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Frozen: Thawing a Heart for Community

by Adam McCune

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Frozen (2013), first to win Disney the award for Best Animated Feature, has rightly been praised for celebrating sisterly love and prioritizing it over romance. But the remarkable thing about *Frozen* is that it takes baby-steps towards prioritizing community over its heroine's initial hyper-individualism.

Elsa's solo, "Let It Go," highlights how she sees her community as the problem. She has to "be the good girl" and suppress her snow-queen identity because she believes that otherwise her community would shun her. She thinks she can only be "free" of their "rules" through indifference ("I don't care what they're going to say") and cutting herself off in her "kingdom of isolation": "slam the door." Elsa posits at this point not only that her community is the problem, but that isolation is the solution.



As we learn throughout the film, Elsa has things completely backwards. As Elsa's younger sister Anna knows from standing outside Elsa's door all these years, slamming the door is not the solution, but rather the problem. And the community is not a setback to self-expression, it is the solution to the problem of isolation. Startled rather than hostile, even when Elsa's shooting ice is out of control ("Your Majesty? Are you all right?"), Elsa's community welcomes her; only sinister outsiders denounce her for her powers.

The solution to Elsa's fear of her community is not individual self-expression but communal, unconditional love: the love of a family (no matter how many doors you slam) rather than of two romantically interested strangers. The

trolls—the "love experts" of the film—treat this unconditional family love as the model for both romance and for the love of a whole community. When giving romantic counsel, they emphasize that everyone has flaws, but we should love them anyway. They soon apply this counsel about romance to the larger community, which they describe as one big, happy family:

Everyone's a bit of a fixer upper;
That's what it's all about.
Father, sister, brother,
We need each other
To raise us up and round us out.

Elsa eventually learns this lesson—by loving her community instead of fearing (and freezing) it, she can melt her kingdom's winter as swiftly as Anna's love melted her frozen heart.

This is a story about loving communities, and the moment when Elsa sings "Let It Go" is the moment when she understands that the least. So why is this the song that got stuck in our heads and won an Academy Award? We like to hear the lessons we have already learned. We know from "Defying Gravity" that we should do what's right when the community is wrong. We know from Disney's *Hercules* ("look inside your heart") that sometimes we have answers others can't give us. We know from *Aladdin* ("beee yourself") that we shouldn't be disingenuous to satisfy community expectations. "Let It Go" gives us a chance to pat ourselves on the back for already knowing this one. But the rest of the movie? Sometimes your community understands you perfectly, but you misunderstand them. Sometimes your heart is full of ice and fear and you need to listen to other people. Loving yourself is easy, but loving other people is hard. Until we can swallow the new lessons, there will only be baby-steps towards valuing community.



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7 Comments

1. Adam Engel

March 27, 2014 at 10:33 pm

Your point about Elsa's initial retreat from community makes a lot of sense. Maybe Disney's use of "Let It Go" as a centerpiece, despite the film's movement away from that message, hints at their discomfort with their own new direction?

Also, Olaf the snowman is another character who pushes others toward community (he likes warm hugs-melting aside-and wants everyone to be friends). How do you think he fits in to this thematic structure?

o Adam McCune

March 28, 2014 at 12:21 am

I think you're right, that Disney is pulled in two directions here—the movie "seems to be at odds with itself," as [one reviewer](#) has so aptly put it. They've deliberately emphasized family and community in their story, but they as artists and we as an audience are trained for what Lee Artz (in an article titled "The Righteousness of self-centred royals") calls the "anti-social hyper-individualism" of Disney stories, which marginalizes everyone but the elite heroes and heroines.

Olaf is a good example of this. On the one hand, he's the character who first makes the point that love is about sacrifice rather than charm. Like the trolls, he's a "love-expert," but also like the trolls, he's marginalized as comic relief.

The really interesting thing about Olaf is that he is an embodiment of how love makes a community grow. Anna and Elsa built him before Elsa's isolation, and Elsa recreated and animated him in memory of her sister—he is essentially born out of sisterly love, rather than out of the (de-emphasized) romantic plot. He is like the children born at the end of another story that prioritizes sisterly love over the erotically charged advances of (goblin) men: Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market." As U.C. Knoepfelmacher has pointed out, Laura and Lizzie (the loving sisters of Rossetti's story) have children, but husbands and fathers are conspicuously absent (*Ventures into Childland* 314). Like Laura and Lizzie, Elsa and Anna can grow their community without husbands.

■ Amanda

March 31, 2014 at 5:15 pm

I got the impression that Disney was laughing at and correcting itself in this movie. Almost all of the songs have an ironic sense to them.

In “Love is an Open Door,” Anna and Hans claim to have found their soulmates, and claim that they don’t have to feel the pains of the past anymore... but then their claims are clearly shown to be false when Hans later reveals that he doesn’t love Anna at all, locks her in the room to die, and she’s right back in the pain of her past: alone, trying to get through a locked door.

In “Summer,” the most obviously ironic song, Olaf the snowman is dreaming of how much fun he’ll have in summer! (Clearly, he will melt)

I think that “Let it Go” is another song with a sharp ironic edge. It’s impressively nuanced for Disney. Here’s Elsa singing about how “the fears that once controlled me can’t get to me at all,” but it’s those very fears that led her to run away, are keeping her far away, and that spring right up when Anna comes to find her. It’s a great song because it’s so true to Elsa’s emotion at the moment, but the irony is sharp because as the audience, we know that no matter how free she feels, she’s actually just as trapped in her ice castle as she was in her room before. She can’t let anyone in.

Frozen makes a habit of later proving wrong its songs that exemplify previous Disney themes. I’d say “Let it Go” is a prime example of that. I love it.

- *Adam McCune*

April 30, 2014 at 1:27 am

That is an excellent point. “Let it Go” is certainly pulling in two directions—celebrating independence but hinting that the problem of isolation is unsolved. Irony may be the best way of understanding how the song handles that tension.

2. *Ani Govjian*

March 28, 2014 at 1:20 am

I’m convinced. I’d read “Let it Go” mostly as a gendered anthem because it’s so easy for women (and obviously young girls) to grapple with having to put a good face on their feelings, but I love this idea that it is also Elsa not seeing the support system available to her.

3. *Jennifer Ho*

April 21, 2014 at 1:59 am

So I just saw this film with my best friend’s 11 year old daughter—and I had read this post before watching the film. But I have to say that I don’t agree with your interpretation of Elsa’s reaction of isolation. From the moment that the troll king tells her parents that she’s got great power but that she has to learn to control it and fear will be her downfall, her parents reaction is to lock the gates, close the doors and windows, move Elsa to her own private room away from Anna, and to tell Elsa that she has to learn to keep things inside—that her power can get out of control if she doesn’t keep it literally under wraps (ie: the gloves her father gives her). And when she does let her fear overwhelm her (which is at her coronation, which occurs 3 years after her parents tragic death at sea—and why, oh why does Disney insist on killing of parents and making their heroines orphans???) and she runs out of the palace, yes initially the community asks her what is wrong—but when they see the strength of her power (ie: turning the fountain into ice) the formerly solicitous woman with the baby now shrinks away from her, as do the other villagers.

So when she sings the song “Let it go” (which I confess to finding pretty vapid/intolerable to listen to) it’s a declaration of independence—it’s a way of telling her dead parents that their decision to shut her off from the world and to make her keep her power (ie: sexuality) under control, out of sight, is not something she wants to do anymore—and so she’s going to “let go” of the restrictions previously placed on her.

- *Adam McCune*

April 30, 2014 at 1:22 am

You are absolutely right that Elsa's parents are restrictive and that "Let it Go" is a necessary move out of those restrictions. But this necessary step is only half of a solution, for two reasons.

First, the primary problem with her parents' restrictions is that they isolate her, and her escape to her ice palace is just more isolation. I agree that Elsa's power may include her sexuality—that seems consistent with her literally letting her hair down and making new, sexier clothes out of ice—but her power also includes her sisterly love for Anna, expressed in their playing in the magical ice and snow. She gets cut off from Anna (not from some childhood sweetheart); it's Anna she's forbidden to reveal anything to. Severing ties with Anna even further—more of the problem rather than a solution—is a symptom of the inadequacy of Elsa's independence.

Which brings me to the second point, which is that Elsa's independence is a developmental phase. Because her parents died while Elsa was still a child, she has been trapped (frozen?) as a child under the kind of strict rules that parents give to children too young to exercise their own judgment. (In this Disney film, unlike some others, there is a purpose to the loss of the parents besides slimming the cast!) Like real teenagers exploring their identity, Elsa does need to let go of the over-restrictive rules of childhood, but she does so with a teenager's social clumsiness, accidentally hurting those around her. She separates herself from her community to find that independence, but her story doesn't end there. Adults aren't really independent, of course—they depend on each other to survive and to find happiness, they get food and housing from other people, they have colleagues and neighbors and families. To grow up, teenagers must integrate their newly-formed identities back into communities, and that's exactly what Elsa eventually does.

So "Let it Go" is a song about necessary independence, but only as an incomplete stepping stone on the road to community and maturity. My point is that the fact that we want to take that message out of context, especially when every other pop song and Disney movie is already saying the same thing, shows that our culture has a problem of arrested development.