narrative suggest that Stout is too pessimistic? Or does Stout's narrative confirm Solomon's claim that "inner peace" requires a conducive environment?