

FIRST THINGS

ALONE IN THE NEW AMERICA

SOLIDARITY IS THE REMEDY FOR THE ALIENATION OF YOUNG WORKING PEOPLE.

by
David and Amber Lapp

February 2014

We were surprised to meet Anthony there: a twenty-six-year-old white man in an argyle sweater vest, white dress shirt, tie, baggy plaid pants, and sneakers, at the old Methodist church in Maytown, Ohio, whose white steeple rises behind the trees in our backyard. The elderly Methodist membership had dwindled, and the church was now a charismatic congregation led by a Guatemalan pastor. That Sunday there were fifty folding chairs, all empty except for six, the occupants of which included the sound lady, the pastor's wife, and the pastor's mother. After the service, Anthony leaned against his car, smoking a cigarette, his three earrings and star and dove tattoos bold in the sunlight. When he found out we had moved from New York City, his blue eyes widened and his voice became animated. "Wow, that's awesome! Man, I wanna go there sometime." He was considering moving to Florida, he said, for a new start. His fiancée had recently broken their engagement.

He had a story to tell, and he seemed eager to share it. We were in Maytown to interview young adults about their experiences forming relationships and families. So we set up a time to talk with Anthony at his parents' ranch home, where he was living.

Tucked in a valley, Maytown's historic center is home to white working-class residents in ranch and folk Victorian homes. Many of the aging residents, post-World War II transplants from Appalachia, are retirees from union jobs at Ford or General Electric plants and are now celebrating fiftieth wedding anniversaries. Their children and grandchildren, however, are increasingly alienated from work and marriage. Many live together and have children without being married. "Marriage ruins relationships" is a

common observation. Many are under- or unemployed.

Across the railroad tracks, over the river, and up on a hill are new homes built during the housing boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Many of the residents on the hill are transplants, too, although quite unlike the coal miners and farmers who came for factory jobs. These are educated professionals: executives, businessmen, doctors, lawyers, engineers, and professors. Though many of them live within the borders of Maytown, they identify less with Maytown than with their subdivisions, like Highland Estates, known for its million-dollar homes and premier golf club. Most of the folks on the hill are married with children. Their children graduate from institutions like Ohio State University and fall in line with what they see as the norm: going to college, getting married, having kids.

Though the hill and the valley share a post office, they rarely interact. In the valley, where we live, residents sometimes refer to the people on the hill as “stuck up.” Often residents on the hill look concerned when they find out where we live. “What’s it like living *down there*?” asked a mother of three in Highland Estates.

Down here, we met Anthony. Like many of Maytown’s working-class adults, Anthony’s parents are divorced. He has few memories of his biological father, a self-employed mechanic. One of his most vivid is of walking into his parents’ bedroom to discover his dad sleeping with another woman. “Everything was happy; then that happened,” he says. He remembers the day that his dad, “super drunk,” packed all his mom’s clothes into trash bags and hurled them onto the front lawn. When Anthony’s grandfather showed up, his dad pulled out his shotgun and screamed profanities. Anthony, ten, watched from his bedroom window.

At twenty-three, he met Tricia, nineteen. Three months later they moved in together, and he found work as a cook at the nursing home where she was a nurse’s aide. Four days into the job, his boss raised his wage from \$9.25 an hour to \$13 an hour. He also promised that the business would help pay for a culinary school education. As Anthony put it, they were offering him a career, not just a job.

But he was getting drunk almost every day, even clocking into work hungover. One day, he quit. “We were all getting our paychecks, and I was probably one of the younger guys that worked there,” he remembers. “I looked around the room and just nobody was happy, and it’s like they were just robots. They just come to work and just cope. I just thought about that and doing that for eighteen years.” The thought was too depressing.

Tricia was waiting for Anthony to buy a ring, but his unemployment and drunkenness eroded her trust. Anthony caught her getting into a Camaro with a guy he suspected she was sleeping with. He packed Tricia’s clothes into trash bags and demanded she leave. Then she cried, they reconciled, and he proposed. But his depression deepened, and her friendship with the guy in the Camaro intensified. They ended the engagement.

After Tricia left, Anthony became a server at Buffalo Wild Wings, where fellow employees also liked to party. Then he went to work at Steak ’n Shake, where he made minimum wage at part-time hours. “I feel like I had no value there,” he says. “They were just super busy, and it’s like the work that you do then and the pay that you get, it was just like, to me, that just wasn’t worth the headache.” So back to unemployment, then to Kohl’s for \$8.75 an hour as a sales associate. “I just go there and do my job and leave,” he says.

Scholars like W. Bradford Wilcox and Charles Murray have documented how Anthony’s is an increasingly common story in working-class America. The college-educated cluster into pristine subdivisions, work just as much as ever, get married, and sustain intact families. But working-class families, who in the not-so-distant past enjoyed a strong marriage culture and steady work, are fragile. In *Coming Apart*, Murray finds that in only about 65 percent of working-class households (limited to persons ages thirty to forty-nine) does someone work at least forty hours a week and that only 48 percent of working-class adults ages thirty to forty-nine are married. And in the 2013 report *Knot Yet*, a team of researchers including Wilcox found that 58 percent of high school-educated women bear their first child outside marriage.

Young men like Anthony have it especially rough. Sociologist Julie Phillips has documented how from 2000 to 2005, suicide rates among less-educated middle-aged men increased between 12 percent and 30 percent even as they remained stable for better-educated men. Anthony has thought about suicide in his lowest moments. “I just felt so alone.”

While working-class young adults “struggle with similar, and structurally rooted, problems, there is no sense of ‘we,’” reports Jennifer M. Silva, author of *Coming Up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty*. The people she interviewed face problems that are bigger than any one person: unemployment, lingering racism, and a lack of the social capital necessary to navigate higher education and the knowledge economy. But instead of seeking help, they reject solidarity and embrace a go-it-alone ethic. They say things like “No one else is going to fix me but me,” and “I’m like a rock. I like to figure things out for myself, so I really don’t go looking for help.”

The problem, Silva finds, is that most working-class young adults have difficulty trusting people and institutions. And why should they trust? She notes the bewilderment and betrayal that they experience, particularly in education and work. They try to navigate the complex and risky path to college, only to find themselves working low-wage service jobs in distant hope of paying off their debt.

Brandon, the son of maintenance workers, accumulated \$80,000 in debt to earn a criminal-justice degree. Everyone always told him that college is the path to “the land of milk and honey,” he told Silva. But eleven years later, he only has a retail job to show for it. “I feel like I was sold fake goods.” Others describe falling for real-estate scams, accumulating forbidding amounts of credit-card debt, and rushing from first part-time job to second part-time job only to land in the hospital, uninsured and facing a \$5,000 bill.

A big part of the story is the failure of institutions. After high school, Tori, a single mother we met in Maytown, enrolled in a for-profit college to study massage therapy. When she took the state test to receive her license, she found that her classes had not covered most of the required material. She failed the test five times, and she wasn’t the only one: Her class had a 2 percent pass rate. (The school later

closed and now faces a class-action lawsuit.) She took out about \$15,000 in loans, now about \$20,000 with interest. “It’s like a 9.5 interest rate, maybe higher,” she sighs.

Without any license or degree to show for her “investment,” she has struggled to find well-paying work. After about a year of looking, she became a home health care aide. She describes her work as rewarding, though she is unhappy with the \$8-an-hour pay (\$6.25 an hour for the overnight shift) for what are sometimes sixteen-hour shifts. For a time, to supplement her income, she also worked at the YMCA. Her schedule was brutal. When she woke up on Tuesday morning, she wouldn’t sleep again or see her toddler son until Thursday. She quit the Y when he started acting out.

The last time we talked with her, the home health care agency hadn’t given her work since her last client died two months ago. She was planning to attend classes at the local career center to become a nurse’s assistant. “I wasn’t fired, but I didn’t quit,” she says about her job. “I’ve just not worked for two months.” She did what society tells young adults to do: Further your schooling, work hard. But at twenty-three, she has \$20,000 of debt and no job to show for it.

Weighing heavily on young adults is the feeling of bewilderment and betrayal from their experiences growing up in unstable and fragmented families, as well as the betrayal in their own romantic relationships. When Tori was three, her parents divorced. Her mom married again, this time to a man who went on to have an affair with their married neighbor, the mother of Tori’s best friend. “I saw through him when I was little,” Tori says. “All kids do.” When describing her relationship with her biological father, she is dismissive. “He has talked to me three times in three years—doesn’t hurt my feelings.”

Tori is determined to give her son the loving and involved father she never had. “I’ve just seen kids grow up without their dads, and the chances of Aidan not being a troublemaker when he’s older without having his dad in his life are slim to none,” she says. “I don’t want him to be the one that grows up and then on that day where it’s daddy’s day or whatever that Aidan doesn’t have somebody to go in with.”

But Tori has a rocky relationship with Aidan's father, Aaron. They were living together for about three years before he left her for an eighteen-year-old. "There are very few genuinely good guys left," she said, "and they're not around here." Still, she held out hope that he would come back—or at least remain devoted to Aidan, whom Tori worries about. "He'll wake up in the middle of the night and cry for [his dad], he'll cry himself to sleep for him, or he'll want to call him and he won't answer so he cries. He just doesn't have that male role model in his life, and it is taking its toll on him. He's very angry all the time."

Angry is also how Anthony felt about his parents' divorce. In trying to make sense of how he lost his twenties, Anthony takes responsibility, saying that he should have pursued education and partied less. But he also thinks that he was set back by his parents' divorce. "[I've] seen other people that I've known that their parents have always been together throughout life, and I feel like I've always been like so 'Man, I wish I had that.'"

He doesn't want to make the mistakes his parents made. "I don't want [my kids] to have to go through a lot of things that I went through. Because I don't think it's fair, for one, because it's hard. You gotta grow up really quick. It's not always the best thing, because you get into sex, you get into drugs. I feel like a lot of people that have [had parents that stay together]—they're more into sports, into education, you know, they're more into those things. Where we were just like, 'Screw it.'"

It's not that the kids from intact families are "better" than others, says Anthony. "It's just because they have a better upbringing." But for the person who grows up in a fragmented family, "it's going to take a really strong person to break out of that—especially if you're in a bad area, and you're poor."

Silva acknowledges that many of her interviewees kept returning to their family pasts to make sense of their struggles to become established adults, but this perplexes her. Unable to accept their interpretations, Silva reasons that as young adults encounter poverty and economic hardship, the family past becomes "hypersymbolized." Silva believes that deindustrialization and the "neoliberal" ideology of rugged individualism create and reinforce structural inequalities that keep young people from gaining

steady, well-paying jobs and thus from getting and staying married. Until young adults see these social forces and resulting inequalities and take collective political action, she says, they will find themselves “perpetually coming up short.” Instead of focusing on their family pasts, she suggests, they should look to Occupy Wall Street, or lobby for a living wage.

The loss of well-paying factory jobs and the weakening of solidarity matter a great deal. But it is impossible to understand the crisis of trust among working-class young adults without considering the loss of stable family structures. It’s not just deindustrialization but easy divorce and transformed sexual mores that have changed Maytown. It is imperative to see that many working-class young adults are on the brink of alienation from work *and* marriage. (Alienation from religion also should be taken into account.)

When we last spoke with Tori, she had moved back in with Aaron. Asked about what she wants for her future, she replied tentatively, “*Hopefully* to have one or two more kids and *hopefully* get married and just raise our family.” However, she added that at this point she’s willing to forgo marriage and settle for just having another kid, if Aaron holds out.

And Anthony? He said he wanted to get married and “be a better father than mine was to me.” “I got a lot to prove,” he said. “When I can be a father one day and realize that I did what he couldn’t do for me . . . that’s gonna make me a better person, and happy. To say, ‘Hey, I did it.’” But two years later, and three years after his breakup with Tricia, he is not so sure. “I don’t know,” he said, when asked if he wanted to get married someday.

Working-class culture suffers from alienation. As Silva reports, they “learn to approach others with suspicion and distrust.” One person she interviewed said he doesn’t pick up his phone because “I have this problem of being tricked.” In our Maytown interviews, we found that despite their similar stories of suffering and aspiration, these young adults think of themselves as strangers to each other in their struggle to overcome the legacy of family fragmentation and the other challenges of their lives.

John Paul II often focused on the theme of alienation. Its tragedy, he said, is that persons do not “fulfill themselves in community” and are “unable to develop appropriately in the direction of an authentic *we*.” And if they cannot form an authentic *we*—whether in marriage or in other associations—they cannot “find themselves as subjects,” and “social life goes on as though beyond them.” When we are alienated, “the ‘neighbor’ also disappears and all that remains is the ‘other,’ or even a ‘stranger’ or an outright ‘enemy.’”

“I don’t think there’s a thing we can do about it,” said Anthony. “And that’s kind of the American way—this is a free country, and free this and free that. But it’s your life, and not too many people care about other people’s lives. As long as it’s not theirs, they don’t care.”

What indeed can we do? We find ourselves hoping along with Anthony: “I don’t want [my kids] to have to go through a lot of things that I went through.” But this is the generation so afraid of divorce that it is also afraid of marriage. And it becomes apparent that these young adults need opportunities for communion: to share their stories in supportive communities, to name and to share their suffering, and to receive healing. The remedy for their alienation is the experience of solidarity, of being with others, of forging ties.

From the early Church to St. Vincent de Paul to Dorothy Day, Christians have always responded to poverty and class divisions with a deeply personal encounter. This personal encounter is what Pope Francis proposes in his recent challenges to go out to “every street corner,” to the margins of society. He calls for “small daily acts of solidarity” and advocates “the art of accompaniment.”

When thinking about where to buy a house, a couple might ask, “Where is the part of town in which children and young adults are least likely to encounter a loving married couple? Could we move there?” Long-married couples—the envy of many young adults we interviewed—can befriend a young couple (dating, cohabiting, or married) who have little experience with stable marriage. Employers can honor the commandment to honor the Sabbath in the workplace as well as offer their adult employees a living wage.

(Papal encyclicals since 1891 have insisted upon both.)

Foundations could partner with a church or nonprofit to subsidize “solidarity organizers,” who would live in working-class neighborhoods and perhaps even take working-class jobs. They would help couples in their communities share stories, identify problems, consult with peers, and decide on initiatives. They could also help to organize the worker associations that John Paul II described as essential, “not only in negotiating contracts, but also as ‘places’ where workers can express themselves.”

On the margins in America are working-class young adults like Anthony, wandering into old Methodist-turned-charismatic churches, drifting but searching. The only way to reverse the cycle of family fragmentation and mistrust, the only way to overcome the alienating sense of the purposelessness of a great deal of menial work, is to acknowledge and enter into each other’s sufferings. Being close to a loving marriage and people with a joyful commitment to work will help young adults like Anthony regain confidence in marriage and a sense of the dignity of labor.

And being close to young adults from unstable families and in unstable jobs can help the rest of us move from condemnation and cynicism to solidarity. There’s no substitute for the service of being a good neighbor.

David and Amber Lapp are research fellows at the Institute for Family Studies and affiliate scholars at the Institute for American Values. They are writing a book tentatively titled *Love Like Crazy: Looking for Marriage in Middle America*. The names of locations and people have been changed.