

How to Give Up Control and Truly Enjoy Your Wedding

Excerpted from

*"When Good People Throw Bad Parties:
A Guide To Party Politics For Hosts And Guests"*

by

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Several years ago while working as the travel editor for a bridal magazine, I came across a term called "bridal tyranny." I fell in love with this expression because it had been a year in which I'd been a bridesmaid in four different weddings, and I disliked each of these experiences immensely. After each of the weddings, I vowed never to do it again, and in fact, driving home from one of these torturous events, I angrily removed my requisite dyed satin pumps (a nauseating shade of peach), and hurled them out the car window. They landed on somebody's lawn.

Bridal tyranny. These days it's called The Bridezilla Syndrome.

This condition strikes brides regardless of their chronological age or the emotional maturity they might exhibit in other aspects of their lives. It's more common in younger brides, though I've seen plenty of 45 year-olds transform into maniacal control freaks when planning their weddings. At the risk of sounding sexist, this rarely -- if ever -- happens to men. I have yet to hear of a bridegroom getting anal over flower arrangements or insisting that all the bridesmaids wear the exact same shade of lilac panty hose.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT TO GIVE UP CONTROL

Weddings are a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for a couple to make a declaration of love, commitment and *independence*. First and foremost, it's a statement of the partners' commitment to one another, and a ritual to mark their new role in society as a married couple. But it's also a rare and vital moment in which a couple can stand before a captive audience and express the essence of who they are and how they perceive their place in the world. This is not an event to be taken lightly. It's a *privilege*. And every action, every word and every symbol counts.

But the power of symbolism and ritual can get lost when fleeting concerns like catering and clothing become more important than vows and heartfelt ideals. And the whole process really becomes an ordeal when you add family politics into the mix. When you start believing in the fantasy that life is supposed to be perfectly flawless for this one special day, then it's fair to say that you have now gone beyond the boundaries of rational thought.

My primary recommendation: *Let go of the quest for perfection.*

My secondary recommendation: *If there's any element of your wedding that causes you stress or discomfort, get rid of it.*



At Ed and Barbara's wedding, an uncontrollable turn of events resulted in the caterers not showing up. The ceremony began on schedule even though there were no tables and chairs, and not a drop of food to be seen. They ended up sending out for pizza to feed 75 people, and while some people might consider this a wedding disaster. Ed and Barbara consider it one of the most precious memories of their life together. At my own back yard wedding in 1987, it began to rain in the middle of the ceremony. My husband and I laughed with joy at the cosmic beauty of this, and the guests felt the same way we did. The caterers had to move their operation indoors, and it was quite a crush inside the small living room of the house. Did we care? Did anyone? Did it really matter in the real scheme of things?

Of course not. Because during the actual wedding everybody gets so caught up in the moment that the silly little details that mattered so much yesterday suddenly mean absolutely nothing. Most couples go into a sort of unconscious stupor during their wedding ceremonies. It's a combination of stage fright and emotional overwhelm, and when this happens, I guarantee that you will not care about what color shoes the bridesmaids are wearing.

The control that people try to exert over others and over the natural flow of life in general reaches obsessive proportions when it comes to weddings. At the wedding of Wendy and Harold for example, the bride insisted that each bridesmaid wear an identical pair of tiny pearl stud earrings. To guarantee compliance, Wendy even bought said earrings as gifts for her attendants. The dresses she chose for her friends were of a stomach-churning pale orange hue, and she insisted that they wear the exact same color pantyhose with the traditional dyed satin pumps. The girls were, of course, expected to pay for the dresses and shoes themselves (\$250... a fortune back in 1988) and to wear them happily, even though one of the bridesmaids was seven months pregnant and was miserable in high-heels.

This kind of dictatorship can alienate even the most devoted friends. The dresses you choose for your bridesmaids may look wonderful on a friend who has the body of a supermodel, but how will it look on your friend who's 60 pounds overweight? Your friends are mature individuals with unique personalities and identities of their own. Why try to make them look all the same? A color-coordinated flock of virginal maidens dressed up like pastel flowers may work if you're 20 years old and all your friends are thin. But in the real world, women are strong and independent with bodies to match. And honoring their individuality makes an important statement about *you*.

And one last comment about individuality... don't be afraid to throw tradition out the window entirely when it comes to the people in your wedding party. I've seen weddings where the flower girl was a 6-foot-5 man and the best man -- the groom's best friend -- was a woman. I've seen brides dressed in black, groomsmen in Hawaiian shirts, dogs as ring bearers, and even totally nude weddings. Anything goes.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Those of us who came of age in the 1960's and 70's will remember nature weddings -- in rugged and unusual outdoor environments -- as the flavor of the week. It's likely that most of us have attended at least one wedding under a full moon in the forest or on an isolated beach, and for those who preferred to live by common sense rather than tradition, sneakers and a warm jacket replaced chiffon dresses and tuxedos as we trekked through mud and sand to share in the nuptial joy. Outdoor locations are wonderful, but if you're inviting a large group, you'll need to consider the comfort of elders, kids and others who may not be able to manage a hike down a steep canyon trail.



In 1974 I attended two memorable hippie weddings, which probably inspired me to eventually become a wedding officiant myself. One wedding was held deep in the forest, and although the ceremony was beautiful and profound, it was a real hassle carrying in food,

tables and other necessities. The other -- one of my favorites -- was on a high cliff overlooking the sea in northern California. The guests gathered and watched the bride and groom arrive from across the grassy moors on a motorcycle, he driving and she on the back, her purple veil fluttering in the wind behind her. After the ceremony we all walked together back to the couples' rustic home a few hundred yards from where the wedding had been. It was much easier having the reception in a place with running water.

In another example of an outdoor wedding that didn't work, Carl and Rhonda chose to marry at sunrise on the beach, but there were two serious problems with this. Many of the guests simply refused to show up at this outrageous hour (but were more than happy to come to the brunch later that afternoon). And my voice - along with the voices of the bride and groom -- was inaudible against the sound of the crashing waves and the chilly wind. None of the guests who actually did show up could hear one word of what was being said. I'm sure they would have much rather stayed at home in their warm beds. Nature is beautiful, but it can be cold and noisy.

THE CONTENT VS. THE FORM

While you may love the idea of a traditional white wedding, it's important to know that even within that structure you can still improvise on the content of the ceremony. Consider a few alternatives, such as writing your own vows, having a friend read a favorite piece of poetry, or involving friends and family in the ceremony by having them say a few words. One couple did something totally unique, which I loved so much I that ended up using it in my own wedding ceremony. They put their rings into a little basket, and as part of the ceremony, passed the basket around to guests, asking each guest to touch and bless the rings in their own way before handing them back to the bride and groom. If a wedding is about declaring your love to the world, then why not include the world in the ceremony?

Another question of form has to do with how the bride, groom and officiant are physically positioned. A common mistake made by many couples is that they think they should stand facing the officiant with their backs to the audience. This configuration originates in religious ceremonies where the priest or minister is believed to be a channel for god and the couple looks to him for validation and authority. But my view is quite different. I see myself as nothing more than a disembodied voice during the ceremony. My words are there solely to express the ideas given to me by the couple and to create a focus for the audience. The couple is the true authority, and I prefer that my couples *face each other* during the ceremony, with deep unwavering eye contact. If they can't look each other directly in eye, they shouldn't be getting married.

And now a word about religion. If you're reading this article, then chances are you're interested in a non-religious wedding ceremony. A large part of my work as a wedding officiant involves counseling couples who don't want to marry within the dogmatic confines of their parents' religion, yet the parents are pressuring them to do so. This is the one of most stressful circumstances imaginable for a couple, and if it's not addressed right away it can become a lifelong problem. I've worked with couples who were brilliant at setting boundaries and saying NO to religious rituals that had no personal significance to the them, and at the same time, I've seen other couples who've completely caved in to parental pressure and regretted it forever.

A prime example is the story of Christine and Alan. They lived out of state but had their wedding here in California because Christine's parents live here and were paying for the elaborate wedding and expensive



reception. I worked with this lovely couple to create exactly the ceremony they wanted, and things were going quite well until they arrived in California one week before the wedding. They were staying at the Christine's parents' house, and I sensed a problem when they weren't returning my phone calls, with the wedding only a few days away. Finally, the night before the wedding, Alan called me, miserable and dejected, to tell me that Christine's mother had talked them into marrying in her church. They wouldn't be needing my services after all, Alan said, and apologized profusely. He felt so bad that he sent me a check for my entire fee the following week, with more apologies and an embarrassed explanation of the circumstances.

This is a situation in which the couple put more value on the trappings of the wedding -- paid for by the controlling parents -- than on their personal ideals. There is a soul injury when this happens, and I try to teach couples to respect the power of ritual... it focuses our intention, directs energy toward the thing we're trying to create, and therefore helps manifest that creation. Stating vows and declaring intent under a structure with which you have no affinity or alliance compromises the integrity of the ritual.

In another example in which the couple did just the opposite of Christine and Alan, one set of parents was Mormon and the other was Catholic. The couple, Randy and Ellen, had abandoned the religions of their families long ago, but now that they were marrying, the pressure was on. However, they recognized how important it was for them to make their declaration of independence, and went forward with their non-religious wedding, which was held in the back yard of a friend's house. The groom's parents (Mormon) attended the wedding, but stayed indoors during the actual ceremony, unwilling to witness it. The bride's parents showed up and were surprised at how non-offensive the ceremony actually turned out to be.

REMEMBER WHY YOU'RE DOING THIS



Wedding traditions, like all traditions, are not set in cement, and there is no rule, law or scary cultural taboo against altering them to fit your needs and your personality. Start by giving yourself permission to step outside convention. For example, tradition dictates that it's "bad luck" for the bride and groom to see each other on their wedding day prior to the ceremony. Have you ever wondered where this idea came from? It's quite ancient, and has to do with arranged marriages and religious traditions in which the groom often didn't know who the bride was until her veil was raised during the ceremony. So why do modern couples -- most of whom already live together -- insist on playing "hide the bride?"

Because that's the way it's always been done, and nobody thinks to question it. But if you believe that the day of your wedding is one of the most meaningful and spiritual days of your life, and you and your partner are rational adults who've been intimate for years, why wouldn't you want to spend every moment of that day together? Wake up in the morning and go for a walk on the beach (or whatever you normally do on leisurely mornings), and then take a bath together and wash each other's feet. Have breakfast in bed. Have sex. Do whatever feels loving and intimate and natural to you.

Your wedding day should be sacred, romantic and spiritual. Don't allow antiquated traditions or family pressures to take that away from you. Parents or other family members may want to take charge and tell you how it's "supposed" to be (especially if they're footing the bill), so set boundaries and state preferences right from the start by calling a meeting of all involved and laying your cards on the table about your vision of the event. Then let the negotiations begin.

KEEPING YOURSELF SANE

If I had to give only one single piece of advice to brides, it would be this: delegate responsibility. The last thing you should be doing on your wedding day is worrying about paying the photographer or wondering if the canapes are looking a bit limp on the buffet table. Put your maid of honor, your mother or a trusted friend in charge of these things. Write all the checks for vendors in advance and give them to someone whom you've named as money manager for the day. Appoint a few friends to act as "social ambassadors" who can help with hosting duties by greeting guests as they arrive, introducing people to one another and making sure everybody's comfortable.

If your budget allows, hire a professional wedding coordinator who will assume the vast majority of the planning and execution responsibilities. If you can't afford one, assign these tasks to an organized, outgoing friend. This same friend may also be able to help with other social necessities, such as:

- . Greeting people as they arrive and showing them to their seats.
- . Table-hopping, introducing themselves and providing introductions for others.
- . Facilitating activities, such as letting people know that it's time to move into an adjacent room for the cake-cutting, or inviting everybody to start making toasts or speeches.
- . Music coordinator - maintaining communication with the band or emcee to handle special requests, relaying information, scheduling toasts & presentations.
- . Detail management - Handling the little hassles that occur, such as running out of wine or the sudden appearance of rain at an outdoor wedding, and a thousand other unpredictable mini-crises.
- . Acting as your personal assistant and messenger. The band leader might want to know if you'd like them to stay an extra hour (for additional cost). Or you might need to get a message to the kitchen or settle a bill with the valet parking guys.

The best thing you can do for yourself on your wedding day is to shed as many stressors as possible. Be happy. Be calm. Be close to your partner. Remember that this is about you and the person you've chosen to spend your life with, and this is the first day of that life. Remember to breathe. Remember why're you're doing this. But most of all, remember to have fun!