

Why millennials need more 'Frozen' love: Column

Amber Lapp 1:58 p.m. EST February 17, 2015

What Disney's animated hit can teach fearful young people about relationships.



(Photo: Uncredited, AP)

A few weeks ago I spent a day sick in bed, drinking green tea with spoonfuls of honey and spritzes of lemon by the mug-full, and trying to rest while my three-year-old jumped on the bed and occasionally on top of me, too. That's when I decided to put in the Disney movie that everyone has been talking about for the last year — we've been invited to Frozen movie nights in the park and brought Frozen dolls as gifts to Frozen-themed birthday parties — but I had yet to see it. So my son and I snuggled up to watch the highest-grossing animated film (<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/box-office-milestone-frozen-becomes-692156>) of all time.

I was riveted. Not only because of the animation and music, but because of the way this movie tells a story similar to the one that my husband and I heard while interviewing young adults for the Love and Marriage in

Middle America Project (<http://ifstudies.org/about/>). No wonder all the young moms (and dads) I know love Frozen: it tells the story they've lived when it comes to love.

Granted, none of our interviewees mentioned trolls or snow queens or talking snowmen — but the experiences and behaviors of the movie's two female protagonists, princess sisters Anna and Elsa, do reflect those of the young adults we interviewed in an important way.

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In the movie, Anna and Elsa both must respond to the trauma of their parents' death alone: they are isolated within the castle walls and separated from each other. But their responses to this trauma couldn't be more different.

Anna is desperate for love, and when the castle gates are opened for her sister's coronation, Anna is out in the world, wide-eyed and open, needy but full of optimistic energy, and quick to fall in love with the first man that sweeps her off her feet. (Actually, the first man that accidentally runs into her with his horse and falls on top of her into a canoe in a serendipitous romantic encounter, but you get the picture.) Within hours of meeting, she and Prince Hans are singing catchy love songs (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-7M4azCAI8>) with lyrics like, "I've been searching my whole life to find my own place... But with you I've got my place... Say goodbye to the pain of the past, we don't have to feel it anymore!" And by the end of the night Prince Hans asks if he can "Say something crazy" and proposes — and Anna "says something crazier" and accepts.

Elsa, on the other hand, is ice-cold and distant. "Don't let them in, don't let them see (<http://www.metrolyrics.com/disneys-frozen-let-it-go-lyrics-idina-menzel.html>)... Conceal, don't feel, don't let them know." She tells her sister, "You can't marry a man you just met," and then, tired of concealing her magical powers from others and terrified that she will use them to hurt someone, she retreats to a faraway mountain to live alone in an ice palace.

These opposite reactions to the same circumstances reflect what we've seen in our research with young adults, particularly working-class young adults. In our interviews we noticed two popular responses to traumatic or unstable situations like family fragmentation, dysfunction, abuse and serial relationships.

On the one hand, there is what we came to call the "Love like crazy" phenomenon. For many young adults, the search for love doesn't seem hindered by past pain, but rather, it takes on a new fervor, a heightened meaning because of it. Under these circumstances, it becomes a crazy love. The ultimate goal is stability, but it's a love constantly in motion.

We were initially shocked by the fast-paced and chaotic nature of romantic relationships among working-class young adults: sex the first time you meet, sliding into cohabitation within the first few days or weeks of a relationship and having babies not long after that. Some young adults were even quick to get engaged (usually without a ring and with no immediate plans for a wedding), but they were also quick to break those engagements. It was not uncommon to meet someone with multiple broken engagements.

On the other hand, there is the response that ranges from caution to cynicism. Many young people describe feeling anxiety about loving another person, building emotional walls to protect themselves and the importance of getting their own lives in order before getting into a serious relationship with another person.

It seems paradoxical that a generation could be simultaneously desperate for love and rushing into intimate relationships, and cautious and even cynical — but that is the trend we have observed. Among the very same young adults there is a strong desire for marriage and also a fear and ambivalence towards it. Among the same young adults there is a willingness to move fast in relationships when it comes to having sex, living together and having children, and yet a tendency to move very slowly when it comes to letting one's guard down in order to really love and be loved. (One single mom I know [recently blogged about this at the website \(http://www.ibelieveinlove.com/2015/01/30/what-i-know-now-from-facebook-fomo-to-fearlessly-open-to-love/\)](http://www.ibelieveinlove.com/2015/01/30/what-i-know-now-from-facebook-fomo-to-fearlessly-open-to-love/) "I Believe in Love").

Fictional Anna and Elsa represent these real-life responses — only in real life, Anna and Elsa are one and the same, one person with a deep conflict, not unlike the "[swirling storm inside \(http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/idinamenzel/letitgo.html\)](http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/idinamenzel/letitgo.html)" that Elsa sings about.

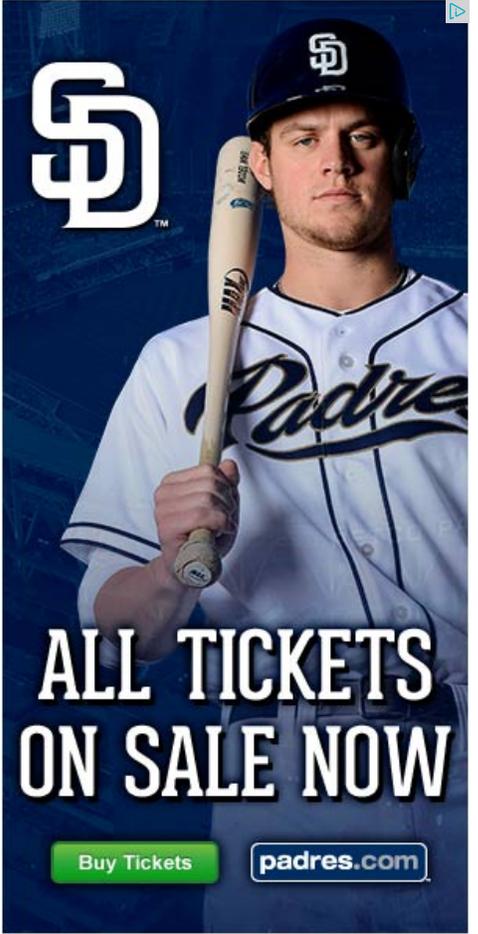
The open question is how the conflict between loving like crazy and taking it slow will be resolved. When the fast-paced love-at-first-sight narrative leads to heartbreak (as it does for Anna when Prince Hans leaves her to die so that he can have the crown), will it result in deepening cynicism about love — or a more mature understanding that love is more than emotion? When cynicism triumphs and ushers in loneliness (as it does for Elsa in her castle of ice), will it lead to further alienation or the recognition that fear is no substitute for love?

Another (welcome) possibility is that precisely because of their broken experiences, millennials will come to practice the wisdom expressed by Frozen's comic snowman Olaf: "[Love is putting someone else's needs before yours \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buDE-aj75Zk\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buDE-aj75Zk)."

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