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INTRODUCTION



WHAT REALLY MATTERS

*H*ere is what everyone fails to mention before your wedding: Getting married? It's huge. It's bigger than you ever expected or imagined. It's life-changing. And having done it, I can categorically say that it is not about the cute cake, or the glamorous dress, or the luscious flowers (though each of those things can be really fun). It's not even about the beautiful ceremony site or the packed dance floor. It's about something more monumental than all of that. It's about the look on your partner's face as you walk down the aisle. It's about that moment when you exchange rings and somehow transform love into matter. It's about how vowing to care for your partner for the rest of your life, in front of a group of witnesses, subtly changes you. It's about seeing your

most unsentimental friends openly cry. It's about the feeling that sweeps over when you fully realize that you have so many people you love in the same room at the same time (or a handful of people you love the most circling you in the courthouse), and that they are all there to celebrate the massive commitment you are making.

A whole industry is set up to sell you a beautiful wedding; it's set up to sell you how things will look. But what matters on your wedding day, what you will remember until you are old and gray, is how it felt. The carefully crafted details are, in the end, just that: details. They barely hit your radar screen on your wedding day. The things that stick with you are those that you could never ever plan. For me it was the four-year-old daughter of our lifelong friend who dressed herself in bright red cowboy boots and an enormous pink hair flower; the wedding dress from the 1950s that I stumbled on in a vintage shop at the last minute; my husband's oldest friend holding my bouquet while I put on my makeup; feeling our lives intertwine as we circled each other under the chuppah; laughing as everyone shared stories.

But as wonderful as the wedding can be, planning it is one of the most complicated and loaded processes of modern adulthood. Getting from newly engaged all the way to your wedding day while staying sane and solvent sometimes feels impossible. The process of negotiating things like faith, money, family, and tradition, all in a very public way, would be difficult in the best of circumstances. When you add the enormous cultural pressures of the modern wedding, you can get something akin to disaster.

I assume that if you are reading this, you are probably engaged. That means you are in one of two places. You're in the first stages of bliss and excitement—whole life together! Wedding to plan! Sparkly new ring (perhaps)! Or you've moved on to stage two—where you realize that planning even a sensible

wedding is going to cost two to three times what you expected, and going to take five to ten times the effort that it reasonably should. Oh. And then there are the expectations. The endless, conflicting expectations.

A cursory glance at a wedding magazine or etiquette book will give you an idea of where the expectations are coming from. First of all, there are the lists. Every book or wedding magazine has *lists*—lists ordering that you immediately do *this*, lists forcefully suggesting that maybe you should start doing *that*, mile-long lists of activities that you need to complete if you want to be a Proper Bride. Worse, these books claim to have both etiquette and tradition on their side (they have neither, but we'll come back to that), which ends up making you feel more than a little inadequate and crazy.

The average wedding planning book will talk you through everything you ostensibly need to know, in mind-numbing, illustrated detail. It will talk you through your fabric choices for wedding dresses (which is fascinating until you realize that, although gainfully employed, the only wedding dress material you can actually afford is inexplicably a poorly manufactured polyester—even though you were pretty sure what you needed to have was French lace). It will talk you through what kind of chairs (or chair covers) you need, every flower that you must know before you pick out your centerpieces, and generally all the things that Must Be Done or everyone will be Horribly Offended.

If the expectations ended there, we would be more or less fine. Half insane, but generally fine. Wedding websites can be ignored; charlatans selling monogrammed favors under the guise of etiquette can be scoffed at. But the problem is, expectations run so much deeper than that.

First of all, and most simply, there are our own expectations. After years of seeing weddings with lines of matching bridesmaids, piles of expensive food, and all-night dance parties, most

of us have a small outline in our heads of what we want: a silk wedding dress, letterpress invitations, pretty flowers, good food, and a wonderful party. That's not so hard, right? This won't be that expensive, right? Well. If only.

Then there are the expectations of our parents. Our parents want things. They want reasonable things. They want to see us tremendously happy. They want to not be embarrassed when they invite friends, whose children's lavish weddings they have been attending for years. They want to look like a happy and normal family at this, the pinnacle of public family life. The problem is that "normal" and "not embarrassing" in Wedding Land have come to look a lot like a banquet room at the Ritz and a slowly melting ice sculpture . . . that, and a giant wad of cash you no longer have.

And finally there is Everyone Else. Unless you have thrown a wedding or had a baby, you have not met Everyone Else. All those neighbors and coworkers and people at the post office? Before, they were just people we saw sometimes. Now they are our Greek chorus. "Let me see the ring! Oooooohhh, it's big! You must be thrilled!" "How many bridesmaids are you having and what are they wearing?" "What are your colors? You have to have colors!" "Now, try not to spend a down payment on the wedding dress, little lady, no matter how much you want to." "Aren't grooms the worst? They just can't help out to save their lives!"

The problem with expectations is not the sentiment behind them. People genuinely love weddings, want to see you happy, and want to *chat* with you about it (God bless them). The problem is when expectations slowly strip you of your capacity to do anything other than what is prescribed. And what is prescribed tends to be massively expensive and stressful enough to give you a need for mood-altering drugs or a hankering for a nightly whiskey.

But here is the kicker: everything we're being sold as *What We Need to Do for Tradition's Sake* has little or nothing to do with the kinds of weddings our grandmothers had or, more dramatically, that our great-great-grandmothers had. One hundred and fifty years ago, most Americans were still getting married at home, in their parlor, in their best dresses, holding a prayer book or an embroidered handkerchief. One hundred years ago, most weddings had moved to the church, with only some brides wearing white, and the union was often celebrated by a tea party or a wedding breakfast. As for our grandmothers' era? Well, my grandmother took a taxi from Alabama to California at the end of World War II, since the trains were not running for civilians, and got married as soon as my grandfather was released from a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp. She wore the one white satin dress she could find in the store, and her attendants were the nurses from the naval hospital where my grandfather was being treated. Other than the white dress, the cake, the flowers, the vows, and the ring, there is next to nothing in modern wedding traditions that my grandmother would recognize, let alone approve of.

How do we plan a modern wedding while keeping our souls and our sanity intact? I suggest that we do so thoughtfully, and carefully, with an eye both to actual history and tradition, as well as to our relationships. In the past twenty years, weddings have become shockingly homogenized. The list of musts has grown longer and longer, threatening to take both the couple and their finances down with it. If we scale back to the level of formality and expense that our grandmothers and great-grandmothers would approve of, and then add and subtract from there, we might make it through alive, and we will have a better chance of remembering what this party is about. That, and we'll have the ironclad justifications of actual history, and actual tradition, on our side.

So, here is a love song to the sensible wedding, the joyful wedding, the unbelievably fun wedding. Here is to the repopularizing of the courthouse wedding, the backyard wedding, the at-home wedding, the picnic wedding, the punch-on-the-church-lawn wedding. Here is to weddings that are both simple and stylish. Here is to figuring out what you actually want, and then having the guts to stick to it. Here is a handbook to get you to the other side, solvent and sane. Here is a how-to guide to get your wedding back to basics: a fantastically fun party to celebrate the day on which you start your marriage.

Because the real point of your wedding day is to end up married. Married, with grace.



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