That Four-Letter Word

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My relationship with Roger had always been a bit hard to define. It was one of those crazy more-than-friends, less-than-dating, always holding hands, never kissing... that type of thing. It didn’t really take shape and pick up at all until our sophomore year. As freshmen we were both too busy to notice each other; I was dating every guy in sight and he was trying desperately to keep his 4.0 in spite of his 19-credit load and having to work night/weekends/lunch hour. Somehow I wound down and he loosened up and we started hanging out.

Roger was the kind of guy who always said what he meant, but let you take it whichever way you wanted to. I can’t remember when it started, or why, but our big inside joke was his proposal. I must have been feeling blue one day or have just been dumped (a frequent occurrence), because to cheer me up he got in the habit of saying, “Would it help if you married me?” I never take things seriously and have no intention of getting married. I perked up a bit and saucily replied, “Maybe next weekend. I’ll see what else turns up.” Roger smiled and squeezed my shoulder. He knew I hadn’t taken him seriously, but it didn’t concern him.

This continued for three terms. I kept frittering cash away on clothes and movie tickets, and then writing home for more money. Roger worked as hard as ever, still keeping his GPA high enough to qualify for scholarships. We spent more time together, the good kind. We studied together, rented movies, gave each other rides to the airport for vacation weekends. One time the electricity went out in the dorms and he showed up on my doorstep with a Bic lighter and a Hershey’s chocolate bar. He knew I was terrified of the dark. About once a week he would offer me his heart forever and I would smile and laughingly turn him down.

The second term of my junior year I hit the wall. My parents got a divorce, which both jeopardized my cash flow and rocked my world. I wasn’t sure which way was up. Emotional security was compromised and I needed to know that the four-letter word I thought I was building relationships on was real. Roger came and held me while I cried and cried. Life was so hard, and I was so tired, and I couldn’t face it alone anymore. He gave me his standard line of comfort and this time, I bit. I needed him. We packed up the car and headed to get married over the weekend. We had been driving for about 45 minutes when he pulled over. He said, “This isn’t what you want.” I looked at him and tried to compose some sort of reassurance that would make him keep driving. Nothing came. Roger continued, “You don’t really want to get married, or admit you need
someone. You won’t be happy.” How could he know me so well and why in the world couldn’t I love him? I just didn’t have it in me, and it broke my heart. I knew this was my one and only chance and it was going to pass me by. He brushed my hair out of my eyes, switched the radio to some 80’s music, and turned the car around. After about ten minutes, when I had my composure, he turned to me and smiled. “Is next weekend good for you?” And I knew we would always be friends.

I miss Roger. They say only the good die young. I don’t think that’s fair, but apparently I’m not in control. Two weeks before graduation a group of seniors went out drinking. He went along as the designated driver. At about 2:30 in the morning, after taking everyone home safe and sound, he was killed in a head-on collision with a drunk driver. They said he died instantly, like that should make it okay; I say dead is dead. The four-letter word worth building relationships on had been demonstrated clearly in a love that asked (and unfortunately received) nothing in return. I’ll never forget that and will continue to show that to others in the hope that he will not have loved in vain.

People won’t know you love them unless you show them or tell them. Roger told me. Don’t be afraid to tell someone close to you. Is that person’s response really what matters?