

Why I Believe in Love

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Since I was a young girl, I always thought I would have married right after college graduation. I grew up in the Midwest, so the bulk of my friends were married by age twenty-five or so. Being in our late twenties now, most of them are welcoming baby #2 or baby #3 into their families. Of course, I celebrated with joy every wedding and every baby. I've genuinely enjoyed watching my friends' transition into the roles of wife or husband and mom or dad. But I'd be lying if I didn't admit that I struggled (and still do at times) with feeling left out, out of place, and sad that it hasn't been "my turn" yet.

Now, I don't say all this to sound dramatic or have you to feel sorry for me. I say this because these are natural feelings and I know that a lot of my peers can identify with or share some of them.

The title of this article is "Why I Believe in Love." But it's not about my personal beliefs about love, or my dating saga this far. This article is about motivating young adults to share our stories about love, dating, marriage, and family for the purposes of helping others—and I thought it's only fair that I share a little of my story to kick this conversation off.

I Believe in Love (www.ibelieveinlove.com) is a website I co-founded and help run. It's for young adults and written by young adults who are pursuing lasting love, marriage, and family life. It's comprised of stories about love, dating, sex, marriage, and parenting. Our tag line is Real People, Real Stories, Real Love. We want young adults particularly to read and participate in our site and know two things: 1) You are not alone 2) Don't give up! Lasting love, marriage, and family life are possible.

Our target audience is any young adult of course, but we have a particular interest in reaching the young adults in the lower income middle class. The lower income middle class or sometimes identified as the working class are individuals who have graduated high school and may have some college experience, but more typically haven't completed a four year degree. They most commonly work in positions in the service industry, factories, construction, or other more technical positions. According to data from the National Center for Education, in 2012 33.5 percent of American's ages 25-29 had a bachelor's degree. This is a record high, and millennials are on track to be the most college educated generation, but the majority of Americans still fit into this lower income middle class definition.

Because statistics can seem vague, I want to put some faces on this demographic by introducing you to some of our writers at *I Believe in Love*.

Brittany is a single mom in her mid 20s. She has two kids from two different dads. Her parents married and divorced multiple times. She has been working in waitressing jobs or forced to be unemployed due to inconsistent babysitters. Brittany lived with the father of her second child for a few years, until a very serious physical action made her see that he could

not be trusted, especially around her children. Brittany would really like to get married and give her children a more stable home environment; she'd also like to date someone who thinks like she does—that a relationship is more than just sex.

Tyler is in his early 20s. He is engaged to the mother of his daughter, who was conceived while they were dating. Tyler grew up never really knowing his dad—he was raised by his mom and grandmother. Tyler was a drug addict until he started dating his fiancé Jazmin. Jazmin told him early in the relationship “it’s me or the drugs” Tyler told me. So he cleaned up, because he said there was nothing he wanted more than Jazmin. Jazmin works as a cashier at the local grocery store. Tyler is in and out of work at various jobs in the service industry. From the moment he learned he was going to be a father, he was dedicated to his child and Jazmin. When I met Tyler, Jazmin was newly pregnant, and he had downloaded an app that showed him what his woman was going through and a practical tip that he as the father could do to help the mother—rub her back, help her tie her shoes, etc. He was excited to give of himself to both his girlfriend and baby. He wants to be a good dad, but lacks the model of good fatherhood. Tyler and Jazmin are hoping to get married in February.

Madeline is in her mid 20s, married and about to have her 2nd daughter. She met her husband at community college. They were both raised by their grandparents—both of their fathers were inconsistent in their lives. Neither of them had real relationships with their moms—and in fact, when I met Madeline last summer she had learned about 2 weeks prior that her mom actually lived just down the road from her for her entire life—Madeline had been told she fully abandoned her. Madeline had called her and has tried to build a relationship, but understandably has a fair amount of trust issues, not just with her family but in all her relationships, she says. But Madeline and Zach are trying to make it work for them. They are committed to each other and their children. Madeline stays at home and Zach works at the factory in town. He works 5 days a week for very long days. And sometimes the factory will offer workers extra shifts—instead of 10 hours, 15 hours. Zach will often take these shifts because as he sees it—that’s another grocery bill. They live in a small apartment with no cable or internet, because those are luxuries they can’t afford if they are saving to buy a house, they say.

Over the past few years in particular there has been a lot of discussion about this demographic and particularly there has been discussion about what Charles Murray coined “the coming apart” of America—others have picked up this work as well—Brad Wilcox at University of Virginia, Andrew Cherlin at Johns Hopkins University, Isabel Swahil at Brookings Institute. Murray’s thesis is essentially that America is coming apart not by race or gender but by socioeconomic status, and particularly Murray points out that those who are in the upper classes—the elites and even the college educated—are increasingly unaware of the culture and lives of those in the working class and the poor. As Murray states early on in his book *Coming Apart*, “It is not the existence of classes that is new, but the emergence of classes that diverge on core behaviors and values...”

As hopefully you saw in the few profiles I gave you, all of those young adults want the same goods as college educated young adults—marriage, to be a good parent, to be financially secure—but they lack good models in their parents and communities who are able to help them. That’s why the themes 1)you are not alone 2) and don’t give up, are so important to our work.

The age of marriage in America has increased to record highs. Average age is 27 for women and 29 for men. While American young adults are putting off marriage, they are not putting off childbearing. By age 25, 44% of women in America will have had a child, but only 38% of women will have married. Among this working class, 52% of births occur outside of marriage, a noted increase when you consider that in 1970 that number was only 6%. For the college educated, only 12% of births occur outside marriage.

Millennials are not delaying marriage because of their lack of interest in marriage. Leading surveys and polls, from places like Pew, Child Trends, and National Longitude Study of Adolescent Health, continually report that more than 80% of all young Americans consider marriage to be an important goal. It shouldn't be a surprise to anyone that the dating and marriage scenes in the millennial generation are more complex than past generations-- rise of birth control, pre-marital sex, cohabitation, and divorce, have all contributed to this complexity.¹

My colleagues who have spent a significant amount of time with the young adults in the working class hear a lot about how their parents' divorce (sometimes multiple divorces) impacted them and how they don't want to divorce but want to be married for decades. But without models of healthy relationships and marriage, young adults in this demographic specifically lack the understanding of what "marriage material" looks like and are often afraid to get married for fear they will end up divorced. Furthermore, they are often surrounded by adults who are very pessimistic about marriage, and very vocal about that. Now, this is all very simplified really---there is so much more I could say about why they are delaying. But the fact is, across the board, young adults are delaying a life choice they say is important to them---marriage. But many of them are not delaying child bearing---especially in the lower income middle class. And non-marital childbearing sets many of these young adults on a much tougher road---tougher financially, relationally, and emotionally. Across the board, researchers have agreed that single parent homes are the least ideal place for a child and for their parents.

So I want to focus again on the two broad themes I mentioned at the beginning---1) you are not alone 2) don't give up.

And particularly I want to go back to Charles' Murray's point about the division of classes by behavior and values and our call as compassionate human beings, and certainly as Catholics, to do something about this divide.

Some colleagues of mine---David and Amber Lapp---are currently living in a working class town in Ohio. They moved there from New York City and are there for the sole purpose of getting to know their young adult neighbors and talking with them about love, sex, dating, marriage, and so forth. [They reported](#) in a recent issue of *First Things* that their peers in the their town are struggling with issues larger than most can face on their own---unemployment,

¹If you're looking for information on this delayed marriage trend and how it specifically impacts children and also 20-somethings, the [Knot Yet report](#), written by a diverse team of researchers has some fascinating findings on the outcomes for children and the outcomes for adults---including findings like married 20-somethings are less likely to report being depressed, more likely to have higher earning power, etc.

drugs, mental illness, family dysfunction, and lack of support needed to understand the educational world and knowledge economy. But according to David and Amber's findings, "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."

At *I Believe in Love*, we're trying to break through that "I'm in it by myself" mentality especially with regards to dating, sex, marriage, and family life. And particularly, we're trying to do so at the level that connects to young adults—through real stories, by real people, about real love. The reality is for many young adults the path to lasting love and marriage involves struggle, but in American culture, the college educated have better equipped to seek help—from friends, family, professionals, etc—and apply that help to our situations. So, *I Believe in Love* we believe it's important for us to share what we do to get through the highs and lows of dating and marriage. As Murray says, "we have to preach what we practice."

Our model is also unique because it invites its audience to participate in our "service" instead of just being clients who take tips and leave.

We do this by inviting our target audience—the working class—to tell their stories—their successes and failures, their struggles and victories, their hopes and their worries—alongside those in the college educated demographic—some who are married and some like me, who are dating. This gives this "go it alone demographic" a place to reflect on the choices they make in their romantic lives and also gives them a sense of accountability to what they are saying. As one contributor—a single mom—told us recently: "I don't talk to anyone else about this stuff. Writing at 'I Believe in Love' gives me an outlet to sort out the ideas in my head and make better decisions in my dating life."

For the college educated writers, it's a place also of reflection, but also a place for service and community with our brothers and sisters who we may not have otherwise encountered or realized need friendship and support. The college educated writers' stories of dating, engagement, and marriage provide a model of "how to" to a demographic that grew up without models and lack even neighbors or friends who can show them the way.

The Catholic Church, and particularly our most recent popes: Benedict and Francis, have talked about how communities can be fostered on the internet, and information can be shared with people who otherwise may not have encountered these truths. And that's exactly what we're trying to do at *I Believe in Love*

All of this brings me to my final points—what can the average observer do to help this cause?

- 1) Visit our site, like us on [Facebook](#), share our content. We hear sometimes from readers that they don't like to like, comment, or share because then someone might think they are struggling with whatever topic the article is about. But the more I've immersed myself in this work the more I've found that it's actually very freeing to be so open about feelings. Now, I'm not making a case of the sob story Facebook post or for a continuation of over-sharing, but I am suggesting that Facebook can be

another community where we can stand shoulder to shoulder with our brothers and sisters in Christ and be a little more vulnerable. It's why I started this article with a little bit of my personal story, because the personal captivates and helps people relate and trust the other.

- 2) Be aware of the messages you're sharing—especially in a forum like Facebook. We're very specific at our website to not use words like chastity, abstinence, purity, etc, largely because those words mostly don't make sense outside the Catholic world. Instead we say sex or not having sex. The reason, which hopefully is self-evident at this point, is that the audience we're trying to reach is not following the latest conversation on which chastity speaker communicates the message better. But they are open to ideas on how to have a healthier view of sex, dating, and relationships.

A quick example to illustrate this point for you—I recently published an article at *I Believe in Love* which was vulnerable in nature. I posted it on my personal Facebook page and among the many comments I got came a comment from a former classmate of mine. I had known him in college but haven't spoken with him since college. I do know he struggled with a host of issues very similar to this demographic we're trying to reach. His comment to me was encouraging as he thanked me for an honest article that dealt with issues of dating, relationships, and sex in real way, he said, which is often lacking in religious conversations, he emphasized. I offer that story as food for thought, that you never really know who might be looking for more honest discussion of these issues or who you might help with Facebook posts that are a little more relatable.

- 3) Find the people in your life or in your neighborhood, or surrounding neighborhoods, who may fit this demographic. Become their friend. Invite them to events, and if and when it is relevant, talk about how you're navigating the dating and marriage scenes. Something we're looking into over the course of the next year is the idea of commissioning young adults to live in these working class neighborhoods and towns for the purposes of building friendships and community, and simply be a good neighbor. Our colleagues David and Amber have found that their consistent friendship has really helped some of their neighbors think differently, act differently, and truly feel like they are not alone. Their peers in their town really want to talk about these topics but have no one else who is willing to engage them in a hopeful and genuine manner. We really have come to see there is no substitute for a good neighbor and friend.

Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* says “An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people's daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others.”

I think that sums up what we are trying to do at *I Believe in Love*, and I hope my introduction of it has inspired you to join us in our mission.