

# “the language of love”

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Marion Williams-Bennett

**A**s I rode the train to work the other day, I observed a young couple clearly in the early stages of love. They were talking to each other in a focused, intense way—gazing at each other, hanging on every word, holding hands. It took them five stops just to say their goodbyes. Kisses. Hugs. More kisses. When he got off the train, he literally put his hand against the window to say a final goodbye to her.

Later that week, on the way home, a different couple was the object of my voyeurism. They were older and spent much of the train ride in silence. Finally, he turned to her and said, “I am really happy with the new dishwasher. The glasses are coming out very clear.” To which she said, “Me, too, the plates fit in nicely.” They were quiet for a while, and then he shared another thought, adding, “And the knives!” To which she replied, “Oh yes, the knives.”

I started to wonder how it is that we move along this path as a couple. We start out with this chemical rush of newness, hanging on every word, cherishing every thought. Then one day our conversation winds its way to subjects like the new dishwasher.

It made me think about my own relationship. I remember when we first started dating. We’d call and email each other constantly throughout the day, keeping each other up-to-date on all the drama that could take place in a two-hour time frame. We’d always end the call by saying how much we missed each other.

In those early days, it seemed as if our conversations would just go on and on, talking about life, work, ideas for the future. We never ran out of things to say. Our conversations, like that time of our lives, seemed magical and full of possibilities. And then our lives evolved. We grew our relationship past early infatuation into a solid partnership. We got married, traveled, had a child. After 17 years together, we have long since moved on from the days of sitting and gazing. We’ve stopped being pained at the thought of being apart; in fact, there are days when we cherish it.

But I wondered about our conversations. Had we reached the stage where things like the dishwasher were the highlight of our discussions? And if we had, what did it mean about our relationship?

I started to listen for signs. The first indication that things had changed came as I was listening to my husband’s old stories. For the first time, I just couldn’t even muster fake interest in these legends that I’d heard so many times. As he began to weave his tale about his best round of golf, “Then, on the 11th hole I thought my opportunity for birdie would be thwarted by a sand trap...,” my head would just fall forward, and I’d feel drool start to pool in the corner of my lips.

I knew that my old stories held the same amount allure for him. He’d half listen as I again spun my time-tested theory on why women need several pairs of black pants, a theory I expounded on each time I came home with a new pair.

But those were our old stories. They had been told so many times that, of

course, they would lose their appeal, but what about the new stories? Maybe the answer was there, in the conversations about our new experiences.

I started to study these conversations and track them by levels of interest. The initial results weren’t encouraging. We had a discussion on whether blue cheese can be too blue. Does it mean that the cheese has gone bad, or is it extra good? I heard a 10-minute lecture on why tires need to be replaced in pairs. Standing over the pool of vomit the dog had provided, we held an interactive debate on the cause. New chew toy or Barbie hair?

These were the highlights, mixed in with our everyday mundane chats about laundry (are there two socks that match?), picking up our daughter (your turn!), finances (never enough) and what’s for dinner (no ideal!). After a while, I started to understand why the older couple was excited about their dishwasher.

It was sad to think that our conversations had taken a turn to the truly dull. If we weren’t sharing compelling stories, were we still growing as a couple? Or was our relationship as boring as our conversations?

Over time I began to realize that yes, indeed we are still growing as a couple; it just doesn’t reveal itself in long, drawn-out discussions like we shared in the early part of our relationship. At this point, the goodness in our relationship comes from what we don’t have to say. There is magic in the silence and moments when we just know what the other person is thinking. We have a connectedness that lives between us without words. Like a day walking in the rain, when he says, “Maine day!” and I say, “Chili and beer!” This is our shorthand for one of our favorite days. We went to Maine and had the most beautiful walk on the beach while a windy, misty storm swirled all around us. Then, we shared bowls of chili and beers at our favorite place. This was the day we got engaged, actually, but we don’t need to go on and on about the beauty of getting engaged. We just say, “Maine Day!” and that says it all.

There are also great moments when life presents something that is uniquely hilarious to both of us, something only the two of us would get. All we need to do is look at each other. Joke made, laughter ensues. No words needed.

This happens a lot at parties. A man might be wearing shoes with a really high heel. It will remind of us both of a particularly hilarious episode of The Mary Tyler Moore Show in which Ted Baxter was wearing Conquistador boots in an effort to look taller. (Just saying Conquistador boots is funny.) We’ll spy the shoes, look at each other, shake our heads and look away in laughter without uttering a word.

After all these years together, there is such beauty in the fact that someone knows my thoughts, laughs at my jokes and can just smell my ideas. What makes it even more amazing is that he can do all of that without words. It makes me realize that we have a bond that lives even when we are not talking, even when we are apart.

At this point in our lives, there’s not much drama when we say goodbye. There are times when we simply wave to each other and say “Hey, drive carefully!” But in the unsaid lives that connection. It’s the feeling that screams, “Let the world be good to you out there,” so that when you return, we can resume the conversation without words.

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