

Putting a Marriage Culture Back Together Again, “Piece By Piece”

by Amber Lapp | @AmberDavidLapp | March 2, 2016 8:00 am

On *American Idol* Thursday night, Kelly Clarkson took the stage to perform an emotional version of her hit single, “Piece by Piece,”^[1] which tells the story of her parents’ divorce when she was six and the pain of not being wanted by her father—as well as describing how her husband has since “filled the holes” that her father “burned in [her] at six years old.”

Of her husband, Clarkson sings,

Piece by piece, he restored my faith
That a man can be kind and a father could stay.

The performance captivated the audience, leaving *Idol* judge and country singer Keith Urban and host Ryan Seacrest in tears. At times Clarkson, too, struggled to get through the song, choking back emotion and turning her face from the microphone to regain composure—which only added to the power of the performance. The next day the single jumped to No. 1 on iTunes.

In Clarkson’s story, I saw reflected the stories of many of the young adults my husband David and I interviewed in small-town Ohio. Over and over again we heard them describe the pain of family fragmentation, and their own resolve to do things differently for their children.

As Anthony, age 26, said of his parents’ divorce, “I just remember the break-up. I remember my mom crying. It’s just something that a child shouldn’t have to go through. It happens all the time [so] it’s almost accepted, which is so wrong. But it’s just like, man...I just don’t want that. I wanna have a good home. I wanna have a good wife.”

Though he is not a father yet, he knows what he wants for his future children:

I don’t want my child being in a broken home. And then, I don’t wanna have baby mama drama. And at the same time, I wanna be a better father than mine was to me. I got a lot to prove, you know, when I can be a father one day and realize that I did what he couldn’t do for me. And then see my son, daughter have what I didn’t have—I mean, that’s gonna make me a better person, and happy. To say “hey, I did it.”

Twenty-year-old Elliot explains how he and his girlfriend feel about parenting their infant son: “I seen [my father’s] mistakes growin’ up and I won’t make those mistakes. I know what it does to people. My girlfriend grew up watchin’ the same thing. We’re out to make a good life for our kid.”

Nicole and her boyfriend got pregnant shortly out of high school, but got married in their early twenties and recently celebrated their fifteenth anniversary. “I think my home life as a kid made me more driven to be like, ‘I’m not gonna have a broken home. I’m not gonna separate and [have] my baby not know her dad the way I didn’t know my dad for so many years.’”

In our interviews, sentiments like these were so common it became overwhelming, and they were often expressed with tears and fierce determination.

“Because my mom and my real father are divorced and my father, he wasn’t around when I was growing up, and I feel like I have to be there for my kid. So that’s why I want to make his life great. I want him to have me there for everything.”

“My [parents’ divorce] made me kind of think of what I would want in life.”

“That’s one good thing I can say that came out of me not havin’ a father. That makes me a better father because I know how it feels to not have a dad. That’s the only thing good that comes out of that.”

Clarkson—who wrote “Piece by Piece” when she was pregnant with her daughter, River Rose—captures the emotion, resolve, and hope of these young adults in the last lines of the song:

Piece by piece I fell far from the tree.
I will never leave her like you left me
And she will never have to wonder her worth
Because unlike you I’m going to put her first and you know
He’ll never walk away,
He’ll never break her heart
He’ll take care of things, he’ll love her.
Piece by piece, he restored my faith
That a man can be kind and a father should be great.

In an interview with *Glamour*[2] last year, Clarkson explained, “It’s a positive song, even though I know it sounds sad. I don’t know what my father went through as a child, and I don’t know why he left and made the decisions he made, but everyone’s human. I don’t understand it for me, but I understand the depth of what that is—having a child—now, and he’s made me want to be that much more present in my family.”

In an interview with CBS’s Gayle King, Clarkson added, “My husband came into my life and he was the complete opposite of how my father was. He was present. He wins for being around.”

One thing that is sometimes overlooked in discussions about high divorce rates, the growing number of children born outside of marriage, and the fragility of nonmarital unions is that many young adults do not approve of these trends, even as they contribute to them. They deeply desire stability for their children, and want to keep their families together so that their children can know and be raised by *both* parents.

These aspirations, born of profound experiences of personal suffering, could catalyze new trends towards more stable marriages and families. As 27-year-old Mike, whose parents divorced when he was young and who was abused by his stepmother, put it, “I think the up-and-coming generation—I’m really positive about. Because they’ve seen all the—they’ve walked through all this shit. Like they lived it and they want a change. So this is the generation that came out of all this divorce. Well, a lot of us are. I think it’s just going to be good. I’m positive about it, honestly.”

But sadly, despite these good intentions and high hopes, young adults too often find themselves falling short of their own expectations. In my next piece[3] I’ll examine why the same young adults that have vowed to keep their families together often find them falling apart. And I’ll explore[4] some things that they suggest

could be done to—piece by piece—put back together a culture that supports the kind of stability that they so deeply want to give to their children.

Endnotes:

1. emotional version of her hit single, "Piece by Piece,": <http://www.ew.com/article/2016/02/26/american-idol-kelly-clarkson-piece-by-piece>
2. interview with Glamour: <http://www.glamour.com/entertainment/blogs/obsessed/2015/03/kelly-clarkson-piece-by-piece>
3. my next piece: <http://family-studies.org/want-a-stable-family-someday-date-intentionally/>
4. explore: <http://family-studies.org/want-a-stable-family-someday-date-intentionally/>

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