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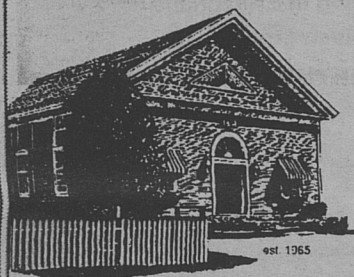
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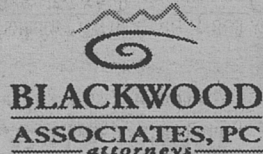
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# Views: Who Was That Guy, Anyway?

**B**y the time my partner died on June 14, 2002 I'd gotten used to people misunderstanding our relationship. Early Onset Alzheimer's Disease had aged Russ considerably beyond his years, although to me he always retained the large facial features of an exceptionally good-looking man and the forehead of a philosopher.

"Don't tell me!" a woman good-naturedly, but somewhat stridently, offered one day as she approached us in a Wal-Mart parking lot, "Father and son! Right?" Russ developed a lumbering gait in his last years and I've always walked that way. Anyway, we looked alike; so I guess it was an understandable mistake for a stranger unused to considering a relationship between two men that was anything other than familial or platonic.

After Russ entered a nursing home, and later a hospital, we got the father and son question a lot. I always responded the same way. "He's not my father; he's my partner." My quiet but determined declaration was almost always met with kindness, often warmth.

Once, though, an aide replied, "What kind of business were you in?" I stared blankly back, then said, "Oh no, not business partners, domestic partners." She was visibly shaken, and stammered weakly, "Oh. I know about that. There's some of that where I live." In a measured tone and being careful to smile, I replied, "Yes. There's a lot of that around."

Hours after Russ died, I was explaining Russ's and my relationship to the funeral director (who, as it turned out, had once been Russ's student) and told him that I would be making all of the final decisions concerning Russ's remains and the service. He appeared to take everything I told him in his stride.

But when it came time to talk about the obituary, he first asked me if I wanted to be mentioned at all, then asked did I want to be mentioned as Russ's "friend." He might still have been unsure as to whether or not I wanted to go public. I didn't consider that though. Instead I replied emphatically that no, I didn't want to be mentioned as Russ's "friend"; I wanted to be mentioned as Russ's partner of 28 years.

A spouse in my situation would not be brought to the question that now distracts me from my grief: who was that guy, anyway? Was he my friend, my boyfriend, my partner, my companion, my lover? What was he to me?

I like to refer to myself, facetiously, as a post-Stonewall

thomas e.  
ziniti

pansy because I came out in the early Seventies, a time before commitment ceremonies and same-sex marriages, when gay couples lived together bravely as outlaws. In those days, those of us in relationships referred to our better halves as our lovers. I reminded a friend of that recently. He said, "True but that makes it sound like the relationship is all about sex." I had to agree and did, readily, but later wondered why when I realized that the literal meaning of the word lover is, simply, someone in love.

Therefore, I think it a great misfortune that Standard English usage compels the collec-

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tive imagination directly into the bedrooms of gays, causing many heterosexuals to cringe a lot, and even some homosexuals to cringe a little. To me *lover* is not only the most comprehensive term; it's the loftiest - although I admit it will probably never do for legally sanctioned relationships, such as Civil Unions.

I can just hear the officiant saying, "I now pronounce you lover and lover!" If nothing else I suppose such a pronouncement would give new meaning to the expression "Until death do you part." A week or two later a certified copy of a *License to Love* would arrive in the mail.

The first time I remember hearing the term partner, as it related to same-sex couples, was in the early Nineties. Initially, at least, the word struck me not only as foreign but too palatable. It seemed to me at the time as though gays were saying that heterosexuals might accept us if we're partners, but never lovers.

As for friends, sure,

Russ and I were friends - best friends. But for me to claim friendship as the be-all-and-end-all of our relationship would be, finally, to deny us and betray him. All of the other terms I could conjure to describe what we had together (companion, etc.) strike me as equally euphemistic, and fall sadly short of the mark.

A week or so after the funeral, I opened a valise given to me by the funeral director which contained a guest book, two laminated copies of the obituary, some thank you cards and six certified copies of the death certificate (for which I had provided the information to the funeral director who, in turn, provided it to the town clerk). The death certificate contains information about Russ, including his last address, the cause of his death, his parents' names, and even (because the law requires it) the name of a woman to whom he had been married for two years some thirty-two years ago. The document further indicates that

she was his wife.

I am mentioned too. At the bottom, the certificate reads, "Information provided by: Thomas Ziniti. Relationship to deceased: Friend."

Thanks to my friends inside and outside of the gay and lesbian community who helped me through the most difficult time of my life, I am pleased to say that after the writing of this article and before its publication, I went to the town clerk and requested a change. The death certificate now reads, "Information provided by: Thomas Ziniti. Relationship to deceased: Partner." ▼

*Thomas Ziniti lives in Warwick Massachusetts and works as a special education paraprofessional. He also works part-time as Newsletter and Events Coordinator for T.H.E. Men's Program of The AIDS Project of Southern Vermont.*