



# Weddings For the Twenty-First Century

**Spiritually Rich, Non-Religious  
Marriage Ceremonies**

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## **PLEASE NOTE:**

This booklet was originally part of larger book entitled: The Rituals Resource Book—Alternative Weddings, Funerals, Holidays & Other Rites of Passage. Due to a decrease in interest in printed books, I have chosen to not continue making printed copies of the book. All of the material contained in The Rituals Resource Book is now available on this website as free electronic downloads.

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## Introduction

You may be puzzled as you open this chapter to see that there are thirty pages of discussion about the institution of marriage leading up to the actual ceremonies, including some questioning about whether or not legal marriage should even exist. Perhaps you are a young person planning to get married and were just looking for some creative and poetic wedding vows, and are wondering “Why do I need to read all this ‘heavy’ background information and history about marriage?” It seems that young people today, in general, do not take issue with the institution of marriage the way people did back in the 1960’s, 1970’s and 1980’s. I would recommend to any person considering getting married that you invest an hour wading through this information. I think you will discover that **there are some important lessons to be gleaned from those decades when marriage was attacked and rejected, and eventually re-examined and reshaped.** It was not just hippy rebelliousness; there were legitimate reasons why marriage came under such scrutiny for a couple of decades. I am therefore trying to preserve the history of those decades. So let me start this chapter with some background information about how attitudes towards marriage have changed during my lifetime and share how my views of marriage have evolved over several decades. You may well find that this information has more relevance to your present day life than you would have thought. **NOTE:** If you are a gay or lesbian couple, some of this information will not be relevant to you, but a good portion of it will be.<sup>1</sup>

When I was a young girl (early 1960’s), marriage was pretty much a given. The standard life plan for a girl was to meet a nice boy and get married and have babies. By the time I reached young adulthood in the late sixties, the hippie movement, sexual revolution, and women’s liberation movement were in full swing, and marriage was taking a real nose dive in popularity. Marriage was not very popular with the sixties generation for a number of reasons. Perhaps the most obvious reason for this was that the sixties generation suffered a very serious loss of faith in governmental authority. The Vietnam war, the shootings at Kent State University, the Watergate scandal, and disagreements about the legalization of marijuana left many of my generation with little respect or trust for the government. Many people who came of age in the sixties or seventies would not even think of looking to the government to sanctify their lover relationships.

Another change that occurred during the cultural revolution of the 60’s and 70’s that affected peoples’ views about marriage was that many people began drifting away from Christianity. People began exploring alternative religions and philosophies. Unlike Christianity, this new spirituality did not operate from the premise that God had handed down a decree that lifelong marriage was the only spiritually correct lifestyle. These religions were based on the premise that people were free to explore a variety of lifestyles without jeopardizing their spiritual salvation. The Baby Boomer Generation were also more likely to announce themselves to be agnostics or atheists with no ties to any church or religious doctrine that required marriage. Marriage began to be viewed as a human-made custom, the value of which was to be determined strictly by its own merits. As we baby boomers looked around at the questionable quality of many of the marriages of our parents’ generation, it certainly left many of us seriously wondering whether the bad points of marriage outweighed the good!

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<sup>1</sup>Since gay/lesbian couples have been seeking governmental sanctioned marriage, the discussion about whether the government should regulate marriage may seem irrelevant. But I believe gay/lesbian couples will soon discover there can be negative aspects to governmental regulation of marriage that they (like many heterosexual couples) may want to avoid. Likewise, I hope gay/lesbian couples, in their excitement about their freedom to marry, will not trap themselves with “till death do us part” marriage vows for reasons explained herein.

The women's liberation movement also contributed to marriage's decline in popularity. Feminism began freeing women from marrying for economic survival. A substantial number of liberated women (and men) began to question whether the institution of marriage had any relevance in a society where men and women existed as economically self-sufficient individuals. The availability of reliable birth control also made people question the need for marriage: "Did marriage make any sense when children were not involved?" So, for a variety of reasons, by the late sixties, people of all ages and socio-economic backgrounds were creating long-term love relationships without the formal structure of marriage.

However, during the 1980's, marriage began increasing in popularity. I, at that time, still belonged to the "Don't invite the government into your bedroom" camp and was very dismayed to see marriage becoming more popular. I remember watching in total bewilderment as many of my acquaintances, and even some of my closest friends (who for years had vehemently disagreed with the idea of marriage as much as I had), decided to get married. I did not understand why so many "anti-establishment" baby boomers were suddenly flocking to the altar. The first edition of this book, written in 1987, took an anti-legal marriage stance.

During the 1990's, I decided I wanted to figure out why legal marriage was continuing to become more popular. I therefore began interviewing couples and engaging in lively debate about the pros and cons of legal marriage. These heated, but fascinating, discussions led me to reconsider a lot of my premises. Slowly, but surely I got converted to the idea of salvaging the institution of marriage. However, the only way I was able to come to view marriage as something worth salvaging, was to actually go back to "square one" and ask "Are there any valid reasons for governmentally regulated marriage?" and then build my own unbiased, thoroughly researched rationale for marriage. This chapter is the result of that examination process. This chapter discusses:

- 1) Why the institution of legal marriage makes sense.
- 2) How marriage needs to be reformed and updated.
- 3) How to decide when marriage is the appropriate choice.
- 4) Some sample marriage rituals appropriate for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **Does Government-Regulated Marriage Make Sense?**

As I mentioned above, having grown up as a sixties generation hippie, I went through a long period when I was very opposed to the idea of the government regulating people's romantic/sexual relationships. I believed that all couples have different philosophies about how they might want to structure their romantic/sexual relationships and it is not the place of the government to tell them how to behave in their own homes. I also saw the idea of the government supervising how couples should divide their resources upon divorce as very condescending. It discounted the ability of two consenting adults to come to healthy and fair decisions using their own judgment and integrity.

My philosophies about the government regulating partnerships between lovers fit into my general view of the world and humanity. I kind of had this overall sense that people did not need laws to tell them how to behave properly. I operated from the premise that people have a basic drive towards good, and possess enough wisdom to act out of an internal sense of fairness and justice towards one another. I was often labeled (sometimes affectionately and sometimes not) an anarchist. I never particularly called myself one, but my general world view did, in fact, have a strong similarity to classic anarchist theory.

As I continued to debate with proponents of marriage through the years, they continued to point out flaws in my anarchist premise that people did not need the government to regulate their family relationships. I was prompted to see that many of our current family laws arose as a result of problematic behavior. For instance, in

the past, husbands sometimes deserted their wives, leaving them penniless, with no compensation for the years of energy and support they donated to the marriage. Thus, the concepts of child support, alimony and divorce settlements were devised. Wives sometimes packed up and left their husbands, and denied the father any visitation rights to his children; this problem resulted in joint custody arrangements and visitation rights for fathers. In general, husbands and wives sometimes reneged on their agreements and promises resulting in extremely unfair treatment of their spouses.

Likewise, there is substantial evidence that non-married partners are also sometimes incapable of treating one another fairly, and honoring the agreements they make with one another. The courts are full of estranged co-habiting partners attempting to sue their ex-partner because the partner has wronged them upon severing the relationship. Some estranged co-habitants have even received court settlements. Lee Marvin's ex-girlfriend made headline news in the 1970's when she received a million dollar "relationship severance allowance." As I listened to these arguments, I had to agree that there is evidence to support the notion that, quite often, people do not treat one another honestly and fairly in their lover relationships. Given the fact that husbands and wives, and persons in non-marital relationships, sometimes treat one another extremely unfairly, a case can be made for marital and quasi-marital relationships being regulated by society at large.

I think what finally convinced me of the desirability of governmental regulation of marriage was seeing some of the inconsistencies in my own arguments. When I argued against legal marriage, I said it was because I didn't believe in governmental regulation. Yet, on the other hand, I was in favor of governmental regulation in many other instances. I supported environmental protection legislation, child abuse laws, international fishing regulations, food labeling, drunk driving laws, animal cruelty regulation, and on and on. I was confronted with the inconsistency again when I saw a friend who seriously criticized everyone she knew for getting legally married (because she opposed governmental regulation) take someone to small claims court for renegeing on a debt! I was confronted again and again with the fact that our local, national, and global societies are all based on the philosophy that society will intervene in the personal relationships of its members when one member appears to be treating another in unfair and unhealthy ways. I came to realize that even in tribal societies, mediators and arbitrators were sometimes appointed to settle conflicts.

I came to see that I was really no longer the anarchist I once was. Through the years, as I interacted with my co-human beings in a wide range of ways, from anarchist structures to direct democracy in small groups, to representative democracy in large groups, my views and philosophies about the role of government had changed. It was as though my mind was a lump of clay, and my life experiences the potter's hands. My mind was pounded and rolled and shaped by my experiences, and alas, I acquired a political philosophy.

I came to the painful realization that my anarchist theories sounded a lot better on paper than they actually worked with real live human beings. I began to see that though, in general, most human beings might have positive intentions towards others, they were at times unable to manifest this positive intention into real behavior. I also concluded that, even when every person in a given situation is trying to do what he/she believes is right, different people have very different visions of what is right and wrong, true and false, etc. All of these observations led me away from anarchy towards what I would call "low-key democracy". I want to throw in a quick definition of low key democracy so I can make some connections in regards to this discussion of marriage.

### **The basic tenets of "low-key democracy" are as follows:**

- 1) Whatever facets of a society operate successfully with no laws, rules, etc., should be left unregulated.
- 2) Facets of society which do not seem to operate in healthy ways under #1 operating procedure should have the minimum laws/regulation set up as is necessary to correct the problems.
- 3) The members of society responsible for designing and enforcing laws and regulations should be elected via one person/one vote democracy.

4) The citizens at large should maintain the right to impeach the elected representatives at any time for not making decisions which reflect the needs/rights of the majority of citizens.

5) Representatives should come up for re-election at regular intervals.

6) The elected representatives should attempt to use creative problem solving and compromise at all times, such that laws/regulations do not unduly infringe upon the rights of the minority.

7) Citizens should have complete access to their representative's voting records, and whenever feasible, all meetings of elected representatives should be open to citizen observation, so citizens are able to determine if the representatives are operating in a manner which fairly represents them.

When I applied these political views about governmental regulation to the issue of marriage, I had to admit that there were centuries of evidence to support the notion that a substantial percentage of couples do not treat one another fairly in their lover relationships, and therefore, governmental regulation was warranted.

In summary, having spent a great deal of time rethinking the issue of whether marriage should be regulated by the government, I have come to see the merits of governmentally regulated marriage and I wholeheartedly support it as a valuable institution of our society. My discussions with hundreds of couples made me see that having the government regulate marriages helps to insure that marital partners treat one another fairly. **However, there are many problems with the way state governments currently go about protecting the rights of marital partners.** In the remainder of this chapter I will outline the problems associated with the legal protection state governments currently offer marital partners. I will also discuss some other problems with traditional marriage rituals and outline some ways marriage ceremonies can be updated to better meet the needs of couples in the 21st century.

## The Negative Side of Governmental Regulation of Marriage

As I just outlined, after serious consideration, I came to appreciate the positive side of having the government regulate marriage. However, there is a negative side to governmental regulation of marriage as well.

*"The marriage contract is unlike most contracts: its provisions are unwritten, its penalties are unspecified, and the terms of the contract are typically unknown to the contracting partners. ...No state ever asks prospective spouses if they are willing to assume the duties, rights, and obligations their marriage contract specifies. It is simply assumed that everyone who gets married will abide by the state-imposed unwritten contract known as legal marriage.*

*...It is only when they begin to disagree about their respective obligations or try to make arrangements for their responsibilities after divorce that they discover, usually upon consulting their respective lawyers, to what extent their freedom to decide their own fate is restricted by the terms of the state-dictated marriage contract that is codified in family law.*

*...There is the further irony that many of these same couples will discover that the unwritten contract that governs their relationship is based on outmoded assumptions about the family, assumptions often contradicted by the reality of their own experience but nevertheless applied to them by law.*

Lenore J. Weitzman, (1981) *The Marriage Contract: Spouses, Lovers and the Law*. New York NY: Macmillan Publishers, pp. xv-xvii.

After reading Ms. Weitzman's book as I was writing this chapter, I contacted a court magistrate who performs many civil marriage ceremonies to ask him for a copy of a standard marriage ceremony. These are the vows the magistrate sent me.

*"Do you take this woman/man to be your lawful wedded wife/husband? And do you solemnly promise before these witnesses, that you will love, honor, and cherish her/him; And that forsaking all others for her/him alone, you will perform unto her/him all the duties that a husband/wife owes to his/her wife/husband, until death shall separate you?"*

*"\_\_\_\_\_ I take thee to be my wedded wife/husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better or worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part."*

*"Will you receive this ring as a token of \_\_\_\_\_'s affection, sincerity, and fidelity, and will you wear it as a symbol of your own affection, sincerity, and fidelity toward him/her?"*

When I read these vows, I definitely had to concur with Ms. Weitzman that the "marriage contract" is basically invisible to the parties involved. As you can see, these vows consist of flowery, poetic proclamations of eternal love. There is virtually nothing in the vows which conveys, in concrete terms, what the legal rights and responsibilities of marriage are. I had to laugh when I read the part which states "Will you perform unto him/her all the duties that a husband/wife owes his/her husband/wife?" I was thinking as I read it, how great it would be if someone would pipe up in the middle of one of these ceremonies and say "By the way, Your Honor, would you mind clueing me into exactly what these duties are, before I say 'I do'?" I'm sure this never happens. People are conditioned to get married with "no questions asked", and have faith that everything will work out. Therefore, the actual "contract of marriage" that people enter by stating these lofty vows of eternal love to one another is not known to couples when they marry.

When couples marry they are agreeing, without realizing it, to be governed by what you might call a "one-size-fits-all" marriage contract. The word "contract" is a misnomer here because there is no marriage contract per se. Married couples are governed by volumes and volumes of state statutes. Let me attempt to list the most important legal ramifications of marriage. This is a gross oversimplification of the volumes and volumes of State law pertaining to marriage (which of course differs in each state) but I think this summary is adequate for the sake of this discussion.

## **Legal Marriage creates the following rights and entitlements:**

- 1) The right to automatically inherit one another's complete estate.
- 2) The right to make all medical decisions on one another's behalf.
- 3) The right to possession of one another's body after death, and the right to determine body disposition and funeral service.
- 4) A marital partner has the right to an equitable share of all monies, properties, capital gains of any kind (i.e., retirement benefits, royalties, stocks and bonds, etc.) acquired by his/her partner during the duration of the marriage or converted to joint ownership during the marriage.



- 5) A marital partnership must be formally dissolved in a court of law. Though either spouse may initiate a divorce for any reason, at any time, the procedure must be legally monitored. Partners may not dispose of any of their personal properties until they receive a formal divorce settlement dividing all the properties of the marital partnership.
- 6) A wife is entitled to be financially supported by her husband during the marriage and is sometimes entitled to alimony benefits after the marriage.
- 7) A husband is entitled to have his wife perform (unpaid) domestic labor to maintain the family household and provide for the needs of the children.

**Please Note:** Child support is required whether a man is married to a woman or not, so I am not including it in this legal definition of marriage.

Obviously #6 and #7 listed above are outdated. Some women make more than their husbands these days, and some husbands and wives have similar earning power. I think it is unclear to what extent the courts currently enforce these two provisions of the marriage “contract”. Alimony is less and less common and occasionally wives have to pay it to husbands. However, there are still some traditional marriages where the husband is the major breadwinner and the woman a stay at home mom, so these statutes may still be applied in some cases. The main two legal aspects of modern-day marriage that couples need to be concerned with are #4 and #5: the provisions having to do with how the financial resources of each partner will be divided up if the couple divorces.

Marriage communalizes the financial resources of the husband/wife. This automatic merging of resources can be a very good thing. These laws were created to protect people. Their main purpose originally was perhaps to protect a woman's interest in the marital estate because her contributions to the marriage were economically invisible. This need to protect a homemaker's financial interest is still relevant today in some marriages. It is also true that the need to protect both marriage partners' interest in one another's financial assets goes beyond the issue of childrearing. Oftentimes in a marriage one partner financially supports the other while he/she pursues an endeavor that will later bring financial gain, i.e., getting an advanced educational degree, writing a book, building a business, etc. People often relocate to accommodate one partner's career. In general, marriage partners, particularly in long term marriages, tend to merge their lives in lots of ways that have financial implications.

However, the degree to which couples merge their lives/and finances varies tremendously in this day and age. Some couples do not raise children together and therefore a homemaker's needs/interests do not need to be taken into consideration. Some people are simply very independent people and prefer to create a marriage where each person retains complete ownership of his/her financial resources. Second marriages are also now very commonplace and this often means that both partners come to the marriage with substantial financial assets and established careers and do not want to merge assets after they are married either.

Given the diversity of marriages today, it is ridiculous to think that there can be one marriage contract to meet the needs of every couple. Couples need to be given the right to contract with one another regarding how much financial merging they want to have in their marriage.

Fortunately, there is now a way for people to create a legal marriage that is not bound by the traditional state laws which stipulate that all the financial resources of the couple will be merged. Prenuptial agreements allow couples to override state statutes about financial merging.

## Customizing Your Marriage Contract With a Prenuptial Agreement

When I wrote the 1995 edition of this book, prenuptial agreements were very uncommon and were quite often declared null and void and thrown out of court. However, I gave the following advice to couples at that time:

*“I firmly believe it is wise for couples to draft prenuptial agreements even if the courts do not currently uphold them. If enough couples begin clogging the courts with cases regarding marital contracts, the courts will be forced to recognize the need for such contracts.”*

*Susan M. Mumm (1995) The Rituals Resource Book--Alternative Weddings, Funerals, Holidays & Other Rites of Passage. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Alexandra Yul Publishing, p 33.*

Gee--it's nice to be right about one's predictions occasionally!!! That is exactly what happened. More and more couples wrote prenuptial agreements and pressured the courts to uphold them, and the courts eventually conceded that prenuptial agreements were valid. Prenuptial agreements are becoming more and more common and are, in general, upheld by the courts.

Having the courts support and enforce prenuptial agreements is a very important break-through. I am shocked that this change occurred so quickly. It is now possible for couples to reap all the benefits of having the government regulate marriages while being able to limit the scope of that regulation if they so choose; couples can use prenuptial agreements to protect themselves from over-regulation.

Arlene Dubin, (an attorney) has written an excellent book entitled Prenups for Lovers (Random House, 2001). Ms. Dubin does an excellent job of explaining why prenups are so valuable, and provides a wealth of information about how to write a comprehensive prenuptial agreement that will stand up under fire.

I think Ms. Dubin's book should be required reading for every engaged couple!!! I, like Ms Dubin, think that every couple should take advantage of this new freedom to customize their marriage contract. I don't want to go into much depth about the specifics of prenuptial agreements. But I do want to include a brief summary of the information presented in Ms. Dubin's book. Here is a great quote about the most commonly held myth about prenuptial agreements:

*“**Myth #1:** A prenup jinxes a marriage. This is tantamount to saying that if you write a will, you will die sooner; if you take out fire insurance on your home your house is more likely to burn down; or if you buy long-term care insurance you are more likely to end up in a nursing home.”*

*Arlene G. Dublin (2001) Prenups for Lovers--A Romantic Guide to Prenuptial Agreements. New York, NY: Villard Books, a Division of Random House, p 23.*

Of course, every couple hopes their marriage will be lifelong. Writing a prenup does not diminish this hope or the likelihood of attaining it. A prenuptial agreement simply helps a couple prepare ahead of time for how they will deal with the many complexities of divorce, if despite the best of efforts, they reach a point where they have irreconcilable differences. A prenuptial agreement is a way of acknowledging that people grow and change over time in unpredictable ways and sometimes find they can no longer remain happily married to one another. A prenup prompts people to make agreements when they are deeply in love and full of trust and commitment-- what better time is there to rationally and carefully decide on fair ways to deal with financial issues? A prenup prompts both people to be clear about their needs, desires, and expectations in regards to finances. Putting it all in writing is protection against misconceptions and misunderstandings.

**The following is a list of what Ms. Dubin recommends be included in a prenuptial agreement:**

- 1) List your assets, liabilities, income and expectations of gifts and inheritances.
- 2) Provide how premarital and post-marital debts will be paid.
- 3) Agree what happens to your premarital property and post-marriage appreciation, gains, income, rentals, dividends, and proceeds of such property in the event of death or divorce.
- 4) Agree upon what happens to your post-marital property in the event of death or divorce.
- 5) Determine ownership of your marital residence and secondary homes in the event of divorce.
- 6) Decide upon the status of gifts, inheritances, and other trusts either spouse receives or benefits from, whether before or after marriage.
- 7) Select the beneficiary of all 401 (k) 403 (b), profit sharing, pension, IRA, and all other retirements plans upon death and state if such benefits will be divided in the event of divorce.
- 8) Clarify what will happen to each type of property whether jointly or individually owned such as real estate, artwork, antiques, jewelry, earning from employment or self employment, stock options, stocks, bonds, mutual funds, businesses, professional practices, professional licenses or degrees, celebrity, goodwill, contracts, patents and copyrights, accident settlements, and winnings.
- 9) Figure out alimony, maintenance or spousal support, or provide for a waiver or property settlement instead of support (to the extent allowable by your state law).
- 10) Detail death benefits, stating what you will provide for in your will and the effect on state-mandated rights such as “elective share” and “intestate” amounts.
- 11) Determine whether you wish your spouse to be an executor of your estate or trustee of any trust.
- 12) Decide upon medical, disability, life, or long-term care insurance coverage.
- 13) Determine which state’s law will apply and how your agreement will be affected by a move to another state.
- 14) Identify your attorneys. [Ms Dubin stresses that each person needs to hire **separate** legal counsel to ensure that the prenuptial agreement will be upheld]
- 15) Provide for child support or custody (although non-binding).

Arlene G. Dublin (2001) [Prenups for Lovers--A Romantic Guide to Prenuptial Agreements](#). New York, NY: Villard Books, a division of Random House, pp 74--75.

I cannot stress enough how important it is that couples write prenuptial agreements. When they don't, they are opening themselves up to the possibility of an extremely unfair divorce settlement. **If there is no prenuptial agreement, in the event of divorce, the "default State marriage contract" is enforced.** The state marriage "contract" can be deemed by a divorce court to supersede and make null and void any verbal or written contracts the couple may have made with one another regarding their financial assets **during** their marriage. Without a prenuptial agreement, you are inviting the possibility of unwanted government regulation.

I'm sure most people have personally witnessed at least one nasty, unfair divorce. The sad fact is the seemingly nicest people have the capacity to become unbelievably mean, dishonest and unfair when they divorce. Divorce is often extremely shattering to the ego, emotionally devastating, and frightening. Human beings do not operate at their best under these circumstances. They become incapable of making rational, healthy decisions. There are far too many divorces in which each partner is out to get as much as he/she can from his/her spouse and all sense of justice is abandoned. It is quite common in the United States for each spouse to hire an attorney and instruct him/her to fight as dirty as legally allowable!!!! Oftentimes people successfully renege on all the agreements they have made to their partner through the years. Because, unlike the provisions of a prenuptial agreement, agreements between married partners regarding finances made **after** the marriage are not enforceable. They can be overridden in lieu of standard state statutes. Prenuptial agreements can, in some cases, be overridden too. But my research leads me to believe that a properly written and executed prenuptial agreement has about ten times more chance of being upheld than agreements made after marriage.

So, as soon as you become engaged, buy Arlene Dubin's book and begin drafting your prenuptial agreement. As Ms. Dubin points out in her book, the process of writing a prenuptial is an excellent preparation for marriage. It may also alert a couple to the fact that their decision to marry is a mistake and allow them to bail out and avoid a whole lot of embarrassment and heartache.

The other option for couples is, of course, to not get legally married and draw up whatever contracts they desire as non-married co-habitants. This is a viable option. However, some people have serious psychological attachments to the idea of being married. In the next section I will discuss how to determine whether legal marriage is the best option for your particular situation.

## **When Is Legal Marriage Appropriate?**

As I have just outlined, I now wholeheartedly agree that legal marriage is a good thing. But, it is a good thing for all couples? There are both pros and cons to legal marriage. Every couple needs to look at the negative and positive aspects of getting married and decide whether it best suits their needs. This sounds simple enough, but in reality, couples oftentimes do a lot of agonizing about whether or not to marry. This is particularly true when a couple does not intend to parent together, and in situations where people are contemplating a second marriage.

I have interviewed many, many couples grappling with the dilemma of whether or not to get married. Let me put forth some information that I think can help couples figure out whether marriage is the best option for their unique situation. Let me start by discussing situations for which marriage is not the appropriate option.

The most obvious situation when marriage does not make sense is for young adults. Human beings reach sexual maturity physiologically between the ages of thirteen and sixteen. However, most young people are not ready for the financial responsibilities of marriage until their mid-twenties. There is therefore a gap of about ten years when human beings have a strong desire for romantic/sexual relationships but are not ready for marriage. In decades past, people did not need years of education and training before entering the workforce, and it was therefore not uncommon for people to marry at eighteen. Today there is a need to postpone marriage and child-bearing. Since we have reliable birth control, young adults can safely participate in romantic / sexual relationships during early adulthood and postpone marriage until they are financially ready for it.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I believe in exploring sexuality despite the HIV/AIDS situation.

Postponing marriage until the age of twenty-five also enables people to attain a reasonable amount of emotional maturity before taking on all the psychological complexities of marriage. I conclude that marriage is not an appropriate choice for people under the age of twenty-five, as a general rule.

There are a number of other situations when non-marital relationships are often more appropriate. Many people in this day and age are not choosing to have children. Such people may decide that marriage, with all its legal merging of finances and formal structure, is not necessary or desirable. I'm not saying that couples who are not planning to parent have no need for marriage. For some childless couples, marriage is still the best option. I will discuss this in a moment. But in situations where both people have their own careers and similar earning power, and neither will be taking time out from their careers to parent, the legal complexities of marriage may serve no purpose, and in fact be downright obtrusive. Though you can use prenuptial agreements to delineate the ways you want to keep your finances separate, the easiest way to maintain financial separateness and independence is to not get legally married.

Likewise, as a result of birth control, the decreased birthrate, and increased life span, even the majority of people who do parent usually spend less than half of their adult lives raising children. "Post child-rearing" divorces are fairly common. People sometimes discover that, once the kids are gone; they grow apart, because they want to do very different things with the later decades of their lives. Such people may conclude that marriage was an appropriate choice for the first part of their lives, but not something they would do a second time. This is not to say they will not desire to have another (or several) deep, meaningful relationships in the latter years of their lives; they just may decide that these relationships do not need the formal structure of marriage. Let me now discuss situations for which marriage seems to be the best option.

The first and most obvious situation for which marriage seems to be the best option is when there will be a significant blending of economic resources. The most common time this happens is when people parent together. Sometimes women make career accommodations in order to serve as the primary caretaker of the children. Even if the woman is working full time, she may pursue a different career track in order to remain flexible enough and available enough to parent. Women who parent are sometimes less likely to accept promotions and less likely to accept high powered jobs that require a lot of time and energy investment during the years they are parenting. There are of course exceptions to this. There are house husbands and brain surgeon mothers. Overall, the earning power of young women has continued to increase with each passing decade and some women do not interrupt their careers when they parent. In some couples, the women earns as much or more than their male counterparts, and often these couples will hire professional childcare and therefore neither the man or woman's earning power will be diminished by parenthood. However, there are still many instances where the woman's career and earning power are negatively affected by parenthood

As a result of these sex role differences, if/when a man and woman divorce after parenting together, the man's earning power, education level, etc. is sometimes substantially greater than the woman's. A legal, formal marriage is a way of protecting the woman's "interest" in the husband's earning power, retirement plan, etc. The marriage has to be dissolved in a court of law, and the court will attempt to equitably distribute all the financial resources of the marriage, and often awards the woman alimony to take into account the woman's career sacrifices for parenthood.

However, this kind of "merging of lives" can happen even if there is no parenthood involved. Childless couples often still make decisions to pool their financial resources either directly or indirectly. One person in a couple may geographically move to enhance the other's career; couples may pay for one another's education, support one another's endeavors, etc. A couple may also buy property together, having one person contributing the tangible money and the other contributing sweat equity. Whenever there is a significant merging of financial resources, I think marriage is appropriate.

The last situation for which marriage seems like the best option is when one or both partners feel a strong psychological desire to get formally married. This is more complex than all the logistical reasons. Let me attempt to address this "psychological" motivation for marriage. I have interviewed many, many people about this idea of wanting to be married for psychological reasons. When I inquire about why people prefer to be married, rather than just living together, I usually hear the word "commitment." Some people flatly state "If you're really 'committed' you get married." I believe that "commitment" is a very misused word in regards to relationships I am very uncomfortable with people using the idea of "commitment" as the distinction

between living together and being married for a number of reasons. The first is that people have a lot of misconceptions about what kind of commitment they are actually making when they get married. Far too many people seem to have the idea that getting married means making a commitment to stay together. Well, the reality is, millions of couples have stood on marriage altars and made a “commitment” to remain together but have later chosen to divorce. Remaining together “till death do us part” may well be the hope or intention of almost all people who marry, but I think saying the couple has made a commitment to stay together is extremely misleading. Commitment should be used in connection with things a person is in control of. Technically you are in control of whether or not you end a marriage, but the problem is you’re not really in control of whether you and your partner are able to remain compatible enough such that you are able to remain together happily.

Most certainly there is commitment associated with marriage. Marriage partners need to make commitments like: practicing patience; working hard at the relationship; riding out bad times; being monogamous, etc. The fact of the matter is all of these commitments can be made and often are made without the formal structure of marriage. **Marriage is therefore not really a proof of commitment, nor does the decision to not marry necessarily demonstrate a lack of commitment.**

So, how else can the psychological difference between marriage and living together be described--because I do think it feels different. **My sense is that part of the difference is in how society views your relationship.** Though there is widespread acceptance of couples “living together”, it is still true that you receive more social recognition as a couple in our society if you get legally married. That difference comes through in the way you are treated by bosses, doctors, friends, extended family, grown step children etc. Given how new the idea of couplehood without formal marriage is in the psyche of humanity, it is easy to understand how, at some deep level, people may still have unconscious feelings that somehow being married feels more valid, or right, or real. **This acceptance can be very important to people.**

Marriage seems to bestow some kind of honorable or important status. And this is true even if the marriage does not last a lifetime. There is something to be said for being someone’s ex-wife or ex-husband rather than the person he/she lived with for five years. If your ex becomes famous someday, and they write his/her biography, as an ex-wife or ex-husband you will be mentioned; even if you divorced after two years. I guess you could say this is true even with the oral history of a family. Ex-cohabitants’ names and significance may be lost, as memories fade, but ex’s will always at least be mentioned, perhaps not favorably, but mentioned nevertheless!!! The fact that two people married says that, at least in one point in their lives, they were very, very significant to one another. Perhaps this is why the term adopted by the gay community to refer to their life partners was “significant other.” This term is now used by heterosexual couples as well.

Another possible psychological difference between being married verses living together is that some people say that being married makes them try harder to make the relationship last. Some people argue that having the formal structure of marriage makes them feel more committed or invested in the relationship and helps them feel that their partner is also more invested. People often say “Being married makes me have more of a feeling of being settled”, or “Being married helps me have more faith that the relationship will endure; that we won’t throw in the towel if it gets bad for awhile; that we will try and stay in it for the long haul.” “It’s a way of saying I’ve stopped looking”.

However, there are also people who believe that marriage has negative psychological effects. I’ve heard people state very strongly that, if there is not going to be financial merging or children involved, there is no rational reason to get married, and, if there is no rational reason to marry, it is a mistake to “do it anyway” because of old conditioning. I’ve heard people express the sentiment that it is important to try to evolve beyond the obsolete conditioning and not marry simply because that’s what people have always done. Some people believe it is important to create new ways of demonstrating love and commitment that are less obtrusive than marriage for example having a ceremony without getting legally married, or exchanging rings, or referring to one another as “partners”. I’ve also heard people argue that not getting married helps them work harder on their relationship because it helps them to remember that it is a continuous choice to remain together, not a given.

I’ve heard people say that they think getting married makes people take one another too much for granted. So marriage has different psychological effects on different people. However, I am also convinced that deception sometimes comes into play in this debate over whether or not to get married – both self deception

and deceiving another person. Perhaps we run the whole “There’s no reason to get married” rap on our partner:

*“I don’t see any reason why we should get married. We have no interest in pooling our financial resources; we already co-own a house--isn’t that enough? We both have self-supporting careers; we aren’t planning to have children, what is all the hullabaloo about getting married? It’s only a piece of paper. We know we love one another and are deeply committed to making this relationship work. Marriage is for young people who are having kids and blending all their money together.”*

It can all sound so logical. But sometimes it can turn out to be either a self deception or a smoke screen for someone who really isn’t sure he/she has found the right person. A scene from the popular movie “When Harry Met Sally” comes to mind: Sally felt terribly betrayed and sad when her ex-boyfriend who supposedly didn’t believe in marriage suddenly announced his intention to marry the next girlfriend less than a year after breaking up with poor Sally. Sally was in serious tears saying “It wasn’t really that he didn’t believe in marriage; he just didn’t want to marry me!!!” I think we’ve all seen this scenario played out with people we know.

So, in order to find the right answer as to whether or not to marry, it is crucial to be completely honest with yourself and your partner. There is no inherently right or wrong choice. **The “rightness” of the choice is defined by whether it feels right and meets the needs of both people involved, and that there is no intentional dishonesty or lack of self awareness involved.** If children are not involved, and there will be no merging of financial resources, and no one is going to be making major deviations in their life course to accommodate the relationship, there is no “logistical” need for marriage. As a couple, you then need to decide how you feel about marriage vs. non-marriage on a psychological level. Some people simply feel a strong psychological need for marriage whether or not it makes rational sense. In this case it will probably work better to marry, and rely on your prenuptial agreement to delineate the ways you want the marriage to be different than a traditional one in regards to finances. Otherwise, as I outlined earlier, in the event of divorce, the government may step in and do some merging of resources that are extremely unfair and counter the previous agreements the couple made. In fact, I think writing a prenuptial agreement should be standard operating procedure for every couple getting married (see page 10 for a further discussion of prenuptial agreements.)

Lastly, I want to say that I think it is unclear at this point in human history how many marriages make sense in a lifetime. Movie stars have been marrying four and five times for at least a few decades. Us non-Hollywood folks probably won’t move to five marriages any time soon but two marriages is already pretty common. It can certainly be argued that, in this day and age, having three fifteen year marriages is no less valid an option as one fifty year or two twenty- five year marriages. Fifteen years is a long time in the life of modern-day human beings.

## **We Need to Remove the “Till Death Do Us Part” Clause From Marriage Vows & Add a Reference to Divorce**

A pledge to “love one another till death do us part” has been a part of marriage rituals for centuries. The truth of the matter is, in the twenty-first century, many marriages end in divorce, despite pledges of eternal love on the marriage altar. There are a lot of negative consequences to holding onto this “marriage is forever” myth; but cherished myths are hard to dispel.

When I told people I was writing marriage ceremonies that acknowledged the possibility of divorce back in the early 1990’s, people basically told me I was crazy. There was kind of a “kill the messenger” attitude towards anybody who insisted on pointing out that it’s impossible to predict whether or not any given marriage will end in divorce. In the twenty-five years that have elapsed since I wrote the first edition of this book, the divorce rate has increased enough to force people to be a little more willing to acknowledge the possibility of divorce. However, I still think I am a bit of a “lone ranger” in my quest to actually mention the possibility of divorce in marriage ceremonies. Let me present my argument for this “outlandish” idea of discussing divorce at

the time of marriage. I believe that addressing the issue of divorce as part of marriage ceremonies accomplishes two important goals:

- 1) It helps remove the (often undeserved) **stigma** associated with divorce.
- 2) It helps put people in a healthier “mindset” during their marriage. It encourages people to give some thought along the way as to how they will deal with all the logistical complexities of divorce if they are faced with it.

The stigma associated with divorce has religious roots. If the Bible is interpreted strictly, it prohibits divorce. Obviously, in the last several decades churches have become more tolerant of divorce. The government likewise granted acceptance of divorce when “no fault divorces” were instituted in the 1960’s. So, in theory, the churches and the government have declared divorce to be acceptable. Why then is there still so much guilt and shame regarding divorce? **I would propose that most of the stigma associated with divorce today stems from the contention that divorce is caused by some kind of personal lack in one or both partners.** There are certainly many divorces that are caused by a lack of good relationship skills, a lack of commitment or perseverance, or other mental health problems. Another common cause of divorce is making a poor choice of whom you marry. People who are emotionally scarred from their upbringing often marry the wrong people, for the wrong reasons, and then sadly discover that no amount of hard work can make the marriage happy.

It is always sad to see marriages end for these kind of preventable reasons. **If these were the only causes of divorce, it might make sense to allow the stigma regarding divorce to remain.** It would make sense to discourage people from divorcing and assist them in resolving the emotional or commitment problems that are destroying their marriages (and to try and help people make better choices regarding whom they marry.) As a mental health professional, I most certainly think as a society we should do everything we can to help people avoid “preventable” divorces.

However, I firmly believe that not all divorces fall into this “preventable” category. **I conclude that there is a whole other class of divorces: divorces that are caused by sociological factors.** These divorces have nothing to do with any kind of personal lack in either partner and therefore deserve no stigma. Let me outline these sociological causes for divorce.

Two important factors which have contributed to the increase in divorce are the increased life expectancy and the emergence of effective birth control. The custom of lifelong marriage was established when the average life span for human beings was well under fifty. The average life expectancy is now somewhere around seventy-five. This means that the number of years a couple has to remain together in order to have a lifelong marriage has greatly increased by as much as twenty-five years! The longer people live, the more likely they are to change as individuals, and this may lead them to grow in very different directions and become unable to remain compatible as marriage partners. In addition, up until a few decades ago, people spent their entire married lives raising children, verses the modern day norm of having the children raised by the age of 45 or 50, and still having twenty to thirty years of life ahead. Couples are much more likely to divorce when children are not involved because they do not have to weigh the negative effects on their children in making the decision to separate.

This brings me to another factor which contributes to the increased divorce rate. A substantial percentage more homogeneity than you do today, in terms of values and lifestyles. Our culture has become very diverse. There are radical feminists and traditional housewives, born again Christians, Zen Buddhists, and those who of marriages today do not include children, for a variety of reasons: concerns about overpopulation, infertility, and simply a greater acceptance by our culture of the choice to not parent. Childless couples can base their decision to remain married, or divorce, solely on the basis of the personal satisfaction with the relationship.

Another factor contributing to the increase in divorce is simply that human beings have become increasingly diverse in their values and lifestyles over the past several decades. If you took a cross section of the population of the United States, before the cultural revolution of the 1960’s, you would have found a lot more homogeneity than you do today, in terms of values and lifestyles. Our culture has become very diverse.



There are radical feminists and traditional housewives, born again Christians, Zen Buddhists, and those who practice Witchcraft; vegetarians and those of the "real men don't eat quiche" philosophy; Communists and right wing Republicans; voluntary simplicity hippies who ride bicycles and yuppies who own three sports cars; war protesters and flag waving war supporters.

In this day and age, when two people marry, they are part of a diverse culture, with a multitude of lifestyle options and ways of thinking. As a result of this diversity, marriage partners may grow and change tremendously as they progress through life. After ten years a husband and wife may take a look at one another and say "You're not the person I married; we want totally different things out of life. There's no way we can meet one another's needs as life partners." Though a certain amount of individual differences between husbands and wives is both inevitable and healthy, there is a point at which the differences can interfere with a couple's ability to create a satisfying love relationship.

The last sociological factor I want to discuss is the women's liberation movement. Lifelong marriage, from a historical perspective, evolved out of a social structure in which women were deprived of independence. Until women had a reasonable degree of economic independence, that is, access to jobs that paid more than subsistence wages, marriage was, for most women, not a choice but a necessity. For women, divorce meant going out into the world with no job skills and poor earning power. Under such circumstances, it was easier to remain with a spouse one didn't love than to face the poverty of single womanhood. Men were also trapped by women's lack of independence. If a man no longer wanted to be married to his wife, he could not feel free to leave her without feeling guilty. Marriage was a woman's source of income and identity, and dissolving a marriage was to strip a woman of these necessities.

Though we are a long way from true equality between men and women, there have been dramatic improvements. Women, on the whole, have considerably more economic independence than they did before the women's liberation movement of the last several decades. Some women make as much or more than their husbands. There are now female CEO's, we've had a female Secretary of State and will likely have a female president in the not too distant future. As a result of this economic freedom, women are much less likely to be forced to marry, or to stay married for economic reasons. Thus, women can terminate unfulfilling marriages. Likewise, more men are deciding to end unhappy marriages, because they know their wives are no longer economically dependent on them, and thus will not be devastated by divorce.

The women's liberation movement also increased the possibility of divorce because it increased the possibility that a husband's and wife's life paths would become incompatible. When women functioned as appendages to their husbands, without their own goals or careers, the question of whether or not a husband's and wife's life paths could remain compatible throughout their lives was a moot point. Women did not think of themselves as having lifetime objectives, other than marriage and children. However, as a result of the women's liberation movement, marriage is now, hopefully, a joining of two evolving human beings, each with individual life goals, careers, and unique destinies to unfold. In such circumstances, it is far more likely that a husband and wife may change in ways that make them unable to remain married without stifling one another's growth and happiness.

I do not mean to imply that feminism precludes the possibility of lifelong marriage; because men and women cannot get along when men are not allowed to be "the head of the household". I firmly believe that some people, staunch feminists included, may decide that lifelong marriage is the option most conducive to their happiness. However, when a high degree of incompatibility develops, the negative aspects of a marriage can grow to outweigh its merits.

There are then, a variety of reasons for divorce. Sometimes marriages fail because the partners lack adequate relationship skills or because one or both parties are unwilling to commit themselves to doing the work that is required to keep a marriage healthy and happy. Some marriages end because the people weren't healthy enough to make a good choice of a partner in the first place. However, in some cases, mentally healthy, deeply committed people, with solid relationship skills develop serious incompatibilities. If/when this happens, the couple can "work" on their marriage until they are blue in the face and it will not enable them to overcome the "irreconcilable differences" that develop between them. There are also situations where one person in a marriage develops a mental health problem that the other person has little if any blame or responsibility for.

Given the fact that some marriages will end in divorce through no fault of the parties involved, it is unfair to automatically assign blame to people if they decide to divorce. This is undeserved stigma and it causes

**unnecessary** emotional pain and trauma to divorcing people.

Requiring people to stand on a marriage altar and publicly announce to all their friends and relatives that they will always love each other and remain together forever contributes to people feeling like failures if they are unable to achieve this. Deciding to end a marriage is often fraught with feelings of betraying God, family, community, self, and the other person. Divorcing people are plagued with shame: "What's wrong with me that I couldn't make my marriage work?" One of the most common reasons people seek psychotherapy is "post divorce adjustment"--I have seen divorce cause very deep self-esteem problems for years afterward. If you take a quick browse in the self-help psychology section of any major bookstore, you will find shelves of books on how to cope with divorce; testimony as to how psychologically traumatic divorce is for people. **Some of the trauma of divorce is caused by the loss itself, but a part of the pain is caused by the guilt and shame from renegeing on a vow that, in my opinion, should never have been made.** I firmly believe that the easiest and most effective way we can dispel the "marriage is forever" myth, and the accompanying blame and stigma that is doled out when "forever" doesn't happen, is to openly stop promising forever, and acknowledge the possibility of divorce at the time of marriage.

The last reason I think that divorce should be openly acknowledged at the time of marriage is that acknowledging the possibility of divorce creates the proper "mindset" for dealing with logistical decisions during the marriage. A "this is forever" mindset prompts people to make decisions that they may regret later if the marriage does not turn out to be lifelong. For example, partners may make serious career sacrifices, not pursue further education, or geographically relocate based on the assumption that they are in a lifelong partnership. If it turns out that the marriage only lasts ten years, for instance, it is hard to make up for those life detours. Admittedly, it is impossible to have a successful marriage without both people making compromises and decisions to accommodate the other person's needs. It also makes no sense to live in constant anxiety wondering "What if this marriage ends?" What I am proposing is some healthy middle ground; simply keeping the possibility of divorce in the back of your mind when making "life course altering" decisions, and having a contingency plan.

Considering the possibility of divorce is particularly necessary when children are involved. When people operate from the assumption that their marriage will be life-long, they do not give enough thought to how they will deal with parenting their children in the event of divorce. As a result of this lack of forethought, divorcing parents often feel extremely angry and confused about how to deal with their relationships with their children after divorce. In addition, ex-spouses are sometimes so bitter about their divorces that they allow this bitterness to affect how they deal with their children.

Quite often the father/child relationship is greatly diminished after divorce because the mother has negative feelings about her ex-husband. Divorced mothers often greatly limit the father's access to the children. In addition, when a divorced mother remarries, she often tries to make her new husband into a new father for the children, and tries to discourage the children from pursuing a close relationship with their biological father. The biological father's relationship is also sometimes diminished because the mother decides to move across the country. Many divorced women make no attempt to coordinate their lives with the children's father so that he can continue to be near his children. The father/child relationship may deteriorate to nothing more than a two week visit once a year and long distance phone calls.

An equally sad situation often happens to the father/child relationship after divorce: the mother may want the father to continue his fathering role, but he may participate very little after the divorce. When this happens, the mother is placed in the difficult situation of trying to play both mother and father to her children. In addition, fathers too often cut off their financial support to the children after divorce. The family courts are full of cases of divorced mothers unsuccessfully trying to collect child support payments.

You may be muttering to yourself as you read this "Even if people acknowledge divorce as a possibility in their marriage ceremonies, divorce will always be traumatic and detrimental for children." I agree that divorce is difficult for children. First there are the logistical problems inherent in divorce. Divorced families are often burdened financially with the cost of maintaining two households that provide enough space for the children to live in half the time, virtually doubling the family's housing costs. For the majority of families this added stress on the budget will be sorely felt. If they can't afford the luxury of dual houses, completely outfitted with a room set aside for half-time resident children, one parent ends up living in a "single-person sized" living space, where it is difficult for the children to feel "at home". The non-custodial parent never again really feels that he/she

lives with his/her children; they just come to visit and sleep on the couch. In addition, if the divorced parents do not live in the same immediate neighborhood, the children often come to resent being carted back and forth twice a week such that their relationships with friends, and their general social connections, are regularly disrupted. Going to the non-custodial parent's house every weekend loses its appeal, when it means you miss the school dance or activity or can't be on the baseball team because Dad and Mom live 50-100 miles apart.

Then there is, of course, the complex, painful feelings the children experience during and after divorce. There is no doubt about it, it is very emotionally painful for children to have their family ripped apart. It is also very emotionally confusing for children that two people who they love and are deeply connected to no longer love one another. Younger children often wonder if the divorce is somehow their fault. Then there is just the simple fact that there is suddenly one parent instead of two available on a daily basis to meet a child's emotional needs.

Despite the substantial difficulties inherent in divorce, a significant percentage of couples continue to divorce. Though some people look at divorcing parents as irresponsible and unhealthy persons who don't care about the well-being of their children, my experiences with divorcing/divorced couples have left me convinced that only a small percentage of divorcing couples fit this description. Most divorcing couples are extremely concerned about how divorce will affect the emotional well-being of their children. Most parents have agonized over whether or not to end their marriage, and made many sincere attempts to salvage their marital relationship before resorting to divorce.

What leads these couples to choose divorce, despite its drawbacks, is the conclusion that all things considered, divorce is the best option. These couples decided that the negative effects on the children must be measured and weighed against the negative effects of remaining in an incompatible marriage. In evaluating the pros and cons of divorce it is important to consider that a seriously unhappy marriage creates a very unhappy and stressful home. Though the spouses may try as hard as they can to make the best of their situation "for the sake of the children" the negative energy seems to hang in the air. Children are amazingly perceptive and are always quite aware of the difficulties between the parents. At its worst, the problems between the parents escalate into frequent heated arguments and/or physical abuse. However, even when couples in dissatisfying marriages are able to refrain from overt fighting, they cannot keep their discontent from putting a constant oppressive damper on the household. My experiences with divorcing couples lead me to conclude that it takes more than an intact family to raise well adjusted children; it takes a happy home. When a happy, intact family isn't an option, I have seen evidence to support the contention that happy, divorced parents can make better parents than unhappily married couples.

When parents are happy with themselves and their lives, these positive feelings enable them to be more loving, nurturing, attentive, and playful with their children. The reality is depressed, dissatisfied, and unfulfilled people make lousy parents. When a parent's own needs aren't being met, they feel in no mental state to be giving to others. The old reasoning of staying together "for the sake of the children" can, in fact, sometimes backfire. If you do something "for the sake of the parents"-- release them from a miserable marital situation-- it will increase their emotional health so they can be more giving to their children.

The conclusions I have reached about the effect of divorce on the well-being of children is that it is impossible to make sweeping generalizations. **Every family is beset with a unique set of circumstances and there are no across the board answers as to what effect, positive or negative, divorce will have on a given family.** Most certainly, due to the many difficult logistical problems inherent in divorce, couples with children should make every attempt to heal the problems in their marital relationship so as to keep their family intact. However, "irreconcilable differences" is for some marital couples a reality that years of marital counseling will not change. If a marital relationship changes such that the partners are no longer capable of meeting one another's needs, divorce can be the best option for both themselves and their children.

As more and more people, through the decades, have struggled with the dilemma of unhappy marriage vs. divorce, couples are learning to deal with divorce in increasingly healthy and positive ways. We are seeing more and more divorces where the parents are maintaining positive ex-spousal relationships with one another and participating in workable joint custody arrangements. Divorced parents are learning how to coordinate their lives geographically to allow each parent to be an integral part of the children's lives.

It would certainly be ideal if there were no need for divorce, particularly when children are involved. It would be nice if couples did not have to be confronted with two negative options: remain in unhappy marriages

or endure the negative aspects of broken family arrangements. I think that, as a society, there is much we can do to decrease the need for divorce. We can attempt to raise people to be healthier; to have strong self-esteem, greater self-awareness etc., so people are more capable of making healthy choices regarding their marriage partners. We can encourage people to participate in pre-marital counseling so they are better prepared for the complexities of marriage. We can teach people good communication and conflict resolution skills. We can encourage people to marry later in life, after they have a clearer and more solid sense of themselves, and thus have a better chance of choosing a parenting partner with whom they will be able to maintain a satisfying and workable long-term relationship. All of this would help decrease the need for divorce. However, I conclude that, even in a society of highly evolved, extremely healthy human beings, divorce would still exist. Even two people who have a very satisfying and viable marriage for ten or twenty years, may grow and change as people and find that they can no longer meet one another's needs.

I firmly believe that during the centuries when we had a very low divorce rate we also had a very high level of unhappy marriages. Many downright miserable marriages lasted in the past because people were taught that it was a sin to terminate a marriage. A substantial number of marriages will continue to end in divorce, even when children are involved. By acknowledging the possibility of divorce, couples will be better equipped to deal with divorce in a healthy manner if they need to.

## **We Need to Update Who in Our Society Has the Right to Perform Marriage Ceremonies.**

Up until the cultural revolution of the 1960's, the majority of marriage ceremonies in this country were performed by clergy-persons. In the last forty years, more and more people have left the churches. Some people still turn to the clergy to perform their life rituals, even though they haven't set foot in a church for many, many years, and may disagree with many of the church's teachings. I personally believe we are in serious need of secular officials whose specific role is to perform marriage rituals.

Currently people who do not choose to be married in a church/synagogue are left with the option of having their marriages legitimated by secular officials such as judges, council-people, etc. This doesn't seem particularly appropriate. It seems incongruous to their general role. What I think we need to see happen is the creation of "Licensed Public Marriage Officiates", whose sole role would be to conduct marriage ceremonies. The State could provide meeting places of various sizes where marriage ceremonies would be conducted, which couples could rent for a reasonable fee. Couples could also have the option of having the officiate come to a private setting of their choice, for an additional fee.

I envision the role of the marriage officiate as low key and simple. Thus, I propose that to become a marriage officiate would not require a college degree, but rather a simple civil service test, and perhaps a six-week training course. It would not be designed to be a position of authority, prestige, etc. The focus of this position would be more as a certified public witness to the ceremony. The officiate would also serve in an information giving capacity.

It would not be the role of the officiate to recite proscriptions of how marital partners should behave (except in real basic ways), or to somehow bless, sanctify, or give approval to the union. Rather, the role would be to act as a public witness to the fact that two consenting adults were choosing to exercise their right to form a marital partnership.

### **This is how I would envision a marriage officiate's role in conducting a marriage ceremony:**

- 1) Ask each party if they choose to marry the other. This would accomplish proof of "consenting adults."
- 2) Ask the couple to announce the agreements they have made as to how their finances will be structured in their marriage, i.e. whether they intend to totally

communalize their resources or not. This would basically be a brief overview of their pre-nuptial agreement.

- 3) Ask each person to declare that they understand and are satisfied with the pre-nuptial agreement they have signed. This would establish that the contract was not made under duress.
- 4) Ask the couple to pledge to abide by the agreements they have made to one another to the best of their abilities.
- 5) Ask each person to pledge that they will provide for the emotional and financial needs of any children of the marriage.
- 6) Make reference to the fact that our society grants individuals the right to terminate a marital union if the relationship reaches a point of irreconcilable differences. Ask each person to pledge that, if they ever choose to divorce, they will treat one another with respect during that process.
- 7) Outline the legal rights of marriage in terms of making medical decisions and funeral arrangements on one another's behalf.
- 8) Invite the couple or wedding participants to speak about their love for one another, aspirations for their future life together, etc. This would be an opportunity for poetic expression, songs, etc. The only stipulations would be that this part of the ceremony could not contain anything which would invalidate or contradict the legal marriage contract they drafted.
- 9) Ask two witnesses to step forth to endorse the sincerity and positive intention of the couple towards one another. I have never understood the purpose of having people "stand up" in a wedding as has traditionally been practiced in our society. If someone is going to participate in your wedding, it seems to me they should do something besides stand mutely on the altar in a poofy pink dress! Likewise, traditionally in our society, the two required witnesses in a wedding do not participate in any way other than to sign their name.

I would give a more active role to the witnesses and wedding party. This is not to say that the witnesses should have to unequivocally endorse the union and guarantee its success. The role of the witnesses would simply be to say that they know the couple well enough to say that they believe they have positive intentions towards one another and are sincerely committed to building a positive, healthy relationship to the best of their abilities. If desired, the witnesses could read poems or add some personal reflections, but the only legal requirement would be for them to attest to the sincerity and positive intentions of the couple.

- 10) Pronounce the couple legally married.

**The above framework is what I have used in the ceremonies presented in this chapter.**

I think a lot of support could be generated for the idea of creating marriage officiates. For those of you interested in this issue, you might consider approaching the appropriate county governing body with the idea of creating a position much like a Justice of the Peace was in decades past.

In the meantime, there are several options for couples who do not want to be married by a traditional clergy-person. The first option is to contact a minister from a Unitarian Universalist Church. They have chapters in most major cities. The Unitarian Universalist Church is very liberal. Their church doctrine leaves room for a lot of personal choice and interpretation regarding spirituality. U.U. church members consist of Agnostics, Atheists, Pagans, Humanists, liberal Christians/Jews, etc. The Unitarian Universalist Church is very supportive of couples designing their own marriage ceremonies. Oftentimes, U.U. ministers are willing to marry couples who do not belong to their church for a reasonable fee.

The second option available to people are the radical "churches" such as the Universal Life Church and American Fellowship Church. These churches were established in the 1950's by political activists who wanted to challenge the sovereignty of churches in such matters as tax exempt status. They also wanted to challenge the emotional power structure of traditional churches with the clergy being set apart as having a special "in" with God. These churches are based on the concept that all persons are in touch with God, and are thus preaching their own gospel, or Divine truths as they perceive them. The founders of these churches challenge that this idea is essentially no different than clergy persons in traditional churches claiming knowledge of the Divine truth. Thus, the procedure for becoming an ordained minister of these churches is quite a simple one. You are sworn in by any other active minister of the church by committing yourself to an oath such as this:

*"Do you \_\_\_\_\_ hereby pledge to commit yourself to pledging Divine truth as you perceive it to be the best of your abilities, so as to raise the spiritual consciousness of your co-human beings?"*

*"I do."*

*"You are hereby ordained for life as a minister of the Universal Life Church, and as such, are entitled to perform all ministerial services such as baptisms, marriages, funerals, and to conduct church meetings. You are likewise entitled to all the privileges and considerations usually granted to a minister. You are also legally authorized to ordain other ministers into the church. You are also hereby authorized to establish your own parish of the Universal Life Church, which will be entitled to all the legal rights granted to churches in the state in which you live."*

Note: A minimum donation is requested by the church for ordainment (\$10.00) to help cover administration costs. (You can also donate more to help maintain these great organizations!)

Thus, one way to circumvent the requirement of having a government representative or traditional clergy-person perform your marriage ceremony is to become an ordained minister of these radical churches, and then ordain your best friend so he/she can marry you. This is how my husband and I were married. We both ordained our best friends, and had them sign our marriage license, and it was as legal as if the pope himself had done it! (You do still have to apply for a marriage license from the State, but you do not have to have a government official, or regular clergy person, perform the actual marriage ceremony.) I have included the addresses of these churches below in case you want to utilize this method for having your marriage legally recognized.

### **Contact these churches at:**

*Universal Life Church, 21595 Sky Tanner Drive Tucson, AZ 85730*  
or [www.universallifechurch.org](http://www.universallifechurch.org)

*American Fellowship Church, 225 Crossroads Blvd. #345 Carmel, CA 93923*  
or [www.americanfellowshipchurch.org](http://www.americanfellowshipchurch.org)

## We Need to Remove the Sexism from Marriage Rituals

Marriage ceremonies, through the centuries, have fostered extremely unequal relationships between husbands and wives. The traditional marriage rituals of our culture are of Judeo-Christian origin. The following verses from The Bible (still in use in conservative churches) give you a feel for how Christianity viewed women through the ages:

*"Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands.*

*Husbands, love your wives...Let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband."*

*The Bible, Revised Standard Edition, Ephesians, Chapter 5, Verses 22-25,28,33.*

*"Likewise you wives, be submissive to your husbands, so that some, though they do not obey the word, may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, when they see your reverent and chaste behavior. Let not yours be the outward adorning with braiding of hair, decoration of gold, and wearing of fine clothing, but let it be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious. So once the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves and were submissive to their husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord...Likewise you husbands, live considerately with your wives, bestowing honor on the woman as the weaker sex, since you are joint heirs of the grace of life..."*

*The Bible, Revised Standard Edition, I Peter, Chapter 3, Verses 1-7.*

These verses are quite blatant in assigning a subservient role to wives. Whereas men are directed to love their wives, women are directed to obey their husbands. The feminist movement of the 1970's inspired some reform in marriage rituals and customs in this country. For instance, most women began demanding that the word "obey" be removed from traditional marriage vows. I think most of the overt sexism has been eliminated from marriage rituals at this point in time.

However, marriage rituals are still sexist in subtle ways. The most obvious example of sexism is the custom of women taking their husbands' names when they marry. The women's liberation movement prompted some women to challenge this custom along with the custom of classifying women as married/unmarried by the salutation Miss/Mrs. However, the majority of women still assume their husband's name when they marry.

I am continually saddened and angered that most women do not recognize to what degree they are compromising their individuality by participating in this oppressive custom. Feminist leaders of the 1800's cried out for reform regarding this issue during the first women's liberation movement:

*"...When a slave escapes from a southern plantation, he [or she] at once takes a name as the first step in liberty--the assertion of individual identity. A woman's dignity is equally involved in a lifelong name, to mark her individuality. We cannot over-estimate the demoralizing effect on woman herself, to say nothing of a society at large, for her to consent to merge her existence wholly in that of another."*

*Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Proceedings of the Second Woman's Rights Convention, Rochester, New York, August 2, 1848, cited in Stanton, Anthony and Gage History of Woman's Suffrage, vol. 1, p. 80.*

The issue of names was addressed during the civil rights movement of the 1960's. The inspirational leader Malcolm X called upon his black brothers and sisters to discard the white names they had inherited from their centuries in slavery. A good number of black families have stopped naming their children white folks' names and have come up with their own unique names. Not only is claiming a new name for oneself often a part of personal liberation, but assuming new names has been part of the process of liberation for whole groups of people: "Black" and "Afro-American" have replaced "Negro", and "Native American" has replaced "Indian", as part of these people's struggle for equality.

Given the significance of names, I am very puzzled as to why so many women cling to the custom of giving up their names -- **a custom so intricately linked to centuries of oppression of women's rights.** The custom of women assuming their husbands' names was part of an entire patriarchal system which denied women the most basic of rights--the right to own property and conduct business, the right to participate in government, and access to economic means of support. Any woman willing to do even minimal research into the origins of the custom of women assuming their husband's names will discover that this was not an act of romantic love. Women were given their husbands' names because they were considered a part of a man's property! The custom served to reinforce a husband's total dominance over his wife.

We are still a long way away from women having full equal rights in our society. There are still gaps in pay, and lots of discrimination regarding promoting women to high level jobs. And we have yet to see a female president. As individuals we cannot eradicate sexism on a national level or international level. However, we have lots of power to eliminate the sexism in our own marriages. The words from a booklet I purchased as a budding feminist in the 1970's ring just as true today as they did back then:

*"My husband and I see ourselves as two independent and equal people who have chosen to share our lives. Our relationship isn't one of homemaker and breadwinner, or protected and protector, but rather of two separate individuals who have in common certain interests and goals. Thus, my becoming 'Mrs. Him' would contradict not only the identities each of us has built up for him and herself, but also our definition of the relationship we have together."*

*"Six months ago I was married and decided at that time to continue to use the name that had been mine for 29 years. I did not want to disappear from the telephone book, from the name tag on the mail box, or from charge plates. Exchanging my name for my husband's name would be a symbolic denial of all that I was before I married, and by taking his name in place of my own I would be publicly proclaiming that hereafter I would be a new person, a person with very little connection with the past. Before I married I traveled to Europe, Easter Island, Peru; I had friends, made plans, paid my bills. In other words, I was a complete person. My life did not begin at the time of my marriage. It simply became happier."*

*Diane Altman, Linda Roberson (1974) Booklet For Women Who Wish To Determine Their Own Names After Marriage. Barrington, Illinois: Center for a Woman's Own Name.*

It is of course true that, in this culture, a woman's maiden name comes from her paternal lineage, and it thus has sexist connotations attached to it. A woman cannot do much about the sexism she inherited. **However, in retaining her given name, a woman prevents sexist naming customs from being passed on to the next generation.** I have met women who felt strongly enough about the issue of names that they decided to give up the name derived from their paternal lineage and adopt a new name. An acquaintance of mine changed her name to "Iamla", which is Sanskrit for "I am Song."



Of course, some couples are dealing with the issue of names by hyphenating their last names, for ample, Maxwell-Brown. Though I appreciate this attempt at a non-sexist solution to names, I think it is an inadequate solution. Hyphenating names will not provide a solution to the other sexist custom regarding names in our culture--giving all the offspring of a marital union the father's surname. Giving a hyphenated surname to the children is an admirable attempt at resolving sexist naming customs, but it is doomed to failure for logistical reasons—it will not work beyond one generation. What happens when Mary Maxwell-Brown marries another child of a liberated marriage, George Beechwood-Green? Hyphenated names are nothing more than a token concession to equality which does not help bring about the fundamental change that is needed in regards to naming customs.

It is extremely important that workable alternatives to naming all children of a marital union the father's surname be developed. I think comments like "It's too much of a hassle", or "We can't come up with a workable idea", is a real cop-out. Naming all children after their fathers is sexist and demeaning to women. It is based on the idea that paternity is all that is of relevance; a woman just provides a uterus for a man to plant his all-important seed within. This is certainly a strange way to look at things when one compares the connection a woman has to a child--nurturing it within her body for nine months and birthing it--compared to a man's participation! However, I am not a reverse sexist and am not interested in replacing a patriarchal system with a matriarchal one (the human race has already been through matriarchal societies). I am excited about creating an egalitarian society where the value and importance of both sexes is respected.

A child is created by his/her mother and father, and it is silly and fruitless to argue the importance of one over the other, because all arguments lead back to the simple fact that a child cannot be born without both a male and female contribution--sperm and egg. It is therefore important that the customs for naming children within a society do not reflect the connection of one parent to the child, while ignoring the other parent's relationship to the child.

So what's a liberated couple to do? One possible way to deal with the issue of names is for both partners to retain their own names after marriage and to name the female offspring after the mother and the male offspring after the father. This is a workable solution and I have met some couples who are doing it, and are quite happy with it. Other couples I've met decided to name the first born child after one parent, and the second born child after the other parent. I have also met couples that made up a new name for themselves upon marriage that had nothing to do with their former names, and planned to name their children this new surname.

However, what my partner and I came up with is to give each of our children their own individual names first, middle and last. I came up with this idea one day when I was thinking about the fact that Native Americans (until they had white culture forced upon them) did not pass surnames onto their children. Every Native American child was given his/her own, unique name at birth. Thus, there are no "Nancy Sitting Bulls" or "Black Elk Juniors"! The idea of children having their own names makes a lot of sense to me: I don't want to view my children as appendages to myself any more than I want women to be viewed as appendages to men.

What is also exciting about the idea of giving children their own last names is that you can make up beautiful, meaningful names. My partner and I have enjoyed looking through baby books for surnames. We've found some inspiring ones: Alexander--helper of humankind and Woodward--keeper of the forest; the possibilities are endless.

My partner and I have been given some negative feedback about our idea of giving all of our children their own names. People have told us that our children will be traumatized because they do not have the same names as their parents or their siblings. I find this reasoning ridiculous in light of the number of children who do not have the same name as their parents or siblings due to divorce and remarriage.

Let me move on now to another aspect of traditional marriage rituals that is subtly sexist: the bride being "given away" by her father to her husband. This symbolic act is derogatory to women because it reinforces the false concept that a woman is a dependent who will be supported by her husband. **The concept of a wife's dependency is created through a false and sexist frame of reference--the total discounting and negation of the value of women's work by our society.** The idea that husbands "support" their wives is an absurd notion. If one were to add up the number of hours a full-time homemaker works in a family that includes children, it becomes quickly obvious that it is she who carries far more of the workload of the family. A typical homemaker works as many as eighty-four hours a week, fifty-two weeks a year, no paid vacation or

holidays. As anyone who has done house work or child-care can attest to, a housewife's job is just as difficult as a job outside the home. So, the notion that a woman is a "dependent" who is supported by her husband is a sexist and absurd way of looking at things. A husband and wife are a team which splits the work that is necessary for their family's survival. It is of course also true that, nowadays, the majority of wives also work outside the home. So in many cases husbands do not support their wives, even in purely economic terms.

The most obvious way to eliminate the sexist custom of the bride being "given away" by the father to the husband is for both the bride and the groom to walk down the aisle themselves. However, another option is for the bride to walk down the aisle with both her parents, and the groom walk down the aisle with both of his parents. There is something to be said for having the parents walk down the aisle to the spouse. Marriage redefines one's most primary bond to be to one's spouse, not one's parents. Therefore, I think adapting the "give away the bride" custom into a "give away the child" could help symbolize the legal and psychological separation between parents and adult children which happens at the time of marriage.

The next sexist aspect of traditional marriage rituals that needs to be eliminated is the bride's father paying for the wedding. This custom serves as the passing of the baton of financial support--from father to husband. In paying for a daughter's wedding, the father makes one last grand act of providership before turning this duty over to the new son-in-law. Again, I maintain that grown women are NOT supported by their husbands as long as they are working every day to provide for the needs of their families. I would like to see the custom of fathers paying for their daughters' weddings done away with because it feeds the whole "men as providers" mentality. The costs of a wedding should be shared by everyone involved--the bride's family, the groom's family and the bride and groom themselves. If there are significant economic disparities between the families, people can contribute labor instead of money. Some people can help prepare the food, decorate, or clean up afterward; all of these labor donations are as valuable as cash contributions. Handling the arrangements in this way gives everyone the opportunity to feel they are making a valuable contribution. If we continue to participate in sexist marriage customs, we are sabotaging our efforts to create truly equal relationships between men and women. Rather than participate in outmoded rituals we should create new rituals--rituals that can help move us a step closer to the future we glimpse in our moments of vision.

## **We need to recognize that a significant number of couples will choose to marry, but not have children. We need to address the issue of parenthood directly, and independently, of marriage.**

Until fairly recently in human history, marriage almost always led to children. It is still quite common for friends and relatives to begin almost immediately inquiring of recently married couples: "So when are you going to have children?"; as if no one would get married unless they intended to raise a family together. A substantial percentage of married couples do not have children, for a variety of reasons: concerns about overpopulation, infertility, or simply not wanting to parent. Therefore, it is important that we begin viewing the decision to marry, and the decision to become parents, as totally separate decisions. I believe that each of these passages should have its own ritual. Marriage rituals should prepare people for marriage. If the people decide to become parents together, at a later date, a separate ceremony should be held to deal with the issues of parenthood.\*

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*\*If people want to make a brief mention in their marriage ceremony that they intend to have children together, I think that is fine. However, I think it makes sense to wait until the time of pregnancy to deal with the issue of parenting in depth.*

Given the need for a separation of marriage and parenthood, the marriage rituals on the following pages focus on the relationship the marital partners will have with one another as spouses. I have also written a parenthood ceremony; which deals with the relationship between the prospective parents and their children, and their relationship with one another as parenting partners. The parenthood ceremony can be downloaded on my website: [personalgrowthresources.com](http://personalgrowthresources.com).

As far as the logistics of wedding ceremonies and parenting ceremonies, I think this would vary greatly. Couples who choose to have a large wedding ceremony might not wish to bear the financial burden of having another large community celebration when they become parents. They might therefore choose to only invite immediate family and a few close friends to the parenting ceremony. Some couples may choose to have a more private wedding ceremony, and a large parenthood celebration. Obviously some couples will chose to marry specifically because the woman is pregnant. In this case I think it is important that this combination ceremony address the relationship of the partners with one another, as well as their relationship to their children.

## **We Need to Grant Gay Couples the Right to Marry**

Even if you consider yourself a liberal minded person, you might still find yourself bristling at the thought of sanctifying gay marriages. **This was the opening sentence to the 1987 edition of this book. I was advocating for it almost twenty-five years before it came a reality.** We have certainly come a loooooooooooooooooong way in regards to gay marriage. There are some states that now sanction gay marriages and perhaps soon they all will or there will be some federal legislation granting gays the right to marry. The battle for acceptance is far from over though. In the hearts and minds of some people, gay marriage is still not something they see as morally acceptable. So I want to include some of my original arguments in support of gay marriage for proponents of gay marriage to use when discussing the topic with people who have not yet reached a sense of acceptance about granting gays the right to legally marry.

Perhaps the most common arguments still used by people opposed to legalizing gay marriages is: "Gay marriage is detrimental to society because gay couples do not produce offspring, and procreation is at the root of the survival of the species." This line of reasoning may have made sense in the 1800's when we were trying to populate this continent, and a large percentage of children died before reaching adulthood, due to the harshness of life. However, the absurdity of applying this line of reasoning to present day life is obvious. The planet is grossly overpopulated. Many heterosexuals are choosing not to parent for this very reason. Due to our own ignorance, we are unable to even provide decently for a large number of children that are already here. Certainly we do not need to call upon all able bodied men and women to spew forth children! There are probably enough adoptable children on this planet to supply all gay couples with a ready-made family!

But perhaps gay couples raising children is, in fact, what is at the root of some people's fear: "If you give gay couples children to raise, via adoption or artificial insemination, they will bring more gay people into the world!" I sincerely hope that as more and more people from all walks of life, all religions, and all political orientations discover that a percentage of their offspring and relatives turn out to be homosexual, they will become less and less concerned about whether or not gay couples will produce gay children. I hope that we soon evolve to a state of mind that gayness will not be seen as a scourge that needs to be removed from the world. Secondly, I question the accuracy of this assumption that gay parents necessarily raise gay children.

Studies of gay parenting couples do not bear out the hypothesis that gay parents produce gay children. Likewise, consider the flip side of this: gay children come out of heterosexual families! After considering this matter at length, I am convinced that it is impossible to definitely link any environmental factor to gayness. Gay adults come out of a wide range of family situations. Likewise, a given family situation that produces a gay child almost always produces several heterosexual children as well.

A related argument against gay parenting I want to address is the idea that children raised by same-sex parents will have difficulty forming close relationships with the opposite sex in adulthood. I would totally agree that if children are denied the opportunity to emotionally bond with persons of one sex when they are young, they will experience great difficulty in forming close, trusting, relationships with whichever sexed

persons were absent from their experiences. I think this would be very detrimental to the children's well being. If a given gay couple was into a weird, neurotic trip of hating and discounting the value of all persons of the opposite sex and refusing to allow their children to form any relationships with men/women, this would be a pathological way to bring up children. However, this extremist and unhealthy philosophy is very uncommon. **Most gay parenting couples have a variety of close friends and relatives of the opposite sex, with whom they encourage their children to have close relationships.** It is not imperative that opposite sex bonding happen with a parent figure; there are millions of children raised in single parent homes who likewise only have a parent of one sex.

I'd say I know more gay parents than most heterosexuals do. The gay parents I know operate from the premise that children develop most optimally when allowed the freedom to interact with a variety of adults, not only of different sexes but people with different values and philosophies as well. This allows children to get needs met that their parents cannot meet, due to their own limitations and shortcomings, which all parents have.

Another issue that concerns people about gay parenting is the idea that male children need a male parent for role modeling purposes, and female children likewise need a female parent. I believe that this is an obsolete concept. In less advanced societies where the roles and characteristics of males and females were polarized, this issue was relevant. However, our modern day society has recognized how rigidly defined sex-roles unnecessarily limit options for both men and women, both in terms of personal development and career possibilities. Thus, we have evolved to a situation where both men and women are encouraged to be strong, assertive, and analytical, as well as gentle, nurturing, and intuitive. Likewise, both men and women can be doctors, engineers, lawyers, as well as nursery school teachers, nurses, and librarians! Children do not need to be indoctrinated nor subtly encouraged to think, feel, or live in certain ways because they are male or female, nor direct their career choices in certain ways because of their sex. Thus, whether a child has same-sex parents will not preclude him/her from assuming an appropriate role in society as an adult. I would agree that there are some psychological differences between men and women, and that it is important that children have opportunities to have close, intimate relationships with people of both sexes. I simply do not believe that it is necessary for children to have two opposite sexed parents to develop properly.

Of course, not all gay couples will choose to parent, just as in this day and age, not every heterosexual couple chooses to have children. Even if there were enough adoptable children available, and gay male couples and gay female couples were permitted to adopt, some couples would quite likely decide that their unique contribution to humanity is not to raise children. Some gay couples would choose to work at alleviating social problems, enriching human existence through the arts, etc., instead of parenting. But the point is, people should not be prohibited from becoming parents because of their sexual preference. Adoptable children should be placed into homes on the basis of a couple's ability to meet a child's needs for love, nurturing, guidance, financial support, etc.

In summary, it is my sincere hope that we, as a society, continue to move towards accepting gayness as a perfectly normal state of being. Gays want to be able to bestow titles of honor and love such as husband/wife upon their partners like everyone else, and they need the same legal rights and protection in the event of death, incapacitation, and divorce as everyone else. As far as gay couples raising children goes, sperm banks and adoption agencies should use the same criteria in granting children or sperm to gay couples as to everyone else: Does this couple have the emotional maturity, commitment, mental health, and financial security to be good parents? I suggest that people concerned with the emotional health and well being of children focus their attention and energies on truly abusive family situations.

## **What About Sexually Open Marriages/ Relationships?**

No book about alternative marriages would be complete without a discussion of sexually open marriages or relationships. The "Open Marriage" movement enjoyed but a brief heyday. The movie Bob & Carol and Ted & Alice (1969) and the book Open Marriage by Nena and George O'Neil (Avon Books, 1973), prompted people to consider the possibility of expanding the boundaries of marriage to include the freedom to sexually relate to other people. However, the movement took a real nose dive when the O'Neils filed for divorce a few years after

their book made a big splash. No one else stepped forth to rally the cause, and no major revolution regarding sexually open marriages ever took place in this country.

I must confess that, as a young woman, I found the idea quite fascinating. Since love was such a wonderful thing, why not have as much of it in one's life as possible? Wouldn't it be great to have a primary relationship but also be able to have other lovers? I had certainly found that I could feel sexually attracted to more than one man at once. For me, this desire to sexually connect with more than one person was not prompted by a desire for sexual variety in a physical sense. It was simply that I could love more than one person at a time. Even if I had a primary partner with whom I was quite content sexually, emotionally, and intellectually, I would occasionally meet other men whom I also felt I could love. I was never one of those people who, when they fell in love with one person, just automatically stopped having attractions to other people.

Being the psychologically adventurous person that I was, I was determined to see if it was possible to openly and honestly have more than one lover. I therefore made several attempts to create a sexually open relationship, once when I was twenty-two, and several other times much later in life. I initially embraced the idea of a sexually open relationship with great enthusiasm and optimism. I believed that jealousy was an archaic emotion that evolved human beings could overcome. I was determined to try and "rise above" feelings of possessiveness. Well, with hindsight I can say it was a fascinating experience, but both times it was rather short lived and basically unsuccessful. I will try to summarize the conclusions my co-adventurous souls and I came to as to why sexually open relationships do not work.

I will start with the jealousy issue since that is the most obvious. I would have to say that, in essence, we were not able to overcome our feelings of jealousy despite our aspirations to do so. **The way I have come to conceptualize my experiences with open relationships is that they don't work because they create a situation of unequal emotional vulnerability with the auxiliary lover getting the short end of the stick.**

When two people sexually and emotionally connect, a deep, intense bond develops between them. My fellow experimenters and I discovered that when you have this kind of connection to another person, there is a need, or at least very strong desire, to have access to him/her whenever you want. It feels uncomfortable or painful to have to share someone you are so deeply bonded with. Situations come up regularly when you simply do not want to be told "Sorry I have to be with my other lover tonight."

Both times I asked men to be an "auxiliary lover" to my primary relationship or marriage they ended up saying it wasn't workable for them. In both cases the person initially told me that he understood the parameters of the relationship I was offering him and thought he could handle it. But I remember quite vividly what one of them told me when he bailed out:

*"I simply cannot do this. I cannot be your Tuesday and Saturday lover. What am I supposed to do with all the feelings and desires I have on the other five days? I can't turn them on and off like a faucet. You go back to your primary lover on the other days but I feel lonely. Emotionally and sexually connecting with you creates a deep bond and attachment and it doesn't work to only be able to be with you on a part time basis. It kind of feels like getting crumbs when I really need a whole loaf of bread."*

I tried briefly being an auxiliary lover years later. I thought I had a great strategy. I planned to stay detached to a certain degree because I knew my lover's primary commitment was to the woman he was living with. But, I found that having to stay detached **undermined** the whole purpose for a deep, intimate, passionate relationship!!! It wasn't very enjoyable because I had to constantly have the brakes on my feelings. In general, I very quickly decided that it took too much emotional energy to deal with all the complex feelings that arose.

This jealousy issue tends not to come up for the person who already has a primary partner. He or she has all the advantages of having a full time partner and then gets to have the excitement and stimulation of having an additional lover. Usually the auxiliary lover is willing to give the person in the primary relationship as much time and energy as he/she wants. Thus, the person in the primary relationship doesn't have to deal with sharing issues. Of course jealousy issues can come up for a person in the primary relationship who does not have a current auxiliary lover. He or she may come to resent sharing his/her partner if/when he/she cannot find an

appropriate auxiliary lover with whom he/she wants to spend time.

There is another major “open relationship problem” that I encountered even when I was able to keep jealousy issues at bay for awhile. When I was the person who had a primary partner and an auxiliary lover, I found it took an unbelievable amount of time and energy to balance two emotionally and sexually intimate relationships. It’s not as simple as taking the amount of hours you have per week or month for a love relationship and splitting the hours between two lovers. I discovered that if I split the normal number of hours I spent with one lover between two lovers, neither relationship seemed to receive the time and attention it needs. Lover relationships are very deep and intense by nature, and they become even more complex when you are dealing with all the emotions and logistical problems of multiple lovers. So, I ended up siphoning time and energy from other areas of my life in order to give more time and energy to my lover relationships. For me this ended up not being a workable solution. I began to feel that I was being consumed by the lover relationship part of my life. I no longer had adequate time and energy for other things that were important to me like friendships, extended family, community involvement, hobbies, or even alone time. My life became very unbalanced. My personal experience led me to conclude that having multiple lovers is just too draining of time and energy for me, and I am a very high energy person!!!

One other problem I witnessed and experienced in my experimentation with open relationships is that it’s easy to make a misjudgment about who to pursue as an auxiliary lover. You can end up getting involved in some very short-lived infatuations. And it’s not worth all the emotional upheaval when all is said and done. I would certainly encourage any person who is considering experimenting with an open relationship or marriage to be very discriminating about who you consider having as an auxiliary lover. Sexuality is a very powerful phenomenon; it can generate a lot of joy but it also has the ability to cause a lot of pain. I personally do not think it is worth opening yourself up to a lot of challenging emotions just to pursue a very short term crush or infatuation, which if not fanned, will probably dissipate rather quickly of its own accord.

However, I don’t want to come off as unequivocally rejecting the idea of sexually open relationships or marriages. I personally never figured out a way to make them work despite a keen interest in the idea. But I entertain the possibility that if everyone involved was in their own primary relationship it might have some possibility of working. This would solve the problem of the auxiliary lovers not getting enough time and focus. In a sense I guess this would be like the old “swinging” concept but with a deeper emotional component. I personally will not volunteer to step forward and experiment with this idea because there is still the energy drain issue for me. But I would be curious in hearing about other peoples’ experiences. The idea of moving beyond monogamy still holds some intrigue for me. Perhaps my interest in open relationships stems from my observations that affairs are so common. Lots and lots of people really do seem to have trouble remaining monogamous, and that makes me question whether monogamy is too limiting, but we just haven’t figured out how to successfully move beyond it. I don’t know. I have no answers; just failed personal experiences. I’ll leave further exploration to the next generation!

### **Author’s Note:**

*In the 1995 edition of this book I provided interviews from several couples in open marriages. As it turns out, all but one of those couples have since divorced. Learning of these divorces, along with subsequent research and personal experiences, have curbed my enthusiasm regarding sexually open marriages and relationships. I therefore rewrote this section to reflect my current perspective on this issue.*

## Introduction to the Ceremonies

When I tell people I have written a book about alternative weddings they always ask me “So how is an alternative marriage different than a traditional one?” One of the most obvious ways these ceremonies are different is that they have no religious component. These ceremonies depict marriage as an agreement between the two people, not a covenant between the couple and God. For a discussion of my break with Christianity, please refer to my article *How to Get Closer to God Without Going to Church* available on my website [personalgrowthresources.org](http://personalgrowthresources.org).

The second major difference is that these ceremonies acknowledge the possibility of divorce. That may sound like a real bizarre idea, but after twenty-five years of researching the matter, I conclude it is the sanest way we can deal with marriage and divorce. For an in-depth discussion of this matter please see the section in the first part of this chapter entitled “Letting Go of the Marriage is Forever Myth.” The condensed version of what I discussed in that section is that in this day and age, a significant percentage of marriages will not be lifelong, oftentimes through no fault of the marriage partners. Given this fact, our marriage rituals need to be updated. It is imperative that we adapt our marriage rituals to reflect the reality of peoples’ lives in the twenty-first century. I’ve heard all the arguments about discussing divorce undermines the marriage and increases the likelihood of divorce, and I find no validity in these arguments. Vowing to remain together “till death do us part” has not stopped millions of people from later deciding to divorce, so acknowledging the fact that divorce is a possibility, if irreconcilable differences develop, can certainly do no harm, and in fact has many benefits.

Acknowledging the possibility of divorce at the time of marriage helps people to mentally and emotionally prepare for all the complexities of divorce if they are faced with it. A marriage ceremony is the most logical time and place to ask a couple to make some pledges that they will end the relationship they are beginning in a healthy and appropriate manner, if that becomes necessary. A public ceremony is a golden opportunity for the couple to pledge before their family, friends, and community that, if they ever decide to terminate their marriage, they will treat one another with respect and caring during that process. Considering the large percentage of bitter divorces, we are in desperate need of strategies to help couples cope with divorce without vicious anger and expensive lawyer fees. Hopefully, having the family and friends witness the couples’ vows to treat one another respectfully if they divorce, will inspire the couple’s community to likewise not “take sides” in a destructive kind of way.

Some people may mourn the end of days gone by when married people were so sure they would remain together that they bought husband/wife cemetery plots. I am very much aware of how unhappy some of those fifty-year marriages of the past were. People did not always stay together because they were happy; they simply had no option to end their marriages. Some people are able to remain happily married to the same person for their entire lives; it’s an amazing and beautiful experience when it happens that way. However, some people develop irreconcilable differences and would be doing themselves and their partner a great disservice to remain together. The divorce rate is a trade off: People no longer have the security of forever, but they have the freedom to end an unhappy, unfulfilling marriage.

Other ways these ceremonies are different is that I try to give a more active role to the witnesses. Witnesses are asked to make a statement that they believe the two people have an earnest intention to build a healthy marriage. I don’t mean that the witness is guaranteeing the success of the marriage; he/she is simply stating publicly that he/she believes the couple has a genuine intent to create a positive relationship. Requiring an active witness can be a “reality check”. If none of your close friends are willing to serve as witnesses in your wedding, its some powerful feedback that you may be making a bad decision to marry. The ceremonies also address whether or not the couple intends to become parents; this is not an automatic given as it was fifty years ago. However, parenthood is not addressed in any depth because I have designed a separate Parenting Partnership Ceremony to address the issue of parenting.

The issue of sexual fidelity is mentioned in a little more depth than in typical wedding ceremonies. Monogamy is a given in a traditional religious marriage an automatic “decree from God.” In a secular ceremony, it makes sense for the couple to specifically state why they are making a pledge of monogamy. If we’re not being monogamous because God told us we have to, then why are we? In the first edition of this book, I discussed the possibility of sexually open marriages. I have since given up on that idea (see discussion under Sexually Open Marriages). I now believe that when all is said and done, monogamy is, by far, the best option.

However, I firmly believe that monogamy is a difficult challenge. Many people seem to have the delusion that monogamy is easy and natural; that if two people love one another, they will magically lose all desire for other people. This cannot be true given the high incidence of extra marital affairs. The reality is, in most long-term relationships, people struggle with attractions to other people. Sexuality ebbs and flows during a long term relationship, and during the ebbs, it’s easy to be attracted to other people with whom you can have the powerful, intense kind of sexuality that is characteristic of new relationships. However, many times, when people pursue the alluring intensity of an affair, (often destroying their marriage in the process) they discover they are unable to sustain this passion with the new person. They then find themselves in a real lose/lose situation. I think having the couple make a public pledge to remain monogamous, as part of the marriage ceremony, helps reinforce that monogamy is an act of self discipline that a couple exercises to preserve the deep level of intimacy in their relationship.

An important part of these ceremonies is a mention of how much the couple intends to communalize their financial resources. Marriage used to mean an automatic blending of all financial resources, but that is no longer the case. Couples may now choose among many different options. The couple’s intentions regarding finances should be announced to family and friends. It is my firm belief that the more the extended families and friends know about what kind of marriage the couple is trying to create, the more they can serve as support people in that process. The financial agreements should also be delineated in a pre-nuptial agreement (see page 10 for a discussion of prenups.)

Lastly, I do want to mention that you may well run into some social pressure when you announce to your families and friends that you do not intend to have a traditional wedding ceremony. I say this from personal experience. Our society is still very attached to the traditional “till death do us part” type of ceremony, and if you decide to have an alternative ceremony that refuses to reflect that kind of philosophy, you will encounter resistance. When I first told people that my fiancé and I were going to discuss the possibility of divorce in our marriage ceremony, they thought I was crazy: "How can you talk about divorce at a wedding ceremony without ruining the whole thing?" We persevered, never-the-less, and even those friends who were skeptical admitted to me afterwards that the ceremony was quite poetic and beautiful despite its lack of "till death do us part" proclamations of love. I remember one particularly skeptical friend saying to me after my ceremony:

*“Mumm, I am shocked-- you actually pulled it off! I can’t believe I just sat through a wedding ceremony that talked about divorce and it actually sounded kind of normal to do that. It was a very nice ceremony.”*

My husband and I stuck to our convictions that our love was no less wonderful or deep than most other peoples' who were flocking to the alter; we were simply more realistic about the whole thing. Perhaps because we were both over thirty-five and had seen a lot of divorces, or maybe because we were just more rational and logical than most people, we simply did not want to use words like forever in our ceremony. Of course we hoped our marriage would last a lifetime, but we did not want to promise that to one another because we both recognized that it was not something that could be predicted. We were not willing to stand up and make the same kind of “love one another till death do us part” promise that we had seen so many others promise and break. So we tackled the task of how to design a marriage ritual and celebration that was a reflection of our philosophies about marriage and not anybody else's!

We also did a lot of thinking about how much money we wanted to spend on our wedding. We concluded we did not believe in having a really expensive wedding. That decision had more to it than just the money. It had to do with asking the question “How **appropriate** is it to have a very expensive, and grandiose wedding? We concluded it is not appropriate because it helps create the illusion that marriage is a *fait accompli*. For those of



you who do not know this French phrase, it means something already done, a foregone conclusion, a feat accomplished. Marriage is no longer necessarily a once in a lifetime event. It therefore really makes a lot more sense to save some of that wedding money and grandiosity for a twenty-five year anniversary party! A twenty-five year marriage is indeed a *fait accompli*, worthy of great hoopla. I certainly do not recommend slinking off to City Hall to be married with strangers as witness as if there should not be any celebration in the act of getting married. But there is a lot of healthy middle ground between no celebration, and a huge, expensive, grandiose wedding. It's all about moderation.

In summary, I offer these ceremonies as “food for thought.” I encourage people to use the ideas presented to design their own, unique wedding ceremony. On the following pages you will find a wedding ceremony for couples intending to have children and one for those who do not intend to become parents. There is also a lesbian wedding ceremony, a wedding ceremony for gay men and a ceremony for a senior couple. You are obviously free to mix and match parts from any of them.

# Sample Wedding Ceremony #1

[For couples intending to have children.]

**Woman:**

[Walks down aisle arm-in-arm with both her parents.]

**Man:**

[Walks down aisle arm-in-arm with both his parents.]

**Woman:**

Thank you for coming here today and sharing your positive energies with us on this important occasion of our lives.

**Man:**

We ask you to witness the vows we make to one another as we enter this union of our deepest selves. We know we will at times look to all of you for support in achieving these goals. We likewise want to be a source of support to all of you in the years to come.

**Woman:**

Today we are leaving our families of birth to become family with one another. As we make this transition, we would like to take the opportunity to offer a special thank-you to our parents for the many gifts they have given us through the years.

**Woman:**

Mom and Dad, you have offered me nurturing, guidance, laughter, and sustenance. There are no words that can express the gratitude I feel towards you for being there for me all these years. In addition to the love and care you have given me, you have also given me some other very important gifts that I will take with me as I make this passage into marriage.

You have modeled for me a growing, happy, and healthy marriage--not, by your words but by your deeds. By watching you love, I learned how to love. By watching you forgive, I learned forgiveness. By watching both of you work and struggle through the difficult complexities of maintaining a successful marriage, I learned perseverance and patience. Thank you for teaching me how to love.

**Man:**

Mother and Father, today I start a new life, with a new family in which I will play a very different role. I want to take this time to express my appreciation for the family atmosphere you provided for me. When I look back on our life together as a family, I remember camping trips filled with joyous adventures. I remember eating popcorn and watching corny science fiction movies together. I remember litters of bouncy puppies and drives to the ice cream store for double scoops. I want to take this time to say thank you for creating a family life filled with fun and warmth. I hope to create such a family.

Two other gifts I want to thank you for are of a different kind. I want to thank you for being really interesting and enlightened people. I feel so grateful that I grew up in a home where the mother and father related as equals--where mom knew how to use a power saw, and had equal say in all family decisions. I am thankful that I had a father who knew how to be gentle, and washed clothes, and cooked a great Sunday dinner. Lastly, you taught me the importance of following one's heart. As a young man I sensed that even after two decades of marriage there was still passion in your marriage, and it inspired me to settle for nothing less than a vibrant, exciting love.

**Woman:**

We would like to begin our marriage vows by proclaiming our love for one another and defining the goals we have for this marriage.

**Woman:**

\_\_\_\_\_, we have shared a deep and abiding love for several years now. You have become my closest friend. I find you to be a fascinating, wonderful, human being. The longer I know you, the more I have come to love you, and the more I cherish the relationship we have with one another.

\_\_\_\_\_ today I stand before my family and friends to ask you to become my husband. In order that I may know that we share the same dreams and aspirations for this union, let me speak to you of my vision of our future life together.

*--I want to create a home where it's okay to have feelings and express them. I want to know that I can yell when I'm mad, and that you won't run away because you know that anger is a natural part of living and loving.*

*--I envision a home where friends and neighbors drop by unannounced, knowing that we will reach out and welcome their friendship and companionship. I see the years of our lives made richer from potluck dinners that lead to fascinating philosophical and political debates till wee hours of the morning. I see our home as a gathering place; a place for pumpkin carving parties, and solstice celebrations in the backyard.*

*--I dream of being your date at the monthly square dances year after year, and slow dancing with you in the living room on boring rainy days.*

*--I want a family that goes canoeing together, hikes in the woods to enjoy the autumn colors, and finds time to have snowball fights. I want a living room without a TV and I want to create a family which comes together each night for a dinner of "real food". I want a partner that is committed to building a family that is a source of love and strength.*

**Woman:**

\_\_\_\_\_ do you share these dreams and values of mine? Are you ready to pledge yourself fully to building a supportive and loving partnership with me?

**Man:**

I am.

**Man:**

\_\_\_\_\_, I love you. I've struggled to define what I mean by those words. The first thing I mean by the words "I love you" is that I have a deep respect for you as a person. I also mean that I feel passion towards you, that intangible yet so important part of a loving relationship. In saying I love you I mean that I continually delight in your company. Whether we are discussing the meaning of life, cleaning the house, or sharing a movie, I always find that my life is richer because you are a part of it.

**Man:**

Because of this deep love we share, I am ready to have our relationship take on a new depth and level of commitment by becoming marriage partners. Today I stand before this congregation to ask you to become my wife. In order that I may be assured that we want the same things out of life, let me share with you my heart's desires.

*--I have come to realize how important it is to me to live a life of simplicity. The more I remove the material clutter and hecticness from my life, the more able I am to hear the inner*

*callings of my soul. I want to have time to make strawberry jelly and home-made soup, walk under the stars, and sit on the porch on summer nights and look at the moon. The life I envision is filled with hard work and a minimum of luxuries, but a richness of spirit.*

*--I want a relationship where there's room to grow and change and be fully myself.*

*--I dream of a better world and I want to feel that we as a family are connected to our community and to the people with whom we share this planet. I would like us to set aside time each month to do community service together --perhaps we can plant trees, work on the recycling truck, or spend time with troubled teenagers. I also want to tithe part of our income; I want to share with those less fortunate than us.*

*--I look forward to raising children with you. I treasure the thought of seeing the world through five-year-old eyes again. I look forward to sharing our wisdom with our children, as well as gaining new kinds of wisdom as our children ask us questions that make us stretch our minds in new ways.*

**Man:**

\_\_\_\_\_ do you share these dreams of mine, and are you willing to pledge yourself to creating such a life together?

**Woman:**

I am.

**Man:**

We believe that in a healthy marriage, partners should allow one another the freedom to enjoy friendships with other people. We also know that, as much as we enjoy one another's company, we each need time to pursue our individual interests and goals.

**Woman:**

However, we believe that partners must reserve their passion and sexuality for one another. We therefore make the following pledge to one another in the presence of all of you. \_\_\_\_\_, in order to nurture the rich, intimate passion we share, I hereby make a commitment to be monogamous with you throughout our marriage.

**Man:**

\_\_\_\_\_, in order to nurture the rich, intimate passion we share, I hereby make a commitment to be monogamous with you throughout our marriage.

**Officiate:**

\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ you have proclaimed your willingness to enter into a state of marriage. It is apparent from the words you have spoken that you have a deep passion, caring, and respect for one another. As a representative of this community I need to also ask you to affirm that you are willing to accept the legal parameters of marriage. By becoming marriage partners you are entrusting one another to serve as legal guardian over one another's bodies, both in sickness and in death. Do you hereby accept the responsibility to make all decisions for one another during sickness and at death?

**Man:**

I do.

**Woman:**

I do.

**Officiate:**

Marriage is considered by this community to be a joining of your life energies. Thus, henceforth all that you each come to own will belong to you jointly. If you someday, for any reason, choose to divorce, your marital estate will be divided equitably between you. Do you each consent to this legal merging of your resources?<sup>1</sup>

**Woman:**

In creating this marital partnership with you today, I wish to declare that from this point forward, everything that I come to own belongs equally to you. I acknowledge that our lives have become intertwined in such an intricate number of ways that the words "yours" and "mine" no longer have any true meaning. In taking you as my husband I also wish to proclaim to my family, friends, and community that all I achieve in the coming years, I will achieve in part because of the constant nurturing and support I receive from you.

**Man:**

Today I stand in front of this gathering to say that I wish to take you as my wife. In so doing, I declare that everything that I come to own in the coming years belongs equally to you. I also declare that, as my partner, all my accomplishments are yours as well, for it is only through sharing my life with you that I draw the strength and sustenance to achieve my goals and dreams.

**Officiate:**

This community recognizes the right of every individual to enter into a marital partnership of his/her own choosing. This community also recognizes an individual's right to terminate a marital partnership in the event that he/she concludes the marriage has reached a state of incompatibility, and is no longer capable of meeting his/her needs. As a representative of this community, I need to ask each of you to pledge, as you enter this marriage, that if you ever decide to sever this union you will do so with due respect for one another. I need to also ask you to promise that if you divorce you will participate in a termination process so that both of you are able to come to an understanding of why the relationship is no longer workable.

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<sup>1</sup> If you disagree with the idea of totally communalizing your resources in marriage, it is very important that you state that clearly in your pre-nuptial agreement. You should then summarize the terms of your pre-nuptial agreement as part of the wedding ceremony. For example:

**Officiate:**

\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ wish to create a marriage with more independent financial arrangements than traditionally practiced in our culture. They would like to make a public statement to that effect, with you, their family and friends, as witnesses.

**Man:**

We, as two very independently oriented people, wish to have our marriage legally recognized by the State, however, we do not wish to totally communalize our resources. We have drafted a pre-nuptial delineating the ways in which we desire to retain independent ownership of our personal resources in our marriage.

**Woman:**

We wish to announce to you, our family and friends, that we intend to honor this contract between ourselves in lieu of having the State separate our marital estate for us in the event of divorce.

**Officiate:**

\_\_\_\_\_ do you hereby publicly declare that if you ever decide to sever this bond of marriage you will treat \_\_\_\_\_ with honesty and respect during that process?

**Woman:**

With all of you as witnesses, I pledge that, if I ever find it necessary to terminate this marital relationship, I will treat \_\_\_\_\_ with fairness, honesty and due respect through the process of separation.

**Officiate:**

\_\_\_\_\_ do you hereby publicly declare that if you ever decide to sever this bond of marriage you will treat \_\_\_\_\_ with honesty and respect during that process?

**Man:**

\_\_\_\_\_ I will always care about you as a person. If ever we should decide to divorce I would give you my full respect during that process.

**Woman:**

\_\_\_\_\_ and I would like to state to our family and community that we have promised one another that we will work very hard, even through the difficult times, to make our marriage a success. We ask all of you to challenge us if you see us getting out of touch with the commitments we have made here today, so as to help us rediscover and renew the vibrancy of our love.

**Man:**

We ask you to help us confront our fears, overcome our impatience, and overcome the obstacles inherent in any relationship.

**Woman:**

However, we also ask that, if in the future, you come to see that we have grown so incompatible, that we are no longer able to meet one another's needs as husband and wife, that you help us to come to grips with this realization. We would ask that you help us to heal the pain of that transition.

**Officiate:**

Will you each pledge in our presence that if you parent children together, you will honor your parenting commitments, whether or not you choose to remain marital partners for life?<sup>1</sup>

**Woman:**

I do. We would also like to state that we reject the traditional sex roles of child-raising. We therefore make the following commitment: I hereby commit myself to contributing fifty percent of the financial requirements of this marriage and I also commit myself to contributing fifty percent of the labor to maintain our home and children.

**Man:**

I hereby commit myself to contributing fifty percent of the financial requirements of this marriage and I also commit myself to contributing fifty percent of the labor to maintain our home and children.

---

<sup>1</sup> I firmly believe when people become parents they should have a ceremony which deals with all the issues of parenthood in much more depth than this simple statement. Refer to the sample parenting ceremony. However, I think some mention about honoring one's parenting responsibilities in the event of divorce should also be included in marriage ceremonies.

**Officiate:**

Will the witnesses please step forward?

**Officiate:**

Do you \_\_\_\_\_ support this decision of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ to become partners in marriage?

**Witness #1:**

I do.

**Officiate:**

Would you like to say a few words on behalf of this union?

**Witness #1:**

[Person talks about his/her experiences with the couple. Person may also want to read a poem or sing a song.]

**Officiate:**

Do you \_\_\_\_\_ support this decision of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ to become partners in marriage?

**Witness #2:**

I do. [Person shares his/her thoughts.]

**Officiate:**

You may now exchange rings.

**Man:**

\_\_\_\_\_ I hereby take thee as my wife. Please accept this ring as a symbol of my love. I ask you to wear it in honor and remembrance of the vows and commitments we have exchanged here today.

**Woman:**

\_\_\_\_\_ I hereby take thee as my husband. Please accept this ring as a symbol of my love. I ask you to wear it in honor and remembrance of the vows and commitments we have exchanged here today.

**Officiate:**

By the power invested in me by this community I now pronounce you husband and wife.

## Sample Wedding Ceremony #2

[For couples not intending to have children.]

**Man:**

We would like to welcome all of you, who are so very dear to us. We are honored to have you with us, as we embark upon a new life as loving partners.

**Woman:**

Family and friends, please witness as we proclaim our love for one another, and join our lives in marriage.

**Man:**

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways--

*--I love the mischievous twinkle in your eyes that says you find life a glorious adventure.*

*--I love your gentleness with cats and dogs, and turtles and butterflies,*

*--I love your honesty, your courage, your willingness to forgive.*

*--I love how you give of yourself wholly in your life work, with little thought of compensation, but rather with dreams of transforming the world into a better place.*

*--I love the fire of your kisses, and the beauty of your femaleness as you stand naked before me.*

**Woman:**

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways--

*--I love your patient approach to life, your unflinching belief that obstacles can be overcome.*

*--I love your exuberance, the way you approach each new day with excitement.*

*--I love the ecstasy of our bodies intertwined in passion.*

*--I love you for the thoughtful, kind things you continually do for me day in and day out.*

*--I love your stubborn refusal to let the injustice of this world shake your faith in the ultimate beauty of humanity and the harmony of the universe.*

**Man:**

We desire to build a committed, loving partnership without squelching one another's autonomy. We would like to read some words written by Anne Morrow Lindbergh:

**Woman:**

*A good relationship has a pattern like a dance and is built on some of the same rules. The partners do not need to hold on tightly, because they move confidently in the same pattern, intricate but gay and swift and free, like a country dance of Mozart's. To touch heavily would be to arrest the pattern and freeze the movement, to check the endlessly changing beauty of its*



*unfolding. There is no place here for the possessive clutch, the clinging arm, the heavy hand; only the barest touch in passing. Now arm in arm, now face to face, now back to back--it has the same rhythm, creating a pattern together, and being invisibly nourished by it. ...The dancers who are perfectly in time never destroy "the winged life" in each other or in themselves.*

**Man:**

We intend to build a marriage that is free of rigid expectations.

*...When you love someone you do not love them all the time in exactly the same way, from moment to moment. It is an impossibility. It is even a lie to pretend to. And yet this is exactly what most of us demand. We have so little faith in the ebb and flow of life, of love, of relationships. We leap at the flow of the tide and resist in terror its ebb. We are afraid it will never return. We insist on permanency, on duration, on continuity; when the only continuity possible, in life, as in love, is in growth, in fluidity--in freedom, in the sense that the dancers are free, barely touching as they pass, but partners in the same pattern. The only real security is not in owning or possessing, not in demanding or expecting, not in hoping even. Security in a relationship lies not in looking back to what it was in nostalgia, nor forward to what it might be in dread or anticipation, but living in the present relationship and accepting it as it is now...*

*Anne Morrow Lindbergh (1955) Gift From the Sea. Reprinted with permission from Random House Inc., New York, NY pp. 104, 105, 108, 109, 110.*

**Woman:**

We know that maintaining a satisfying marriage takes hard work, patience, compromise, and courage. Yet we also believe that the energy we contribute to our relationship will be returned to us—for we will draw strength and sustenance from our partnership and thereby be enriched as individuals.

**Man:**

We believe that in a healthy marriage, partners should allow one another the freedom to enjoy friendships with other people. We also know that, as much as we enjoy one another's company, we each need time to pursue our individual interests and goals.

**Woman:**

However, we believe that partners must reserve their passion and sexuality for one another. We therefore make the following pledge to one another in the presence of all of you. \_\_\_\_\_, in order to nurture the rich, intimate passion we share, I hereby make a commitment to be monogamous with you throughout our marriage.

**Man:**

\_\_\_\_\_, in order to nurture the rich, intimate passion we share, I hereby make a commitment to be monogamous with you throughout our marriage.

**Man:**

As part of this ceremony we want to acknowledge, with family and friends present, that we do not intend to become parents. We have done much soul-searching in reaching that decision. We have come to conclude that we hear a different calling in our souls.

**Woman:**

We very much believe that raising children is one of the most sacred and valuable contributions that any couple can make to the world. However, we also know that there is a lot of work to be done in order to make this world a peaceful and safe environment for the children that are already here. There are many serious problems confronting humanity: wars and political unrest, starvation and hunger grave environmental problems,

joblessness and homelessness, spiritual alienation; the list goes on and on. We believe in our hearts that people are needed who can devote their life energies to helping eradicate these pressing problems so that this planet can be a place where each and every child has access to the resources he/she needs to develop into a healthy, happy human being.

**Man:**

We have therefore decided not to raise our own children, but rather to touch the lives of children through our volunteer work. We have both been working on some amazing projects for the past few years. \_\_\_\_\_ has been working with a world hunger organization and I have been working with a neighborhood revitalization project. We feel our efforts have made a tremendous difference in the lives of the children we worked with. We find this work extremely rewarding and plan to continue our efforts in other areas in the future. We wanted all of you to know the reasons behind our decision to not have our own children.

**Woman:**

We would now like to ask our friends to come forward to read a poem by the poet Kahlil Gibran, which for us captures the essence of marriage.

**Participant #1:**

*Spring*

*Come, my beloved, let us walk among the little hills, for the snows have melted and life is awakened from its sleep and wanders through the hills and valleys.*

*Come, let us follow the footsteps of spring in the far-off field;*

*Come and we will ascend the heights and look upon the waving greenness of the plains below.*

*The dawn of spring has unfolded the garment concealed by the winter night, and the peach tree and the apple wear it, adorned as brides on the Night of Power.*

*The vines are awakened, their tendrils entwined like the embrace of lovers.*

*The streams run and leap among the rocks singing songs of rejoicing.*

*The flowers are bursting forth from the heart of Nature as foam from the crest of sea waves.*

*Come, my beloved, let me drink of the last of rain's tears from narcissus cups and make full our spirits of the joyful songs of birds.*

*Let us breathe the scent of the breeze and sit by yonder rock where hides the violet, and give and take of Love's kisses.*

**Participant #2:**

*Summer*

*Arise, my love, to the field, for the days of the harvest are come and the time of reaping is nigh.*

*The grain is ripened by the sun in the warmth of its love to Nature;*

*Come ere the birds reap the fruits of our labor, and the ants consume our land.*

*Come, let us garner the earth's yield as the spirit does grains of bliss from fulfillment's sowing in the depths of our hearts,*

*And fill our bins with Nature's bounty as Life does the storehouses of our souls.*

*Come, my mate, let us make the grass our couch and the heavens our coverlet.*

*Lay us down our heads on a pillow of soft hay and seek thereon repose from the toil of the day and hearken to the music of the murmur of the brook in the valley.*

**Participant #3:**

*Autumn*

*Let us go to the vineyard, my love, and press the grapes and store the wine thereof in vessels as the spirit stores the wisdom of ages.*

*Let us gather the fruits and distill from the flowers their fragrance.*

*Let us return to the dwellings, for the leaves of the trees are become yellow and the winds have scattered them to make of them a burial shroud for flowers that died grieving at summer's passing.*

*Come, for the birds have taken flight to the seashore bearing upon their wings the good cheer of the gardens, bequeathing desolation to the jasmine and the myrtle, and the last tears have been shed upon the sod.*

*Come, let us go, for the brooks have ceased their flowing and the springs are no more, for the tears of their joy are dried up; and the hillocks have cast aside their fine garments.*

*Come, beloved. For Nature is overcome by sleep  
and bids farewell to wakefulness with sad and  
wishful melody.*

**Participant #4:**

**Winter**

*Draw nigh unto me, my soul-mate. Draw nigh  
and let not icy breath separate our bodies. Sit you  
with me by this fireside, for fire is winter's fruit.*

*Speak with me of things of the ages, for mine ears  
are wearied of the winds' sighing and the elements'  
lamenting.*

*Make fast door and window, for the angry face  
of Nature makes sad my spirit, and to look upon  
the city beneath the snows, sitting like a mother  
bereaved, causes my heart to bleed.*

*Fill you, then, the lamp with oil, for it is already  
dim. Put it beside you that I may see what the  
nights have writ upon your face. Bring hither the  
wine-jar that we may drink and remember the days  
of the pressing.*

*Draw nigh to me, loved of my spirit, for the fire  
is dying and ashes conceal it.*

*Embrace me, for the lamp is dimmed and  
darkness has conquered it.*

*Heavy are our eyes with the wine of years.*

*Look on me with your sleep-darkened eyes.  
Embrace me ere slumber embrace us. Kiss me,  
for the snows have prevailed over all save your kiss...*

*Reprinted from A Tear And A Smile, by Kahlil Gibran by  
permission of Alfred A. Knopf Inc., copyright (1950) by  
Alfred A. Knopf Inc., pp. 5-8.*

**Man:**

\_\_\_\_\_, I would be honored to share the seasons of my life with you.

**Woman:**

\_\_\_\_\_, I would be honored to share the seasons of my life with you.

**Man:**

Will the officiate please come forward to perform the legal aspect of this marriage?

**Officiate:**

As a representative of this community I need to ask you to affirm that you are ready to accept the legal parameters of marriage. By becoming marriage partners you are entrusting one another to serve as legal

guardian over one another's bodies, both in sickness and at death. Do you accept responsibility to make all decisions for one another during sickness and at death?

**Man:**

I do.

**Woman:**

I do.

**Officiate:**

Marriage is considered by this community to be a joining of your life energies. Thus, henceforth all that you each come to own will belong to you jointly. If you someday, for any reason, choose to divorce, your marital estate will be divided equitably between you. Do you each consent to this legal merging of your resources? <sup>1</sup>

**Man:**

I do.

**Woman:**

I do.

**Officiate:**

This community recognizes the right of every individual to enter into a marital partnership of his/her own choosing. This community also recognizes an individual's right to terminate a marital partnership in the event that he/she concludes the marriage has reached a state of incompatibility, and is no longer capable of meeting his/her needs. As a representative of this community, I need to ask each of you to pledge, as you enter this marriage, that if you ever decide to sever this union you will do so with due respect for one another. I need to also ask you to promise that if you divorce you will participate in a termination process so that both of you are able to come to an understanding of why the relationship is no longer workable.

---

<sup>1</sup>If you disagree with the idea of totally communalizing your resources in marriage, it is very important that you state that clearly in your pre-nuptial agreement. I think it is also good psychologically to announce that as part of your ceremony. For example:

**Officiate:**

\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ wish to create a marriage with more independent financial arrangements than traditionally practiced in our culture. They would like to make a public statement to that effect, with you, their family and friends, as witnesses.

**Man:**

*We, as two very independently oriented people, wish to have our marriage legally recognized by the State, however, we do not wish to totally communalize our resources.*

*We have drafted a pre-nuptial delineating the ways in which we desire to retain independent ownership of our personal resources in our marriage.*

**Woman:**

*We wish to announce to you, our family and friends, that we intend to honor this contract between ourselves in lieu of having the State separate our marital estate for us in the event of divorce.*

**Officiate:**

\_\_\_\_\_, do you hereby publicly declare that if you ever decide to sever this bond of marriage that you will treat \_\_\_\_\_ with honesty and respect during that process?

**Man:**

I dream that this love of ours will last till we are parted by death. Yet I know I must talk of the future as a hope, an aspiration I move towards. I must acknowledge that the future is a mystery; the pages of which will unfold slowly, day to day, year to year. However, you can have faith that if I ever choose to terminate this marital partnership, I will do so with the same loving concern for you as a person that I have as I enter this marriage.

With all of you as witnesses, I pledge that, if I ever find it necessary to terminate this marital relationship, I will treat \_\_\_\_\_ with fairness, honesty and due respect through the process of separation.

**Officiate:**

\_\_\_\_\_, do you hereby publicly declare that if you ever decide to sever this bond of marriage that you will treat \_\_\_\_\_ with honesty and respect during that process?

**Woman:**

\_\_\_\_\_, I promise that if I ever leave you, it will only be because we have exhausted all hope and possibility of healing the rifts between us. If I ever sever this bond of marriage, you can trust even that parting will be an act of love. I will only leave you if I come to know in my heart that we have traveled as far as we were meant to travel together, and that to hold on would be to smother the deeper calling of our souls. If we ever decide we must divorce, I promise to do all in my power to make that transition as painless as possible.

**Officiate:**

Will the witnesses please step forward?

**Officiate:**

Are you willing to endorse the sincerity and positive intention of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ towards one another in entering into this marital union?

**Witness #1:**

I am.

**Officiate:**

Would you like to say a few words on behalf of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_? <sup>1</sup>

**Witness #1:**

[This person can read a poem, sing a song, talk about his/her experiences with the couple, offer well-wishes/blessings, etc.]

**Officiate:**

Are you willing to endorse the sincerity and positive intention of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ towards one another in entering into this marital union?

---

<sup>1</sup> *Since often the officiate of a marriage does not know the couple as well as personal friends of the couple, I have designed these ceremonies such that the friends are the ones who do most of the talking about the couple. It doesn't make much sense for a couple to spend hours familiarizing the officiate with their relationship, just so he/she can recant this to the guests. As I discussed earlier, I believe an officiate should serve as a certified public witness, not as some kind of an "expert" who approves the marriage.*

**Witness #2:**

I am.

**Officiate:**

Would you like to speak on behalf of this union?

**Witness #2:**

[Again, this is an opportunity for a friend or family member to participate in the ceremony by adding his/her perspective about the couple's relationship.]

**Officiate:**

It is apparent from the words of those who know and love you, that you have a very deep love and passion for one another. It also sounds as though you have put a lot of thought into this decision to marry, and enter this union with maturity and integrity. I hear that your relationship has a strong foundation of trust, openness, and respect for one another as unique individuals. Will you both please step forward to take your marriage vows?

**Man:**

\_\_\_\_\_, I hereby take thee as my partner. Please accept this ring as a symbol of my love. I ask you to wear it in honor and remembrance of the vows and commitments we have exchanged here today.<sup>1</sup>

**Woman:**

\_\_\_\_\_, I hereby take thee as my partner. Please accept this ring as a symbol of my love. I ask you to wear it in honor and remembrance of the vows and commitments we have exchanged here today.

**Officiate:**

By the power invested in me by this community I now pronounce you partners in marriage.

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<sup>1</sup> *If a couple does not want to exchange rings (many people never end up wearing them) another way of "sealing" the wedding vows is to have the partners sign a printed copy of their wedding vows in the presence of the wedding guests. A couple I know had an artist create a beautiful, hand lettered copy of their vows which they signed at their wedding ceremony and later framed.*

# **A Lesbian Marriage Ceremony**

## **Introduction**

I have been advocating legalizing gay marriages for over thirty years. I am very happy to see it finally happening. However, I do have concerns that some gay couples are signing themselves up for the negative aspects of a traditional legal marriage. I've seen gay marriage ceremonies that have the same "till death do us part" phrases as the traditional heterosexual marriage ceremony. I am just as opposed to gay partners making promises like that as I am to heterosexual couples promising forever. I encourage gay & lesbian couples reading this ceremony to refer to the previous section **We Need to Remove the "Till Death Do Us Part" Clause From Marriage Vows & Add a Reference to Divorce** on page 16 so you have an understanding of why I have written this ceremony with an acknowledgment of the possibility of divorce. Likewise refer to page 10 for an explanation of why I have included a discussion of finances in this ceremony.



## **A Lesbian Marriage Ceremony**

### **Woman #1:**

Family and friends. Thank-you for being with us today. Some of you have traveled a long way to be here, and we deeply appreciate your presence.

### **Woman #2:**

We are keenly aware today of how lucky we are to have loving, accepting families with whom we can share this important occasion in our lives. We know that not all people living alternative lifestyles are so fortunate.

### **Woman #1:**

On this day, we stand before all of you to become partners in marriage. It is impossible to describe what it feels like to finally have the legal right to marry one another! Perhaps we feel a bit like the suffragists felt back in 1920 when they cast the first ballots for American women. How empowering that must have felt after centuries of being treated as second-class citizens. Our country has finally bestowed upon gay couples a right that we have longed for, and fought for, for a very a long time. I'm sure all couples feel happy on their wedding day, but for us it holds a special, special magic.

### **Woman #2:**

Perhaps what we are experiencing today also feels a bit like what African Americans felt when they became emancipated. Though nothing can match the pain that slavery wrought upon African Americans, all oppressed groups are united by their experience of being denied dignity, respect, and acceptance. We rejoice in the fact that the long, hard battle for a simple right, that should have been an automatic entitlement, is finally behind us.

### **Woman #1:**

We would like to now call forward Pastor Kern who has been performing gay marriage rituals long before this state authorized him to do so legally, to perform our marriage ceremony.

### **Officiate:**

It is with great joy that I serve today, not just as a facilitator, but as someone who can actually bestow the legally sanctioned title of "married couple" upon \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. It is of course true that love and commitment are what make a marriage a "real" marriage. However, it is also a natural desire to want your partnership recognized, accepted and respected within your community and in and the broader society.

### **Officiate:**

\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ have, over the past three years, created a loving partnership that continually enriches each of them as unique individuals. Through the process of learning to love one another more fully, they have, in turn, come to better understand and love themselves.

Their friends marvel at the richness of their relationship, and envy the deep respect and caring they have for one another. \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ also share an outlandish sense of humor. Those of us who know and love them rejoice at the decision they have made to join their lives, in an even deeper way, through this act of marriage. They have called family and friends together today to witness as they proclaim their aspirations for this partnership. Please witness as they now proclaim their love and commitments to one another and join their lives in marriage.

### **Woman #1:**

As a lesbian couple, we of course, receive no social pressure to marry, as do our heterosexual counterparts. Religious leaders, psychologists, and talk show hosts do not bombard us daily with ideas about how to pick a marriage partner, build the perfect marriage etc., etc.

**Woman #2:**

In the absence of being told how to conduct our relationships, we were thus challenged to consider and decide for ourselves what a marriage should look like. We have arrived at some answers that feel right to us.

**Woman #1:**

Please witness as we exchange the vows we have written.

**Woman #2:**

\_\_\_\_\_, I stand before family and friends to ask you to become my partner in marriage. Why do I ask this, and what am I asking? We have, for three years now, shared a very deep friendship, a joyous physical passion, enlightening conversations, and not least of all, a whole lot of fun. A year ago, we moved in together. After living with you for six months, I was overjoyed to discover that I never felt bored with your companionship. The more I know you, the more of you I want to know. Each day there is a new you for me to discover and explore more fully.

Of course this loving exploration is difficult at times too. Like all couples, we sometimes fight. And those are scary times; it's frightening to live through those days wondering if we will be able to make it through the impasse. But we keep talking and talking. And, again and again we have worked through our doubt, our confusion, our anger, our misunderstanding. I've come to think of our fights as thunderstorms. Just as storms are a necessary part in Mother Nature's scheme of things, conflict is a part of any long-term intimate relationship.

Having lived with you, and discovered that this only deepened the love I feel towards you, I knew that I felt ready to formalize this partnership through the act of marriage. I wanted the other important people in our lives to understand what we are to one another, and know of the depth of our bond and commitments to one another.

**Woman #1:**

I have agonized for several months about what words to recite today in front of family and friends. I eventually figured out why it is so difficult for me to put my feelings for you into words. The love I feel for you comes from a very deep place within me. When I first discovered that I loved you it wasn't through thoughts that I came to know that. It was, for lack of better words, a peaceful knowingness that came over me.

That is how the decision to marry you happened for me too. I didn't decide to marry you by making a list of all your good and bad qualities, and concluding you'd make a great partner for me. It was more like slowly coming to an awareness that living with you had brought a harmony and balance to my life that had never been there before. I felt a calm certainty that I wanted us to build our futures together.

\_\_\_\_\_ you are a wonderful woman, full of spirit. I love how you approach life with boldness and abandon. I feel honored that you want to share your life with me. I am happy to call our community together today so that they may have an understanding and appreciation for the deep merging that has transpired between us. We would now like to do a reading by a feminist theologian named Beverly Wildung Harrison:

**Woman #2:**

*...The final and most important basepoint for a feminist theology is the centrality of relationship. A feminist moral theology celebrates the power of our human praxis as an intrinsic aspect of the work of God's love, as it celebrates the reality that our moral-selves are body-selves which touch and see and hear each other into life, recognizing sensuality as fundamental to the work and power of love, so above all else a feminist moral theology insists that relationality is at the heart of all things.*

*I am perfectly aware that our current preoccupation with "human relations" with "skills of relationship" is such that some have declared that our modern concern for relationship is merely trendy and faddish. It is true that, like everything else in late capitalism, "relationship" becomes transformed into a commodity to be packaged and exchanged at a price. To speak of the primacy of relationship in feminist experience, and to speak of a theology of relation, however, is not to buy in on the latest capitalist fad. It is, above all, to insist on the deep, total sociality of all things. All things cohere in each other. Nothing living is self-contained...*

**Woman #1:**

*We are called to express, embody, share, celebrate the gift of life, and to pass it on! We are called to reach out, to deepen relationship, or to right wrong relations--those that deny, distort, or prevent human dignity from arising--as we recall each other into the power of personhood. We are called to journey this way, to stay in and with this radical power of love. When you do that for me, I am often overwhelmed by your generosity, and I may speak of the sacrifice you make for me. But we both need to be perfectly clear that you are not, thereby, practicing the virtue of sacrifice on me. You are merely passing on the power of love, gifting me as others have gifted you, into passing that power to do radical love.*

*Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics by Beverly W. Harrison, edited by Carol S. Robb, Beacon Press, Boston, MA. 1986. Reprinted with permission of Beacon Press.*

**Officiate:**

As a representative of this community I need to ask you to affirm that you are ready to accept the legal parameters of marriage. By becoming marriage partners you are entrusting one another to serve as legal guardian over one another's bodies, both in sickness and at death. Do you accept responsibility to make all decisions for one another during sickness and at death?

**Woman #1:**

I do.

**Woman #2:**

I do.

**Officiate:**

Marriage is considered by this community to be a joining of your life energies. Thus, henceforth all that you each come to own will belong to you jointly. If you someday, for any reason, choose to divorce, your marital estate will be divided equitably between you. Do you each consent to this legal merging of your resources?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>If you disagree with the idea of totally communalizing your resources in marriage, it is very important that you state that clearly in your pre-nuptial agreement. You should then also make a statement to that effect in your marriage ceremony. For example:

**Officiate:**

\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ wish to create a marriage with more independent financial arrangements than traditionally practiced in our culture. They would like to make a public statement to that effect, with you, their family and friends, as witnesses.

**Woman #1:**

*We, as two very independently oriented people, wish to have our marriage legally recognized by the State, however, we do not wish to totally communalize our resources.*

**Woman #2:**

*We have therefore drafted a pre-nuptial delineating the ways in which we desire to retain independent ownership of our personal resources in our marriage.*

**Woman #1:**

I do.

**Woman #2:**

I do.

**Officiate:**

This community recognizes the right of every individual to enter into a marital partnership of his/her own choosing. This community also recognizes an individual's right to terminate a marital partnership in the event that he/she concludes the marriage has reached a state of incompatibility, and is no longer capable of meeting his/her needs. As a representative of this community, I need to ask each of you to pledge, as you enter this marriage, that if you ever decide to sever this union you will do so with due respect for one another. I need to also ask you to promise that if you divorce you will participate in a termination process so that both of you are able to come to an understanding of why the relationship is no longer workable.

**Officiate:**

\_\_\_\_\_, do you hereby publicly declare that if you ever decide to sever this bond of marriage that you will engage in a termination process and treat one another with honesty and respect if you decide to divorce?

**Woman #1:**

We aspire to make this union a lifelong partnership. We hope we turn eighty together! However, we recognize that we are both evolving people, and may change in ways that make us wonder if we can remain happily together as spouses, despite our best intentions.

**Woman #2:**

Therefore, we hereby promise that if we ever come to believe that we have, through our life experiences, developed irreconcilable differences, we will share with another why the relationship is no longer working and seek counseling to see if there are solutions we are not seeing. If those discussions do not lead to resolution, we will terminate our spousal relationship in a respectful and gentle manner.

**Officiate:**

As a representative of this community I also need to ask you to pledge that if you choose to become parents, that you will honor those responsibilities whether or not you choose to remain marriage partners. I also need to hear you pledge that you will continue to treat one another respectfully as you continue to parent your children.

**Woman #1:**

If we become parents, I pledge to fulfill that responsibility regardless of how our lover relationship may change in the future.

**Woman #2:**

If we become parents, I also promise to view that as a lifelong commitment, and to treat you respectfully as my parenting partner.

**Woman #1:**

We would now like to ask \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ to step forward to be our witnesses.

**Officiate:**

\_\_\_\_\_, do you support \_\_\_\_\_'s and \_\_\_\_\_'s desire to merge their lives through this act of marriage? Would you like to say a few words on behalf of this union?

**Witness #1:**

[Person can share thoughts about the couple, read a poem, sing a song, etc.].

**Officiate:**

\_\_\_\_\_, do you support \_\_\_\_\_'s and \_\_\_\_\_'s desire to merge their lives through this act of marriage?

**Witness #2:**

[Person can share thoughts about the couple, read a poem, sing a song, etc.].

**Officiate:**

\_\_\_\_\_, with family and friends as witnesses, do you hereby declare that you take this woman as your loving mate and life partner? Do you pledge to cherish, nurture, and support her?

**Woman #1:**

I do.

**Officiate:**

\_\_\_\_\_, with family and friends as witnesses, do you hereby declare that you take this woman as your loving mate and life partner? Do you pledge to cherish, nurture, and support her?

**Partner #2:**

I do.

**Partner #1:**

\_\_\_\_\_ please accept this ring as a symbol of my love and commitment to this marriage.

**Partner #2:**

\_\_\_\_\_ please accept this ring as a symbol of my love and commitment to this marriage.

**Officiate:**

As a spokesperson for the people who know and love you both, we hereby bless and celebrate this union of your deepest selves and pronounce you a legally married couple.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:**

*This ceremony is but one example of a gay wedding ceremony. It is based on a wedding ceremony of a lesbian couple I know, and as such it reflects their views and style. It certainly cannot speak to the needs of all gay couples. Gay couples looking for ideas for weddings will probably find the book **Ceremonies From the Heart; Celebrating Lesbian Unions**, edited by Becky Butler (Seal Press, 1990), helpful. This excellent book contains interviews with lesbian couples and their wedding vows and rites. There are many beautiful ceremonies, and each wedding is quite unique. In designing their wedding ceremonies, the women have drawn from a fascinating variety of sources: ancient Goddess-centered religions, paganism, witchcraft, Native American spirituality, etc. Some of the couples reclaimed their Ethnic heritage by simply altering additional ceremonies to meet their needs. The ceremonies are quite diverse. Some are radical feminist in nature, others fairly mainstream; some are spiritual, many are secular. Another good resource book about gay weddings ceremonies is: **Lesbian and Gay marriage; Private Commitments, Public Ceremonies** edited by Suzanne Sherman (Temple University Press, 1992).*

# A Gay Marriage Ceremony

## Introduction

I have been advocating legalizing gay marriages for over thirty years. I am very happy to see it finally happening. However, I do have concerns that some gay couples are signing themselves up for the negative aspects of a traditional legal marriage. I've seen gay marriage ceremonies that have the same "till death do us part" phrases as the traditional heterosexual marriage ceremony. I am just as opposed to gay partners making promises like that as I am to heterosexual couples promising forever. I encourage gay & lesbian couples reading this ceremony to refer to the previous section **We Need to Remove the "Till Death Do Us Part" Clause From Marriage Vows & Add a Reference to Divorce** on page 16 so you have an understanding of why I have written this ceremony with an acknowledgment of the possibility of divorce. Likewise refer to page 10 for an explanation of why I have included a discussion of finances in this ceremony.

## A Gay Marriage Ceremony

**Man #1:**

Thank you family and friends for being here today.

**Man #2:**

We never thought we would ever be standing on a real marriage alter. We are delighted to think of future generations of gay couples growing up with legally sanctioned marriage a given; the natural manifestation of a loving, committed relationship. As we rejoice here today, we felt it was appropriate, to take a few moments to acknowledge the long road that has led to our new found freedom to be come a legally married couple.

**Man #1:**

We know many older gay couples endured the pain of having to live in the closet for decades, unable to acknowledge their love for one another. We know throughout history there were gay men whose careers would have been toppled if the world had known they were gay. How sad it is to think that creative geniuses like Walt Whitman, Michael Angelo, or Ralph Waldo Emerson had to hide such an important part of themselves. How tragic to think that they gave so much to the world, but the world, at that time would never have given them the simple right to choose who they loved.

**Man #2**

We also know that until durable power of attorney for health care and body disposition legislation was enacted a short time ago, male partners were sometimes unable to care for their partners during illness or at death. We've known partners of ten years who were denied the right to sit at their life partners' bedside as they passed away; we've known partners who were given no say in arranging their loved one's funeral; we've known partners who were not given their partner's cremated ashes because family members objected. It was these kinds of painful experiences that motivated all of us to keep fighting for acceptance and legal sanction of our unions.

**Man#1:**

We hereby want to thank each and every gay activist for the part they played in winning our freedom to stand here today. We would now like to invite \_\_\_\_\_ forward to officiate our marriage.

**Officiate:**

\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ I am honored to have this privilege to officiate at your marriage ceremony. Family and friends. Please witness as \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ join their lives in marriage

**Man#1:**

\_\_\_\_\_, I stand here today to pronounce to the world that I want you to become my spouse. What I mean by that is that I intend to share my life with you for better or for worse. I intend to celebrate your triumphs with you, and comfort you during the painful, challenging times.

**Man#2**

\_\_\_\_\_, I stand here today to pronounce to the world that I want you to become my spouse. I want to be there for you in good times and bad. I look forward to working together to achieve our dreams and goals.

**Man#1:**

I know a lot of single people. I cannot even imagine my life without you in it. All the things I treasure in life; a nice dinner with good wine, front row seats to a great play, watching the dog frolic at the dog park, or strolling the corridors of the Louvre, are joyous experiences because I share them with you.

**Man #2:**

Likewise, all my life experiences are made richer when I share them with you. Perhaps the most important thing in the world is to be able to share your experiences with another person and know that they “get” you, they understand your angst, or know how much a certain achievement means to you. Thanks for “getting” me.

**Man#1:**

I hereby pledge today to do all I can to nurture the deep passion that we share. I think that physical passion is an important part of a relationship. I also know that tending to the emotional relationship underlying the physical relationship is what keeps the physical passion alive.

**Man#2:**

I also treasure the physical passion we share and promise to feed that passion by feeding the deep soul connection that caused us to fall in love. There are, of course, ebbs in the passion and those are scary times. But we have been able to weather the rough times and renew our passion.

**Man#1:**

I am also grateful that we both keep in mind our goal to sustain a long-term partnership. We are therefore able to weather the challenging times believing that we will rediscover our passion, if we are patient. We have seen plenty of partnerships fail, and feel proud that we have always stuck it out and found that we did, in fact, grow to love one another in new ways.

**Officiate:**

As a representative of this community I need to ask you to affirm that you are ready to accept the legal parameters of marriage. By becoming marriage partners you are entrusting one another to serve as legal guardian over one another's bodies, both in sickness and at death. Do you accept responsibility to make all decisions for one another during sickness and at death?

**Man #1:**

I would be honored to sit at your bedside when it is time for you to leave this realm, and to be the one who cares for you in times of sickness.

**Man #2:**

I would likewise be honored to be the one who cares for you when you are unable to care for yourself, and I want to be the one who sprinkles your ashes to the wind.

**Officiate:**

Marriage is considered by this community to be a joining of your life energies. Thus, henceforth all that you each come to own will belong to you jointly. If you someday, for any reason, choose to divorce, your marital estate will be divided equitably between you. Do you understand this legal merging of assets and do you each consent to this legal merging of your resources?

**Man:1:**

In taking you as my spouse, I hereby declare that everything I come to own will belong equally to you.

**Man#2:**

I hereby merge my life with you. Whatever is mine is yours. I consider you my partner in all that I do in my life.



**NOTE:**

If you disagree with the idea of totally communalizing your resources in marriage, it is very important that you state that clearly in a pre-nuptial agreement. It is also a good idea to announce that as part of your ceremony.<sup>1</sup>

**Officiate:**

This community recognizes the right of every individual to enter into a marital partnership of his/her own choosing. This community also recognizes an individual's right to terminate a marital partnership in the event that he/she concludes the marriage has reached a state of incompatibility, and is no longer capable of meeting his/her needs. As a representative of this community, I need to ask each of you to pledge, as you enter this marriage, that if you ever decide to sever this union, you will do so with due respect for one another. I need to also ask you to promise that if you divorce, you will participate in a termination process so that both of you are able to come to an understanding of why the relationship is no longer workable.

**Officiate:**

\_\_\_\_\_, do you hereby publicly declare that if you ever decide to sever this bond of marriage that you will participate in a termination process and treat \_\_\_\_\_ with honesty and respect if you decide to dissolve this marital union?

**Man #1:**

We aspire to make this union a lifelong partnership. However we know there is always a chance that, as a result of our on-going life experiences, we will find ourselves drifting apart in very serious ways. We pledge that if this happens, we will give our best efforts to repair that breach.

**Man #2:**

If despite our best efforts, we find that the differences are too great to bridge the gap, we will terminate our spousal relationship in a respectful and caring manner, without bitterness.

**Officiate:**

As a representative of this community I also need to ask you to pledge that if you choose to become parents, that you will honor those responsibilities whether or not you chose to remain marriage partners. I also need you to pledge that you will continue to treat one another respectfully as you continue to parent your children.

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<sup>1</sup> **Officiate:**

\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ wish to create a marriage with more independent financial arrangements than traditionally practiced in our culture. They would like to make a public statement to that effect, with you, their family and friends, as witnesses.

**Man #1:**

We, as two very independently oriented people, wish to have our marriage legally recognized by the State, however, we do not wish to totally communalize our resources.

**Man #2:**

We have drafted a pre-nuptial delineating the ways in which we desire to retain independent ownership of our personal resources in our marriage.

**Man #1:**

If we become parents, I pledge to fulfill that responsibility, regardless of how our lover relationship may change in the future.

**Man#2:**

If we become parents, I also promise to view that as a lifelong commitment and to treat you respectfully as my parenting partner.

**Officiate:**

Will the witnesses please step forward?

**Officiate:**

\_\_\_\_\_, do you support \_\_\_\_\_'s and \_\_\_\_\_'s desire to merge their lives through this act of marriage? Would you like to say a few words on behalf of this union?

**Witness #1:**

[Person can share thoughts about the couple, read a poem, sing a song, etc.].

**Officiate:**

\_\_\_\_\_, do you support \_\_\_\_\_'s and \_\_\_\_\_'s desire to merge their lives through this act of marriage?

**Witness #2:**

[Person can share thoughts about the couple, read a poem, sing a song, etc.].

**Officiate:**

\_\_\_\_\_, with family and friends as witnesses, do you hereby declare that you take this man as your loving mate and life partner? Do you pledge to cherish, nurture, and support him?

**Man #1:**

I do.

**Officiate:**

\_\_\_\_\_, with family and friends as witnesses, do you hereby declare that you take this man as your loving mate and life partner? Do you pledge to cherish, nurture, and support him?

**Man #2:**

I do.

**Man #1:**

\_\_\_\_\_ please accept this ring as a symbol of my love and commitment to this marriage.

**Man #2:**

\_\_\_\_\_ please accept this ring as a symbol of my love and commitment to this marriage.

**Officiate:**

As a spokesperson for the people who know and love you both, we hereby bless and celebrate this union of your deepest selves and pronounce you a legally married couple.

## A Partnership Ceremony for a Senior Couple

*Some senior couples have a strong preference to get legally married and decide that is the right choice for themselves. However, sometimes legal marriage can create financial issues for seniors in regards to alimony, pensions, social security, inheritances for children, etc., such that it is better to not actually legalize the partnership. If there are financial considerations that make legal marriage inadvisable, a senior couple can simply have a non-legal joining or commitment ceremony to celebrate their love and the merging of their lives. This ceremony is of course just an example and can be modified to suit a given couple's unique needs. It is written as a legal marriage but can be adapted for use as a non-legal commitment ceremony.*

### **Facilitator:**

Family and friends, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ wish to thank all of you for being here today as they join their lives. \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ have come to celebrate their love and make a commitment to cherish and nurture that love in the coming years. Please witness as they proclaim their love and aspirations, and exchange the vows they have written.

### **Woman:**

In order for all of you to be able to fully appreciate how happy I am to be standing here today, I have to talk a little about the years that led up to this day. I did not know if I would be lucky enough to find love again; it was not an easy journey. I had become accustomed to aloneness, though not so accustomed that I did not feel some pangs of envy when I saw an older couple strolling hand-in-hand. But I had a standard in my head of what I was looking for. That standard prompted me to say no to people that I knew in my heart I could not bond with in the deep, satisfying way that I longed for. I realized I preferred to endure loneliness in my aloneness, than to feel the haunting loneliness of an ill-chosen relationship.

I began to wonder if Match.com was going to be listed on my monthly credit card bill for the rest of my life. I began to resent the \$20.00 a month I paid them, as the years ticked by. It wasn't like I couldn't afford the \$20.00/month. It was just kind of a monthly notice of failure; failure to find the love I had hoped to find.

I read profile after profile. I went on a lot of first dates that did not lead to a second. I had some six month relationships that looked promising at the beginning but turned out to have incompatibilities I knew I could not live with. I learned something from each failure, most of all I began to recognize what I was not looking for. I spent a lot of time rewriting my profile to be a beacon for the kind of person I wanted to meet. Meeting you was a wonderful surprise that has put an end to a very long search.

### **Man:**

I likewise, spent some years wondering if I would ever meet a person whose values and goals could possibly mesh with an odd duck like myself. But I really didn't want to stop being an odd duck; my many quirks were based on some pretty deep seated values. Since my divorce, I said no to some relationship offers that would have required me to lose some important parts of me. I sometimes wondered if I was making a mistake. But somehow I held on to a mantra given to me by an unlikely source: To quote Popeye the sailor man: "I am what I am, and that's all that I am." I longed for a woman who could love me for the qualities I feel proud to possess; though they are often a bit at odds with the status quo.

I had a couple one or two year relationships. But in both cases the people seemed to be kind of stuck in bitterness and regret about their pasts. I have forgiven myself for my mistakes, and hold no grudges against anybody else. We all did the best we were capable of at the time; I want to cherish the positive memories,

and move on from the painful ones. I did not want to live with someone lost in bitterness and negativity. I finally decided to sign up for Match.com, I really did not know what to expect. I went on some dates with a few people over the course of a year. But nobody felt right. Then one day, last year I found the beacon you had put out to the universe. The look in your eyes and the smile in your photo jumped out at me. Unlike most of the short, fairly shallow profiles I had been reading, yours was very long, and expressed some very deep values and philosophies; ones that very much resonated for me. So I contacted you and we had that first phone call. You passed with flying colors. And every day that I have spent with you since, you have likewise passed with flying colors!

**Woman:**

\_\_\_\_\_, I am very happy to have you to share this chapter of my life with. These are some of the things I hope to share with you in the years ahead:

*-- I want us to be a source of comfort and strength to one another when death touches our lives and we lose a friend or family member.*

*--I want us to help one another maintain a faith and optimism about humanity when the world goes through one of its dark and challenging times.*

*-- I want us to help one another heal from the sadness and disappointment of broken dreams, and find the courage to build new dreams and goals.*

*-- I want us to cook healthy meals together so we can maintain our vitality.*

*-- I want to take long walks in every season, finding rejuvenation in the beauty and rhythms of nature.*

*--I want to be great grandparents together including challenging ourselves to appreciate our grandkids' music so we do not lose touch with the vibrancy of youth.*

*--Perhaps most importantly, I want us to continually remind one another that there is never a excuse for becoming bored with life and disconnected from the world. To me life is a precious gift, and I want to approach it that way for every additional year that I am lucky enough to be given.*

**Man:**

\_\_\_\_\_, I feel so grateful to have found in you a traveling companion for these last decades of my life. When I say traveling companion, I do not mean traveling to physical places. I am so excited to have found someone who is more interesting in traveling to new states of mind rather than simply new places. I treasure the thought of helping one another move to places of greater forgiveness, tranquility, acceptance, and spiritual peace. I have lost my way on these journeys many times in my life, but fortunately, I realized I had taken a wrong turn, and readjusted my course. Now I know I can also count on you to tug on me firmly if you see me wandering off the true paths I aspire to walk on during my remaining years.

In my youth I wanted to move mountains, but that didn't quite happen. I still think there are mountains to be moved in this world, but I have a better sense of how that is done. Now I am more willing to accept that my role may be to help work to get leaders elected who understand that the mountains must be moved a truckload of dirt at a time! Now that we are retired citizens, I look forward to expressing our citizenship in mundane, but oh so important ways, like door to door canvassing, showing up at city council meetings, donating labor to fund-raising events, etc. Now that we don't have go to work at a job every day, we can go to work directly for our local communities, our country, and our planet.

## Note Regarding Finances:

*It is important to briefly address the issue of finances in a senior wedding ceremony whether it is a legal marriage or not. I think having the couple briefly outline the ways in which they have decided to blend or not blend their financial resources serves as a good clarification process for them as a couple, and also makes their desires known to other family members who may be affected; i.e. grown children or grandchildren.*

*There is no right or wrong way to handle finances in a senior relationship; different arrangements work for different people. Sometimes both people in a senior partnership have fairly similar financial resources. However, sometimes when two people meet late in life, they are each in a very different financial position, and sometimes one person has children and the other does not. These kinds of differences may require more creative ways of blending or not blending financial resources.*

### **EXAMPLE #1**

[For couples with very different financial assets.]

#### **Woman:**

We would like to share with you, our families and friends, the arrangements we have made regarding finances, now that we will be living together. We come to this partnership with very different pasts. I have spent my life as a “change the world” activist with a “live for the day” philosophy, and I would not re-do it any differently. \_\_\_\_\_ settled into a well paying career early in life and like a hard-working squirrel, was able to bury a lot of extra nuts for his future and the future of his children. Given our very different financial positions at this point in our lives, we each would like to maintain a lot of autonomy in terms of how our financial estates are intertwined while we are alive, and how our financial resources are allocated after we die. We desire that all of the resources we each enter this partnership with shall remain separate and pass to our respective children when we die. However, since I am giving up my condo so that we can live together and moving into \_\_\_\_\_’s house, he is granting me a life long lease to reside in the house, in case he precedes me. But after I die, the house shall be sold, and the proceeds divided among \_\_\_\_\_’s children. We each believe this arrangement is the most fair, as we are creating a partnership late in life and a total merging of financial resources seems inappropriate. If I die before \_\_\_\_\_ he is free to do whatever he wants with the house, as he will be maintaining sole ownership of it.

#### **Man:**

We feel this arrangement, of mostly separate finances, will enable each of us to continue to be the “captain of our own ship” in terms of financial decisions that really do not significantly impact our relationship. We are kind of both set in our ways and at this stage in life, and each want to be able to continue to spend twenty dollars or a thousand dollars whenever we want to, without feeling we have to consult one another. We think that carving out areas of separateness, enables us to continue to be who we are. We treasure the sense of partnership we have found together, but also need to preserve some areas of individuality. We have drawn up a pre-nuptial agreement which outlines how we want to deal with our finances during our marriage, and after our death.

## **EXAMPLE #2**

[For couples with similar financial assets.]

### **Man:**

As most of you know, neither \_\_\_\_\_ nor I have any children. Before meeting one another we had each prepared a will designating what charitable organizations we wished our estate to be divided among. Now that we are joining our lives in marriage, we have decided to combine our financial estates. We have designated that our joint estate will go first to the care of each of us in case of serious, long-term illness.

### **Woman:**

If we are lucky enough that neither of us needs to tap into much of our financial resources because of serious long-term illness, we have jointly prepared a list of the charitable organizations that we wish to leave our estate to. Since we have such strong political and spiritual value compatibility, we found that who we each planned to leave our money to before we met, is very similar to we have decided upon as a couple. We have named: Hospice, Planned Parenthood, the City of Ann Arbor Parks Acquisitions Department, the Humane Society of Huron Valley, Amnesty International, and the Union of Concerned Scientists as the benefactors of our estate.

### **Woman:**

I hope that we are both blessed with many more years of life to come, but of course none of us know how the roulette wheel of life will spin. I do know that I intend to enjoy each week, month and year that I share with you to the fullest extent possible. Sharing my life with you adds a vibrancy to my life that I am incredibly grateful for.

### **Man:**

I share those sentiments. I think love adds a special excitement to life whether you are twenty or eighty. I continue to discover new things about myself through our stimulating interactions. My life is made richer by having you to celebrate my triumphs, and sooth my disappointments.

### **Woman:**

I have only known you for a short part of my life. However, due to the depth of our connection, you have a profound sense of who I am and what led me to become the person I am today. You weren't there for those decades, but when I share my stories, the good ones and the bad ones, you always get the punch lines!

### **Man:**

I likewise, treasure the closeness we have been able to achieve in such a short time. You are a great listener, and often help me re-interpret my past experiences in ways that help me find a new peace and acceptance about some of the challenges of my life.

### **Facilitator:**

It is clear that both of you feel a great joy about creating this partnership. I hear that you have a deep caring for one another. It is obvious that this marriage will have a strong base of love. Marriage also requires hard work at times. No matter how much you love your partner, there will be times when you will disagree and feel frustrated and disappointed. At these times you must remember the deeper commonality that you are basking in today, and find ways to work through the differences. Are you ready to exchange your vows?

**Man:**

I am.

**Woman:**

I am.

**Facilitator:**

[To ring bearer] Please come forward with the rings.

**Man:**

\_\_\_\_\_ I pledge to work hard to make this relationship a source of strength, comfort, laughter, and loving companionship. I hereby take you as my partner. I will be at your side to support you, and care for you as we continue our life journey, wherever it may lead.\* [ Places ring on woman's hand.]

**Woman:**

\_\_\_\_\_ I pledge to work hard to make this relationship a source of strength, comfort, laughter, and loving companionship. I hereby take you as my partner. I will be at your side to support you, and care for you as we continue our life journey, wherever it may lead.\* [Places ring on man's hand.]

**Facilitator:**

I have witnessed your expression of love for one another and the vows of love and commitments you have both made have today. I hereby pronounce you husband and wife.

**Facilitator:**

[To families and friends] Please support this couple through the years in manifesting the aspirations they have expressed here today.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:**

\*I know I have strongly advocated making references to the possibility of divorce as part of the marriage ceremony and have advised against making any "till death do us part" statements as well. However, I throw out this rule for a senior wedding ceremony. I think it is safe to assume that it will be lifelong. There are of course senior divorces, but I think they are rare enough that it is reasonable to bet on the odds of the marriage surviving. I don't think most senior couples would bother getting married if they did not have a strong sense that they would not end up divorced. People's personalities, values, and goals are much more developed when they are older so the likelihood of the two people growing and changing in ways that make them incompatible are much less than when people marry for the first time in their twenties or thirties.