

THE INVESTMENT OF A LIFETIME

The most memorable valentines are not always frilly cards with store-bought verses, or heart-shaped boxes of chocolates. Often they are no more than a momentary glance that voices a silent “I love you.” Or thoughts straight from the heart that—though imprinted on plain paper with the worn keys of an old typewriter in 1959—remain a treasure for the person for whom they are written. Such was the last valentine my father passed on to my mother. My mother found the message in an envelope marked, “To be opened in the event of my death” after my father died in early 1997. My mother cried upon reading the words a few weeks later:

Memo to Patricia W. Denny—December 16, 1959

Pat, if you ever have occasion to read this perhaps you will think that I want to think for you even after I am gone. There are many things I would like to say as I sit at the office typing this memo. Some of the things I wish to cover are things I have thought about for a long time and have never gotten around to putting in writing.

I do not say this to make you sad, but to make you feel better. I have always loved you. With my perfectionist type personality and short temper I feel that I have never been capable of giving you the love to which you are entitled. Again, I say I have loved you and been proud of you as a wife and as a mother.

. . . Once I am gone I want my memory to hold no strings on you. I would of course want you to remember me as a happy part of your past, but not as a sad part of your future. What I am trying to say is this, lead a normal life—if a guy worthy of you comes along—marry him. If you get an opportunity to enjoy life in some other way don’t be bound by tradition. Remember this, the past was fun and a wonderful part of your life, but it is the past. . . Even if we had no children I would feel the way I have stated above, but with children it is all the more important. They should see you as you are capable of being—enjoy them and enjoy life.

Love, W.S.

I would like to think that there was a higher power looking over my father’s shoulder the day he wrote these words to my mother. Yet what gave the words their depth and meaning was that they were totally consistent with the way my father conducted himself in marriage. He had invested wisely in my mother (and my mother in him) over a period of 47 ½ years. And my mother as a widow continued to live her life to the fullest. At 67 years of age she went on a mission trip to Cuba and from there found her calling ministering to the Hispanic community. She found a gentleman companion who was a man of character and compassion. Though they did not marry, they enjoyed a close relationship for a number of years. Friendships that were formed during the marriage did not die, but continued in a slightly different form. And a number of new friendships were formed, serving to enrich my mother’s life all the more.

I was once told that when a loved one dies “time has a way of alleviating the sorrow, but not the missing.” Yet in one respect if we have invested wisely in our relationships, there is a part of us that will always remain with our loved ones. My father had a sense of that on that winter day in 1959 as he wrote to my mother, not knowing when and under what set of circumstances my mother would read his message. And what better legacy can one leave behind than this—a message of love and affirmation towards those whose lives we have touched.