

Room for tradition at informal weddings

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When asked what essential elements I would recommend be included in a wedding of today, I thought about how incorporating traditions is an ideal way to help structure a contemporary wedding.

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The guidelines that govern wedding etiquette are as flexible or inflexible as you want them to be. There are many variables to consider. For example, many people marry later in life; couples often paying for their own weddings choose not to spend a lot of money on a party when they can use the same money to make a down payment on a house; and then there is the omnipresent societal undercurrent to buck the old system to begin with. But even in the case of a modern, informal wedding the fundamentals still fall into the categories of commitment, ceremony and celebration.

Commitment is the keystone of the marriage and it is important to have a clear understanding of what this means. Marriage is a legal contract between two people - making each one the primary custodian, following one's ownself, of the other's life - forever. As this relationship develops, it includes all the facets of life which are represented in the wedding vows - all areas of importance we encounter throughout the course of a lifetime.

The ceremony is the most ritualistic element of marriage. It symbolizes the beginning of a new life together - not only the bond between two people, individually, but also the bond as a couple with their creator or higher spirit. Without the acknowledgment of these bonds, the ceremony would have no meaning. This ceremony can take place within the confines of a church or other place of worship, or at any other mutually chosen location such as a grassy field.

It is customary for the bride to wear white. This symbolizes, among other things, the creation of a new life bond - its purity and its hope. Although, in the past, female guests refrained from wearing white so as not to compete with the bride in any way, today this custom no longer applies. A white dress or garment accented with a brightly coloured belt or jacket, for example, would be fine. At all weddings, it is expected invited guests make a special effort to wear clean and festive clothing in colours reflective of joy and celebration.

The celebration following the ceremony is a festival or feast of sorts. Achieving this milestone deserves a party.

Two things that first come to my mind as components for a great wedding celebration are champagne and wedding cake - both traditionally symbolic of nuptial festivities. Nothing makes for merriment better than bubbles and sugar. The tradition of toasting the bride and groom with champagne or any sparkling non-alcoholic juice occurs just after the cutting of the wedding cake by the bride and groom.

The style and flavour of this cake often reflects the personality and taste of the bride and, as such, can range from dense fruit-and-nut cakes to multi-tiered spectacular castle-like creations.

Traditionally, unwed female guests place a piece of this cake under their pillows on the wedding night in hopes of dreaming of their future husbands.

The cake-cutting is followed by the final tradition of the bride - throwing her bouquet for the bridesmaids to catch. Superstition maintains the lucky recipient will be the next to wed.

Most importantly, weddings are about the bride and the groom and the recognition and initiation of their new life together. They can be both hosts and guests of honour.

There will hopefully always be some traditions that will carry on through the ages. Fundamentally, tradition honours the respect we have for the past; validates the present; and assures us of continuity into the future.

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