

HOW TO GET MARRIED

THE WEDDING CEREMONY;
AND WHAT COMES BEFORE
AND AFTER

BY
THE SCHOOL OF LIFE

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THE POINT OF A WEDDING CEREMONY

The spirit of our times is firmly against ceremony. If we charted a line across the ages, we would see a decline, starting slowly in the mid-18th century and accelerating rapidly through the 20th, away from protocol, etiquette, propriety and all aspects of solemn ritual towards a relaxed, informal spontaneity.

The change is easiest to see in attitudes towards manners and clothing. It was once widely held that people should be seated at dinner parties in order of social rank; it was scandalous to use the wrong cutlery; people would regularly bow to one another; 'sir' and 'madam' were normal words; a waistcoat was an essential part of elegant male attire; women would always wear gloves; children would not speak to adults unless invited to. Now we all wear jeans and say 'hi'.

Very few elaborate ceremonies have survived: marriage is one of them. Here we tend to remain as ritualistic as our ancestors. We put on strange clothes, use antiquated words and spend (perhaps) the price of a small family car on a few hours of rigmarole.

Why do we bother?

The essence of ceremonies is an attempt to mark out an event from the flow of ordinary life. At moments of ritual, we deliberately wear clothes we wouldn't normally be seen in; we carefully speak in ways that are very unlike ordinary conversation; we are directed to do things we'd never otherwise do: pour water over the head of a fully-clothed baby; purchase a pair of doves and set them free, or eat a seeded rice cake while intoning a poem about the moon's luminosity. The words, clothes and actions are deliberately odd so as to isolate them from ordinary events.

In modern times, there has been an understandable keenness to reduce the oddity of ceremonies. The wish has been to make them more accessible, more normal and less jarring to contemporary sensibilities. There have been attempts to get the participants to speak more colloquially, to wear everyday clothes and to behave as they might in a kitchen. But this is to misunderstand the point of ceremony itself. There are occasions and events that try to mark genuinely radical turning points that sit above everyday life: someone has just arrived on the planet; somebody has just left it; a child is turning into an adult.... This is not the everyday. In a marriage ceremony, you are trying on a single day, at a single instant, to commit yourself to another person for the rest of your existence. The event is trying to make an extraordinary leap: to take us out of normal time and put us in touch with something close to eternal. It is trying to defy the ordinary flux of experience, in which circumstances change constantly and passing whims and fancies enjoy complete sway, and shepherd us towards a commitment that will last until we are laid out in the grave.

Ceremonies often try to bridge a gap between what might be called the *phenomenal* and the *noumenal*. The phenomenal is what we can see, hear and touch: it is the stuff of ordinary experience. The noumenal refers to ideas and events that transcend the day to day; we can't easily pin them down at any one moment and yet they are permanently and crucially in the background. For example, traditional ceremonies around naming a baby stress the noumenal: they are saying, in effect, that certain letters appended to a soft young body will always be that person's name. It will still be their name when they are a teenager on a dance floor, a middle-aged executive on the way to a conference and an elderly grandparent drinking chamomile tea on the terrace of a hotel overlooking the sea in 85 years' time. The naming ceremony needs to create a setting of unusual dignity and solemnity to capture the surreal aspect of what is at stake.

Around marriage, the stakes are similarly high. There's a phenomenal moment when the wedding is actually conducted: 2.30pm, perhaps, on the 8th of April, when it is just starting to rain and the caterers are shifting trays of hors d'oeuvres into the marquee and by chance a plane bound for Bergen is flying overhead. It is a specific moment in time. But there is also a noumenal meaning; this is for the whole of your life. The event is in the eternal present. It stands outside of time; it won't date. You'll be as much married in twenty-six years' time as you are the moment you make your vows. You are doing this forever.



Maison Carrée, Nîmes, France, c. 2AD.

Traditionally, ceremonial places have taken great pains to enforce the notion of a threshold: the point at which one passes from the everyday to the eternal.

For instance, the Roman temple known as the Maison Carrée at Nîmes in the south of France has a grand flight of steps and a row of magisterial columns that cut off the sacred inner space from the busy public realm. One would not have been allowed to enter the temple itself without first washing, putting on a formal cloak and saying a few words to start a process of spiritual purification.



St Paul's Cathedral High Altar, London, UK, 1675.

Similarly, in St Paul's Cathedral in London, the high altar, beyond a quietly emphatic braided crimson rope, is both majestic and off limits. Only on the most significant occasions, such as a wedding, might one be invited to step onto the low raised platform below the altar.

In every culture, the marriage ceremony has special details that mark it out from ordinary time. In Poland, the couple often hand-deliver invitations to the wedding (rather than sending an email). After the event, they are given ritual presents of bread and salt to symbolise the nourishing and challenging aspects of the institution to which they have committed themselves. At Shinto weddings in Japan, the bride and groom each take three sips from three different cups of *sake* and then recite lines from a medieval text about their duties to one another. In the Philippines, the couple release a pair of doves at an appointed moment. In South Korea, the bride and groom frequently present each other with a wooden model of a goose. Before a Berber wedding in Morocco, the bride will wash herself in water transported in buckets by the groom's family from a river at least three valleys away.

Marriage rituals may vary a great deal, but the point is always the same: they signal to everyone, especially the participants, that something very significant is unfolding. The point of these ceremonies is ultimately less tied up to specific actions as it is with getting us to appreciate the transcendent oddity of what is happening.

In almost all countries, it is customary to invite lots of people – which will mean, by definition, lots of people one doesn't especially care for or even like. Here too there is a point. To get married is to commit oneself to doing things for other people: one's spouse initially, but also, in time, perhaps children, parents-in-law, and so

on. Inviting a grumpy uncle one hasn't seen in a mercifully long time symbolises an acceptance of a responsibility to more than just the movements of one's own heart. Through marriage, we are outgrowing our primary and very understandable (and at points important) selfishness.

Weddings are undoubtedly surreal occasions. But rather than scoff at their oddities, we can learn to see and use them in a serious and strategic way: to try to impress upon our naturally intermittent and casual minds the momentous fact that we are seeking to transform our metaphysical status from two separate individuals to a couple whose fates will be intertwined in ever-more intimate ways for the rest of our lives.