


Spring 2012

## "Till Death Do Us Part:" White Weddings and Marriage in Contemporary Ritual

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### Recommended Citation

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**“Till Death Do Us Part:”  
White Weddings and Marriage in Contemporary Ritual**

Senior Project submitted to  
Division of Social Studies  
Bard College

by Brieze Levy

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
Spring 2012

acknowledgements:

thank you to all officiants who contributed to this project:

Bruce Chilton

David Feder

John Genet

and

David Nelson

Bruce, your advising sessions were always delightful helping hands  
the living room, kitchen, and residents of 40 East Market Street  
my personal support systems

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**PREFACE/INTRODUCTION:**

The inspiration for the topic of this paper comes from my interest in what universally binds us all and the techniques we have adopted to handle the binding. We all are born, age and die. Privilege is celebrating moments in history, and moments in one's life, recognizing aging with trusted ones around, and witnessing the start of a new family. The human condition is, at the most basic level, what connects us. We share the responsibility of being alive, interacting and evolving with our environment, dealing with life cycle truths. We all wrestle with the meaning to life, consciously or not, and act accordingly based on our motivations, obligations, and values.

We find comfort in connections, alliances, relationships; communication is the basis of sharing thoughts and ideas, which create methods for living and navigating our shared responsibilities. Rituals persist through time because they successfully quench our need for meaning and our need for communication. They merge our values and cultures with our biology, satisfy values and pass them on, and maintain standards while establishing paths for new ones to manifest. We are bound to ritual but also create the binding.

Our need for meaning can be satisfied privately, as quest for individual truths and explanations on the personal level. But our need for communication cannot be quenched without others. We gain comfort knowing our actions have a past; that they are known and practiced for the same reasons we practice. Performance ritual is proof of our need for communication. The power of the gaze validates our experiences and connects us to the ritual history of the present. Shared experience is possible and eventually built from. We establish our communities through the performance: the common experience where values are stated and lessons are learned.

Rituals dealing with life-cycle phenomena are known as rites of passage. These rites have an added layer of biological practicalities. Weddings are both performance and rite of passage. Family structure and the institution of marriage are co-dependent, which regulates sexual intricacies, reproductive desires, and social standards. Religious teachings are passed down through the family and spread by performance and celebration. Value specifics come out through ceremonial details and decisions. Today, the cultural values practiced in marriage rites are heavily affected by pop culture trends and the desire for marriage to be profitable.

Wedding practices in contemporary North America are becoming increasingly popularized, romanticized, and idealized. A marriage is a commodity, a money-making business and an expensive purchase. The privilege of the ceremony has been bloated and celebrated. Our culture has accepted and advanced on the opportunity to show-off wealth and status with a wedding. Reasons for matrimony have changed, or have seemingly changed, from the motives that develop values for a stable and productive family structure into narcissistic reasons that further advance economic prosperity or a superficial social acceptance. More time is spent planning amenities for the guests than writing the promises and vows.

White wedding practices have led to the development of wedding destination sites. These are geographical locations sought after by financially privileged families for their exotic and rare landscapes. They are environments unseen to the masses, vacation places means for relaxation and special moments separated from daily life. The commercial wedding industry has advertised these geographical locations as part of the wedding fantasy, drawing people in with their significance and status. The atmosphere of location

and atmosphere for ideal weddings satisfy the desire to have a relaxed, stress free and unique wedding experience.

White weddings, particularly at wedding destinations, seem less religious compared to the ceremonies in religious houses of worship. This is because in houses of worship, the symbolism associated with the images and icons transmitted to the guests reinforce the teachings of a religious practice. Their form brings up religious histories and our experience viewing the icons includes knowledge and relationships with this history. Wedding destinations do not have the same iconography. Instead, their location transmits a stress free energy, feelings of ease and happiness, and a state of sublime superiority.

It is not the ritual structure that satisfies or promotes values; it is the ritual performance. Embodying ritual, using the body and the mind, ideally brings the teachings of the historical rites to life. Performance ritual is a specific practice. We call upon our loved ones to witness the marriage because we want them to accept the change from single to married, and know the values that keep relationship and love alive. The ceremony lives forever in the minds of those who watched and those who performed, all those who are in the same place at the same time. The moment is categorized against other experiences and labeled based on details, how they relate to existent categories.

This paper deals with wedding ceremonies that utilize both religious and traditional symbolism. The difference between religious and traditional is found by the decisions made on how to execute the performance of wedding fundamentals. For example, choosing to have the Lord's Prayer would add biblical associations that would otherwise be left out. Substituting a formal setting for a casual, barefoot wedding, or an underwater wedding, shifts focus from the realities of marriage to the excitement and privilege of the moment.

Ritual is traditional by nature, they are patterns sustained through time by action. Weddings ceremonies are divinely linked, a way of organizing the family and what cannot escape. Therefore, labels such as religious and traditional, when applied to wedding ceremonies, have little distinction. However, it is impossible not to categorize and label, and advertisements do it well. We are drawn to certain choices because of the categories we associate to our options. For these reasons, the factors that help create labels and categories are useful when looking into ritual's affect and purpose.

Chapter one is a look at ritual theory. It serves as the introduction on the theoretical foundations of my later research. I am interested in performance ritual, ritual as performance, and the language used to describe something that is being performed. I am interested in what is happening now, how performance ritual is integrated into our present lives, and how ritual continues to teach and change, establish norms and satisfy explanations for meaning and needs for communication.

Ritual studies is a relatively new field within the broader context of religious and anthropological studies. It deals with our patterns and bone level desires, our questions about the unknown and techniques for managing the inevitable. Marriage, as a ritual, rite of practice, celebration, idea, opportunity, lifestyle, is universal. It lives in every culture and every community we know of. Modern advancements in advertising and technology have made it hard for wedding ceremonies to evolve past materialistic importance. But this materialistic importance has helped trace the cultural impact and importance weddings have in our contemporary lives.

In chapter two, I use Max Weber's writings on ideal-type to analyze the cultural impact and practice of wedding rites. The ideal-type is an all-inclusive utopia; it never takes



form, but instead provides the form to create the ceremonies from. This ideal-type must include the fundamental elements necessary to execute the rite, as well as a source for action. The fundamental elements for wedding ceremonies are place, preparations, gestures and objects, guests and witnesses, documents or cultural ties, personalization, and the script/scripture. These fundamentals vary in degree of expression and experience, but are present regardless of intention. There are three sources of action, which I define as experience-states: pragmatic, affective, and conceptual. In wedding ceremonies, and ritual in general, all three sources of actions, or experience-states, are present. Often one will be more present than the other, but they are co-dependent and ritual teachings gain strength the more all three are interacted with.

Chapter two includes the ideal-type chart set up with the experience-states and wedding fundamentals. I fill in the chart with vague examples to remain inclusive of oddities and anomalies that happen with practice. Weber writes on ideal-typical presentations, “they regularly seek to be, or are unconsciously, ideal-types not in the *logical* sense but also in the *practical* sense, i.e., they are a *model-type*” (Weber, 97).<sup>1</sup> Therefore, all actions are grouped and categorized because of the ideal-type; they exist apart because of the ideal’s existence. With this information, a relatively objective viewpoint is ideally recognized. Empirical information has a way to be checked and evaluated because the ideal-type accounts for all that exists and all that can exist. The details of ceremonial execution tell us about how our needs are being satisfied and what questions are craving an answer.

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<sup>1</sup> Weber, Max. *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*. Translated by Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch. Illinois: The free Press of Glencoe, Illinois, 1949.

In chapter three, I apply the information gained by the ideal-type chart to four interviews with officiants. The officiant is the choreographer, the final word and approval system trusted by both the state and religious orders. The role of the officiant is a third party; the intermediate position regulating practices and representing the success and structure of wedding practices. Their role is symbolic of various communities and teachings, doctrines and idealistic values of matrimony in practice. For these reasons, when interviewing the officiants, I was interested in how ritual theory affects their practices; how our need for meaning and our need for communication sets the stage for how they implement wedding fundamentals into practice.

The answers from the interviews are my research for evaluating an objective viewpoint on weddings in contemporary practices. All questions asked touch on a fundamental element to gain information on the source that brings the fundamental element to life. Each officiant has distinct practices, but all officiants practice the same fundamentals. It is important for variety to exist in symbolic details of officiants: different couples have different needs, and variety in execution adds to richness in culture. But at the basic level, when broken down by the ideal-type, we remain united by the needs driving us to ritual action. These needs are universal, and the continuous execution towards finding and organizing meaning, is part of the building blocks of culture. Ritual as actions and as teachings are the essence that encode our patterns, values, motives, and questioning. The rites of the wedding, when active, provide a way to synthesize the mind and body into a continuous and communicative experience that also addresses the greater unknown of nature and divinity.

**CHAPTER 1:  
RITUAL THEORY  
AND WEDDINGS AS RITE OF PASSAGE**

Barbara Myerhoff, a social scientist and anthropologist, published a compelling article entitled “Rites of Passage: Process and Paradox,” that grouped marriage into the ritual subcategory of rites of passage. In it, Myerhoff lays out theories examining properties of ritual found in rites of passages. The properties guided Myerhoff to the motives that arise and generate meaning from a paradox that arises when humans “belong to culture as much as to nature” (Myerhoff 110).<sup>2</sup> Victor Turner, Clifford Geertz, Max Gluckman, and many other influential anthropologists during the 1960’s and 1970’s influenced Myerhoff’s ritual theories. It was in the early 1900’s when ritual studies began. Arnold van Gennep is known as the pioneer, best known for the three stages of rites of passage that Turner, Myerhoff and others elaborate from. This section analyzes only her chapter on rites of passage to shed light on my wider examination of marriage ceremonies. I am not claiming to comment on Myerhoff’s overall ideas. Instead I aim to focus on her theories of why rites of passage exist to better inform my approach in observing wedding ceremonies and the needs they satisfy.

The first and most significant property of rites of passage Myerhoff gives is the need to give meaning to the life course. This property is necessary in differentiating rites of passage as a subcategory in the large category of ritual. Myerhoff takes a naive approach to the relationship between the life course and nature, stating, “the life course is for the most part unmarked by nature, with the exception of birth, sexual maturation, and death” (111).

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<sup>2</sup> Myerhoff, Barbara. “Rites of Passage: Process and Paradox.” From Turner, Victor. *Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Ritual*. Washington, D.C: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982.

This generalization overlooks how our actions, no matter the most banal or novel, are entangled with nature. Our only cut off from this interaction is death. Once we leave the living world, we no longer influence our societies and systems, and are no longer bound to culture and environment. Rites of passage mark our transitional moments and reiterate themes while highlighting moments of duty to nature and culture. In wedding ceremonies, objects such as rings, wine, documents, and dresses, have always been staples in the performance, or proper completion of the rite of passage; the objects involved are of equal importance to the actions and ideas. Symbols act as the sidekick to rites of passage (and therefore ritual), and as Victor Tuner puts it, they speak to us.<sup>3</sup>

Rites of passage are the planned/unplanned experiences noted as taking place during the most prominent moments in our lives. While preparation is a major aspect of most wedding ceremonies, the amount of unplanned, or shotgun weddings, cannot be ignored; a small or insignificant preparation period is a common trait in white wedding practices of contemporary North America, which will include later on. These experiences of rites of passage are most commonly a direct blend of our duties to nature and our duties to culture, but are not restricted by the duty to them. Nature and culture are always present, but the relationship to them changes; some can be out of choice, others peer/societal pressure. Rites of passage happen for many different reasons and take many different forms. Weddings are ideally celebrations, while funerals are a time to grieve. Likewise, not

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<sup>3</sup> Turner, Victor. *Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Ritual* Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982. "A symbol is something that represents something else by association, resemblance, or convention. Spoken or printed words, for example, are symbols. But celebratory objects are, first and foremost, material objects, though they represent ideas, objects, events, relationships, "truths" not immediately present to the observer, or even intangible or invisible thoughts and conceptions. Such celebratory symbols, moreover, usually stand for many things and thoughts at once" (16).

all wedding are celebrations and not all funerals are times to grieve. Their common thread is a beginning, middle, and end; they structure an experience that adds to the histories of a community; and they pass on information with the act of the doing, including all objects, gestures, and icons used. Icons – or objects with meaning – are needed to perpetuate the active lessons and establish continuity among communities.

“Ceremonies must transform the corpse into a properly deceased person; death is only the necessary condition for the departure from the world of the living. Neither are men and women simply born: they are ‘made’ by ceremonies” (Myerhoff 109). Here, Myerhoff implies a social aspect, which links the initiate to a community. This community is one aspect of ritual reality that holds the individuals responsible to the values set forth. The community also and incorporates the initiates into their structure and support system. Lessons, beliefs, and values are transmitted symbolically and literally through the rites being performed. For example, Myerhoff believes we “understand something about our own death in contemplating and enacting rituals involving a corpse” (118). But the reason we feel connected to each other, is because the self is also established with the presence of the community and its histories. This is the reason why meaning is meaningful: because the common knowledge ritual provides brings the comfort of the self because it is recognized individually, separate from the comforting community prescribed to.

Weddings today involve a procession of bridesmaids and groomsmen, flower girls, family members, and other attendees. The importance of the individual as part of a larger community is continuously stressed; the support of the community grants legitimacy to our search for meaning, a verifying system to interact with. Furthermore, a rite of passage such as a wedding ceremony would be hard to perform without symbolic meaning contributed

by objects. Rites of passage stem *from* a need for meaning, and upon performance, become meaning itself.

Taking note on the reflexive quality of ritual sheds light on an inherent paradox to rites of passage: “rites of passage announce our separateness and individuality to us and at the same time remind us most firmly and vividly that we belong to our group and cannot conceive of an existence apart from it” (115). This reflexive quality creates the paradox that propels ritual teaching, the magic that allows rites to reinforce themselves continuously be performed. Completing the experience of a rite of passage includes the realization of the initiate's individuality within a larger ecosystem of socio-cultural ties. As Myerhoff theorizes, part of our human condition is a need for meaning; rites of passage provide the means to sustain a belief in meaning through awareness of the histories and contemporary trends.

Myerhoff rightly looks to the form and function of rites of passage. Myerhoff is greatly influenced and aided by Arnold van Gennep, one of the first scholars and anthropologists of ritual performance, who outlines a tripartite system in 1907. This system allowed Myerhoff to access the information about an experiential state, the *liminal* state, which gave a new view on the need for meaning. Arnold van Gennep, in true structuralist fashion, “recognized that a distinction is most easily made by citing its opposite, that is, by binary opposition” (116). For van Gennep and Myerhoff, this provided a means to distinguish classes/categories in a life cycle, point out symbols and lessons inherent to specific communities, and analyze the changes of natural reintegration and reiteration patterns.

“By identifying the logic underlying rites of passage and pointing out their universal

form (tripartite) and function (clarifying and separating people's movement through status positions in a social system) van Gennep laid much of the groundwork for the modern interest in symbolic and ritual studies" (116). Myerhoff writes, when discussing the benefits of binary opposition writes, "this led to a scheme of two opposing categories defined in three stages" (116). For weddings, the tripartite stages would be single to engaged to married. The two opposing categories are single and married. The transition moment, the planned celebration and ritual performance dealt with the experience. The ritual performance equates to the liminal state, where the teaching are passed only through commitment to experience. Political status, age, social class, family history, etc., are all structures we are tied to and therefore they add variations to ritual experience and performance. During the rite, all participants bring these cultural additions, which add to the eccentricities, memories, and identities of a community. Symbols reinforce these identities with the meaning associated by form. A familiar form can bring nostalgia, which stems from a completed event reflected upon that is enhanced by the power of symbols and objects.

Where the *completion* of an event occurs is up to the theorist, since we are constantly experiencing and accumulating through time. Action is only completed with death, which could be argued is still theory, not fact. The liminal phase, by definition, is the middle stage the initiate goes through when performing/experiencing a rite of passage. This implies separation from the group and reintegration as a changed individual. With weddings, there are two initiates experiencing the same ceremony. Naturally, there are differences between husband and wife, but both must individually choose to submit themselves to the other, their new family structure, and the values of their new community.

The liminal phase is important for the internal change of an individual, but it is just one phase of a larger complex. Each individual who passes through this phase experiences it differently, yet becomes collectively a piece of the larger picture. The variations of experiencing accumulate to differences in members of one community. "Some anthropologists have suggested that in discussing rites of passage we treat as subsets, 'rites of separation,' 'rites of transitions,' 'rites of reincorporation.' Often one phase of the total ritual process will be dominant and obscure the others, but most often logic requires that all three rites are present to some degree" (116). The degree to which these subcategories are present in the whole experience creates room for variables in how the rite is practiced. These three categories are useful for analytical purposes, but the bigger picture of the rite of passage should be looked at as a whole, with respect to the individual and the community. The tripartite categories serve us in examining, but in practice, overlapping of experiences is what creates the resistance that propels forward. Subsets are not to be put into hierarchy according to importance, but rather analyzed together to gather information about the type of overall experience and teachings for the individual and the community involved.

Clifford Geertz believes rites of passage inhibit questions and curiosity, instead of promoting consciousness and questioning. He sees repetition as busy work, keeping the mind from straying away by focusing in on habits and ritualism. Meaning is still provided by ritual teachings, just honed in on and emphasized to keep creativity and disbelief in the shadows. A funeral ceremony, for example, would "stifle one's view of mortality and distract one from seeing oneself in the corpse and its destiny," according to Myerhoff's understanding of Geertz (118). This busy work takes the place of creativity and stimulates



feelings of comfort and ease. Meaning is still searched for because of our human condition the purpose for ritual action, but as Geertz believes, this form of meaning serves a functional purpose: to keep our minds comfortable and directed. In this case, the lessons taught during rites of passage are therefore directed towards a specific fulfillment otherwise missing. Like any lesson, the means of receiving the information are essential to the longevity of the message and aptitude of applicability.

As any good anthropologist, Myerhoff looks into the most direct and efficient ways to gaining insight into how teachings are transmitted. For her, psychological anthropology seems logical because,

“Central to nearly all such rituals, particularly rites of initiation, is the integration of the person into the society. These are occasions when most often the formal teaching of the culture is transmitted to those who are to become full members” (118).

Reintegration is more than a just a physical change. The state of mind of the initiate changes when they enter the new community/phase/stage in their life. Again, liminality is evident, along with the motives of the ritual actors. The initiates mind and body need to accept “duty as desire” to fully learn and internalize the teachings of their new system. This is an optimistic approach, not accounting for those initiates who are not fully devoted to their rites of passage or are prone to showing hostility towards duty.

If meaning is being provided by the rites of passage, belief in the truth of the meaning is required. This includes all methods and materials used for ritual teachings. Rites do not provide meaning; they grant access to reaching it. It is up to the individual to find the meaning they need, find their reasons for performing. However, since rites of passage are also the perpetual return to teachings, acting in line with pattern keeps information by “the operation of reinforcement in the conventional learning sense” (121);

thus the importance of repetition for ritual teachings to be successful. In the case of wedding ceremonies, the transition only happens once, yet we acknowledge the anniversary of the event each year to reinforce the values established during the transition and create relationships based on these values.

When we enter the world we start with one basic distinction, male or female, and become socialized by other distinctions as time goes on. It is the role of rites of passage, as Myerhoff sees them, to mediate culture for the purpose of “organizing and endowing our individual experiences with its characteristic stamp” (125). This stamp takes the form of community traits that are known because the actions exhibit faithfulness to specific values. For example, a diamond engagement ring is a symbol for a particular community that holds sentiment and meaning with the diamond ring. Likewise, the woman of a Hindu household makes specific choices in how she practices her religion in her home, directly affecting the accumulated experiences of all members in her immediate household and indirectly affecting the larger histories of Hinduism.

Rites of passage in contemporary practice have come to mean more than just the continuing of tradition or transition in the life cycle. As we become isolated from each other by technology, a greater need for a personal community develops. It could be argued that modernism has brought a greater need for rites of passage and ceremonialism, no matter if they are sacred or secular, because of our growing need for personal relationships.<sup>4</sup> The value of performing rites of passage comes from participation and completion. The completion creates a feeling of integration into a community. The community acts as both stability and change. It is present to assist during the transition, promises support after the

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<sup>4</sup> Myerhoff talks more on the importance of rites of passage in modernity starting on page 129.

ceremony is over. Smooth transitions make a smooth society, which is ideally made up of people who feel secure, safe and integrated into their communities and culture.

The work of ritual is not possible without the work of the individual and the cooperation of the community. We perform because we want to, or we want the result performance yields. This takes the importance out of what is being done to the simple action of doing it. Myerhoff writes, “rites of passage certainly do not *cause* social integration, rather they reflect and enhance it” (128). To Myerhoff, this allows contemporary rites to serve the same purposes derived from tradition: the needs of the individual. Individuals perform rites for a means to an end. Regardless of the difference between ends in a secular or a sacred rite, “doing is believing” in ritual more than religion.

Rituals begin with a cultural problem, stated or unstated, and then work various operations upon it, arriving at “solutions”- reorganizations and reinterpretations of the elements that produce a newly meaningful whole. Achieving the appropriate shift in consciousness is the work of ritual (129).

We can deduce from this quote that communal consciousness holds great importance in creating the meaningful whole of ritual experience. The motives of the individual are directly responsible for the success of the rite and therefore the success of the teachings. Thus, ritual action is the means to producing the meaningful whole and the shift in consciousness.

The will of the individual is ultimately the driver in charge of ritual action. The performance, the action, is everything. How the performance is executed, by the details and elements, shows us the values and intent that is at the source of the action and the need of the actor. With weddings, individuals have the power to instigate change in their lives, tailored to their personal needs. It is up to the individual to make it happen, using the tools

offered in rites of passage to fulfill the transitions with ease or adversity. All experiences leading up to the present, rituals and rites of passage included, inform the decisions happening in real time. "In our times, society deals with other concerns than the dispensation of meaning or the attentiveness to the needs of the soul. These matters, now, we must take into our own hands," writes Myerhoff, in a somewhat melodramatic celebration of ritual.

We seek meaning and get it by performing rites of passage. The next step is organizing the ritual output in a useful way. Performances are powerful on the large scale because they reach many people at once. We can act on our impulses but may not be satisfied without the cooperation of our community; we can find meaning internally but simultaneously always be searching. Rites of passage are not always conclusive, but their actions are permanent teachings useful in the continuous search for fulfillment of our shared human condition. Wedding ceremonies do not directly show our need for meaning, but rather allude to it. They are work with our family structure, which is centered on our biological duty to reproduce. The will of the individual can be different from the will of the community, yet all work together to organize methods of interacting with duties to procreation and the communities that support us.

#### CATEGORIES AND MONEY'S GREED:

Roland Grimes sets up the marriage scene into two categories, traditional and alternative. These categories separate the religiously affiliated wedding ceremonies that abide to a religious law, and those that ignore laws and are more concerned with individual desires. Grimes rightly acknowledges the blurry lines and gray areas between these

categories, yet the labels exist, and is important to Grimes and most of the population in North America. The contradiction between what is practiced and/or performed and what is imagined and/or marketed is an entry point into Grimes' discussion on categories of wedding ceremonies.

However, the differences between a religious wedding versus an alternative service are not as different as one may think. The agency of individuals in wedding ceremonies is unparalleled; there is no other rite of passage that allows individuals as much choice and freedom to plan a celebration that lives up to our wildest fantasies and desire. The performance of the wedding ceremony, commonly photographed and reminisced upon, eventually serves as an icon once completed. This does not imply that immediately upon completion ceremonies become icons. It is a slow process psychologically but instant pragmatically. Documentation, photos, video, wedding rings, broken glass, tiaras, and those who witnessed, all serve the purpose of keeping memories alive and establishing new ideals.

It should be noted that icons have the capacity to lead to stagnant qualities. John Dewey would describe this as the difference between an image and imagery.<sup>5</sup> Contemporary weddings in North American practices are performed as masks for the disreputable intricacies unfolding underneath, part of the negative mechanics of the relationships. This mask quality of practices today is common for ceremonial rites. This shows how a ceremony can be a planned misrepresentation of the truth. There is no hesitation in claiming that rites of passage, specifically wedding ceremonies, have the power to change and adapt through time. It is *how* they change that becomes the important

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<sup>5</sup> Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. New York: Penguin Group, 1934.

question.

Traditional Christian and Jewish weddings in North America have evolved into what is now the typical, imagined, and iconized white wedding. The white bridal wedding gown, multilayered cake, diamond ring, banquet celebration, bridal shower, honeymoon, etc., all are part of the white wedding fantasy and package. These images and moments are as much the product of advertising as they are ritual histories. However, the white wedding tradition does not date back far. The first popularized version of the white wedding was the union of Queen Victoria to her cousin Prince Albert in 1840; not an American tradition, but borrowed and popularized by Western media's commercialized wedding market.<sup>6</sup> The importance of material objects in wedding ceremonies slowly became a focus and ceremony trait as weddings took on the role of gloating wealth, happiness, and the perfection of the couple. Romanticized views of love substitute commitments practiced in matrimony and therefore values and motives of the marriage structure are also romanticized.

Meaning does not come from form alone; *how* symbols and artifacts are used creates their meaning. The use of artifacts and symbols vary from couple to couple, creating each wedding to be a distinct rite of passage: a celebration that is individual, specific, special, and binding. "The white-wedding tradition, no older than the mid nineteenth century, has not changed much structurally, although it continues, like a great downhill-rolling snowball, to accumulate other elements" (Grimes 156). Grimes' choice of a snowball,

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<sup>6</sup> Grimes, Ronald. *Deeply Into The Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage*. London: University of California Press, 1943. Grimes uses the term 'white wedding' in his chapter "Diving Mates, Making Kin" pp. 152-214. He notes that white wedding is term mostly applied by scholars. Advertising methods instead use the term traditional, further evidence of how advertising influences rites of passage and rites of passage influence advertising.

accumulating in size with motion, is a nice metaphor to apply to wedding ceremonies. History accumulates, never disappearing in time but instead molding into and informing what becomes our present. All actions of history play into tendencies and preferences of today, traditions and rights of passage are naturally affected. For example, instead of choosing either the bridal gown or the diamond ring, the white wedding tradition of today has incorporated both, a choice indicative of characteristics of the community keeping white weddings alive.

The stress of advertising and marketing in the wedding scene became an important fixture of wedding ceremonies beginning in the twentieth century in North America: “Selling and consuming are inseparable from North American ways of courting and marrying, even though in our wedding fantasies we stash the commercial dimensions of marrying backstage” (Grimes 154). This quote is important for two reasons: first, it illuminates a paradox central to Grimes’ interpretation on wedding theory, and second, the stress of money is stated bluntly. On the paradox Grimes sees: weddings are a mask for the subtext of our personal relationships. The “white” in white weddings could not be more ironic. White accentuates pure, virginal, and angelic values, representing the “perfection” of the bride and her soon-to-be household. Yet our personal lives are anything but perfect and contemporary white wedding practice will pay the price of keeping the secrets hidden.

“Rites of passage are often rife with rhetoric and idealized images aimed at animating the emotions and cultivating community values. Only the most naïve of participants could fail to notice the discrepancy between the magic of wedding poses and the hard realities of marriage” (177).

It is no surprise that communities seek to promote their positive traits and productive values over negative ones in times of celebration. But by placing these positive traits in

ideal forms, celebrating, repeating, marketing, and illuminating divine symbols in relation to perfected emotions, a disconnection becomes inevitable. The values of the initiates do not align with the values of the marriage system they enter into contract with.

In comparison to other rites of passage, birth and death specifically, wedding celebrations allow for the most agency of the individuals involved in the rite. This has to do with the age of initiate during the ceremony. For obvious reasons, it would be impossible to have a say in our birth celebrations. For funerals, individual agency is possible, but only to a certain extent. The funeral is concluded for a specific individual, but sadly not performed in their living presence. With weddings, the situation is different. Weddings ceremonies happen when the initiates are active in the life cycle, not starting or finishing. Their opinions and individualities influence the outcome.

The proper age to marry varies from culture to culture and so does degree of personalization allowed. But planning or fantasizing about ones wedding can start at any age. If we ignore the roles of etiquette books, magazines, bridal stores, television shows, and advertisements, the pressure of wedding ceremonies is still evident in North America because of status roles and family structure. This universal quality of wedding practices, along with the expectation to get married, is part of the reason why weddings gain place among the privilege of rites of passage.

In our contemporary practices the pressure to get married starts early, along with ideas for how the celebration will look. These ideals become fantasies and evolve into imagining a perfect wedding. Consciously or not, when fantasizing a wedding, the images drawn up stem from a combination of family values, individual values, and the media that have reached the imagination and prompted a desire. This is to point out the “many”



beginnings of a wedding ceremony. The performance, the actual act of marriage, happens after a long process of mental and physical preparation, which starts anytime during the life cycle. “The wedding process, which should be about divining mates, making kin, and bridging differences, focuses instead on the cultivation of feelings and the performance of images spawned by the advertising, greeting-card, and pop-music industries,” writes Grimes (210). It is important to realize that these spawned images come to meaning through being seen. The importance of how we see these images, which factors in timing, environment, relationships, all contribute to the animation of emotions and icons as well as the creation of foundations for the new life and the community assimilating into.

The second importance of the quote above, the commercial success of wedding ceremonies, is hard to ignore. The gradual increase of images *for* weddings and images *of* weddings contributed to the increase in marketing wedding ceremonies. “The wedding manuals of religious denominations, like the imaginations of children, have no choice but to compete with commercial wedding imagery,” writes Grimes, with a sly hint at his derogatory view towards the increased commercial imagery growing in wedding practices. If imagination needs to compete with these images, as they are more widely accepted, their presence will create the need for an increase in the amount of alternative ceremonial options to choose from. As I will explain, *alternative* does not necessarily mean different from the *traditional*. Those who perform and plan alternative weddings may have the intentions of specifically designing a wedding not like the traditional, but in executing differentness, the celebration is likely to have stemmed from the same rituals as the traditional. Furthermore, the objects and symbols chosen, details picked out, and order of events printed in a program, all create a unique experience but one that is relatable on the

mass scale. Action is joining in the history of wedding traditions, no matter the category or label associated.

The history of wedding performances in North America and Europe, as Grimes lays out, is a borrowed history. Christians, Jews, Romans and Greeks all developed distinct marriage practices, influenced by each other and performed based on these influences. Originally, the Jewish and Orthodox Christian wedding rites were separated into two parts, *erusin* (betrothal) and *nissuin* (marriage). This division of phases gradually shifted and merged into one performance aspect. This change from betrothed to married now happens in a matter of hours instead of years, as the original rite required. “The ceremonial seam, whereby two originally separate rites were stitched into one, is still visible in both religions” (Grimes 199). Ritual change is a felt transition, initiated by more than a single need for meaning or an overpowering urge for romantic love. Slowly the needs of the community take a form and are acted out in various ways of the ritual structure: betrothal is now known as engagement, and not a requirement for a wedding rite. While the need for meaning is a persuasive factor in ritual change, it is not the only one. The community, in action with the environment and the histories, grows at the micro (individual) and macro (communal) level.

Consider the micro level to be consumer goods and information being transmitted. This involves the reality shows we watch, the advertisements we try to skip, the newspapers we read, and the tendencies we have to one brand over another; micro functions on this small scale, dealing with our individual preferences and experiences. On the macro level are traditions, rites of passage, social dramas, state regulations, and cultural standards that spread and reinforce community values. It is the interaction and

fluctuation between micro and macro, (the changes that happen inside the individual and the community as a whole) along with changes coming from outside, environment and biological stimuli, that prompt ritual change. The process is cumulative, and grows as it changes. Change affects our actions and emotions. They spread far among individuals and communities, adding variety to the accumulations and patterns. The emotions evoked in wedding ceremonies, and rites of passage in general, come from the actions performed and the symbols/objects used. It is objects and pattern that hold emotive quality, because of their use.

For example, the smashing of the glass in historicized Jewish weddings can symbolize the destruction of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E. by the Romans. If this is the original reason or an evolved one will never be known for sure, but today the practice of smashing the glass is still an icon to Jewish weddings. Unless the specific meaning associated with the smashing of the glass is made clear during the ceremony, the symbolism goes unnoticed. The legitimacy of continuing the tradition of breaking the glass is not unjustified because of lack of religious knowledge. The importance is performing the action, not knowing the reason why. "An effective wedding, after all, requires performance, not belief," writes Grimes (189). By performing this action during a wedding ceremony, tradition is not only reintegrated, but also spread and demonstrated for those of other cultures and backgrounds. Now, the breaking of the glass is more than just an action, it is associated with Jewish wedding tradition and therefore the religious success of the couple. The audience may remain uninformed, but action is what groups the couple to other ceremonies and Jewish families of the past.

If we take the breaking of a glass example a step further, and imagine that the

broken pieces of glass are put on display during the rest of the celebration, no one would get a broom to clean the mess up. The broken glass means more than just the form it takes. Emotional qualities are added to the shards because of the prior experience, the entire ceremony collectively generates the meaning. A guest who missed the ceremony but saw the broken glass on display would not have the same affective reaction to seeing the glass as someone who witnessed the performance would.

It seems obvious how change, in religious traditions and rites of passage, is inevitable. Catherine Bell sees ritual change as an inherent ingredient, essential to the power of ritual. “Another argument links the efficacy of ritual to what is called its emergent qualities, that is, its ability to bring about social and ontological change by virtue of the doing itself” (Bell, 208).<sup>7</sup> With weddings ceremonies, if the bride and groom are planning a detailed celebration, a “performance value” is being considered. The intent of the ceremony includes the union of two people, for the viewing pleasure and acceptance of viewers. Objects are seamlessly, or not seamlessly, integrated into the performance equation (flowers, pictures, rings, clothing, ornaments, fluff). The scene is set to bring a specific atmosphere, one chosen by the bride, groom, and participating family members.

On symbols used during celebrations, Victor Turner wrote, “altars, statues, masks, totem poles, paintings, temples- they shape or construct, become a kind of shining language in which a society formulates its conception of the universe and its cultural philosophy” (16).<sup>8</sup> The value of the performance includes all objects, performers, guests, and environments. Weddings are, in most cases, a celebration; a specified moment in time,

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<sup>7</sup> Bell, Catherine. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

<sup>8</sup> Turner, Victor and Edith. *Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Ritual*. Washington D.C: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982. Edited by Victor Turner.

separated from daily life, when an elated emotional setting is forced. This causes a reaction, or a change from normal and daily behavior, in those who attend. The presence of the guests becomes part of the performance, the same elated and joyous mood is expected of them.

The elevated nature of celebrations is representative of something “better than” our normal, daily lives. It is no surprise that objects used and details worried about are representations of perfection, or some high standard of living. The esteem, combined with the celebratory atmosphere of weddings, tempts wedding ceremony change into a show of wealth. The contemporary white wedding celebrations are performances to show off what is valued most, and in most cases, the value is directed superficially towards the celebratory atmosphere. Back to the snowball rolling down a hill and gaining mass, each wedding ceremony adds a layer to its size. In addition to gaining size, they grow as ideas, and prompt other snowballs to roll down the hill. Fantasies become imagined and pictured; advertisements catch on to these desires and market them, opening up opportunities for business and production elements to manifest in the wedding economy.

Websites and businesses have generated their own methods of categorizing and classifying the different aspects and parts of a wedding performance. Often, the ceremony is just one piece of the sparkling bubble, not the whole thing. Categories of modern day are inspired from the old, but are more accustomed to the needs of today. For example, the structure originally designed for betrothal allowed for a time period where the community could reflect on the imminent union. The affect of advertisements and cultural shifts compressed this into the ceremony performance, stressing importance in a different form. What was once a ritual involving a time for community members to reflect and respond is

now a moment that stressed the change from single to married in a materialist way. In the white weddings of today, the community is addressed, as it historically has been, but it is not incorporated in the same way.<sup>9</sup>

Onewed.com, a popular wedding planning website, organizes their “Smart Wedding Planning 101” page by two categories: Browse by Topic or Timeframe. In the Browse by Topic category is “Traditions and Etiquette.” Other choices are Beauty and Fitness, Budget, Ceremony, Groom Guide, Reception, Registry, Vendors, Wedding Parties and Soirees, and Wedding Style.<sup>10</sup> Note that venue is separated from planning the ceremony. The stress of importance in choosing a location is a dramatic shift from the historic emphasis on procession from the houses of the bride and groom; the ability to choose a venue is a modern invention. Now, the place of the ceremony, along with the place of reception, after party, dinners, rehearsals, etc., is an added luxury in wedding performances, a new way to show wealth and privilege.

The stress of material goods is pattern in the contemporary wedding practices. For example, most readers of Onewed.com, and wedding websites overall, could be concerned with the color of the wedding dress. Brides may be unaware that the white wedding gown is not a historic symbol (at least not before 1840). Yet the expectation to wear to a white wedding dress is hard to ignore or remain unaware of. Choosing to wear a different color would be a rebellion from the norm, a statement about the bride, the relationship, and the values motivating decisions. These norm and trends are not set by a church or temple. Rather they come from ritual change; tradition influenced by advertising and pop culture,

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<sup>9</sup> See Grimes, page 204.

<sup>10</sup> Nearlyweds! No author addressed. Copyright Nearlyweds! Inc. 2011. 30 April 2012  
<<http://www.onewed.com/>>

cultural significances. The community at large reflects its needs into the transformation of the ceremony; not alone, but with the structure rituals provides and the actions fulfilling desires.

The discussion of *alternative* weddings deserves a brief examination, although the category of *alternative* is an uncomfortable and loaded term. “No one has carefully studied the ways in which North American popular culture classifies weddings, but the traditional/alternative distinction over simplifies the contemporary wedding landscape,” states Grimes (205). The large increase in advertisements of popular North American wedding ceremonies made room for a desire to have the opposite. Alternative stems from traditional, a paradox central in the performance of a wedding with *alternative* or *traditional* qualities. Grimes first talks on traditional, to lead to alternative:

“A traditional wedding is assumed to be a first marriage performed as a religious service in a religious edifice and followed by a banquet that includes a multitiered white cake. The bride wears a white dress and is accompanied by bridesmaids. A traditional wedding is not necessarily the one with the oldest elements in it. It is, rather, the conventional rite assumes by brides’ magazines and etiquette books. ‘Traditional’ is the imagined norm from which alternative and ‘other’ weddings deviate” (206).

Do-it-yourself and/or private weddings are the closest it comes to alternative. But even these are realized because of tradition, which keeps them grouped under *traditional* influences. Anything can become traditional or alternative depending on the viewers perception,

“Sometimes, ‘alternative’ is further subdivided. For instance, there is a growing African American alternative wedding movement, and it includes ‘Nubian’ weddings. Sometimes these are billed as ‘alternative,’ sometimes as ‘ethnic.’ But if the advertisers or magazines are proffered by African Americans, such weddings may be called ‘traditional’” (206).

In the end, traditional and alternative mean nothing to the experience had or desires held important. The roots are the same and the steps are followed founded on repetition and past perceptions of *traditional* and *alternative*.

Repetition is the core of traditions, and therefore participating in the performance of a ceremony is inherently traditional. Alternative is a materialist description categorized by symbolism brought from object. The categories come from contrasting objects, values, environments, and language, to end on a term only to later be compared against. A completely alternative wedding would be no wedding at all. We arrive at terms from building on what is present, the actions and experiences we have to work with. For ritual, this is known repetition; the simplest form of a wedding ceremony is the performance.

As shown earlier, the evolutions that brought us to today include many different categories, novelties, actions, whatever, and are all influenced by developments in advertisements and technology. Richard Grimes compares different categories, or labels of rituals, to show how overlapped the categories are, but he ultimately comes to the conclusion that “the eclecticism and bleeding of boundaries that characterize the alternative wedding scene testify to the permeability of what were once regarded as impenetrable social and religious barriers” (208). “Alternative” as a changing, malleable category applies directly. The stress is about *how* it changes.

This is where imagination and the arts come to play. Imagination is possibilities unseen, but requires, in the broadest sense, a practice in perception. This practice helps imagination go beyond the limitations of culture.

“A repeated claim made by purveyors of alternative weddings is that each wedding is unique, ‘limited only by your imagination.’ In one sense, the claim is true and variety



bewildering. But in another, the alternative wedding scene illustrates how fully our imaginations are culturally constrained” (Grimes 208).

Popular wedding ceremonies of North America are a representation of culture’s limitations on imagination. Accessibility and mass appeal do not foster unique or progressive thinking, but rather act as easy distractions from the human condition. A recycling<sup>11</sup> response happens and “the newly invented is sold as something ancient” (Grimes 208). Direct representation is not imagination but tradition. With popular weddings of today, the “alternative” has become merely imagination on tradition; slight changes in details not present with the historically traditional; thus the spread of increased materialistic options for elaborating on specific themes, atmospheres and décors.

“Entertainment expands its scope to include almost anything that happens that is technically witnessed and can be edited and played back. Art comes in several mutually reinforcing varieties: that which passes the time of those with enough money to buy tickets; that which excited without satisfying the appetites of its consumers; that which shows off the wealth, power, and taste of its patrons; that which is acquired as an investment. Popular entertainment follows roughly the same path” (Schechner 19).

The accessibility of these categories combined with mass communication and technology, expands the horizons of ritual reality to integrate the effects of advertisements and popular entertainment. Blending and borrowing of traditions is a result, which has affected our practices of today.

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<sup>11</sup> *Recycling* is a term used by Schechner in his introduction, pages 1-23. “To recycle, reuse, archive and recall, to perform in order to be included in an archive, to seek roots, explore and maybe even plunder religious experiences, expressions, practices, and liturgies to make art is to ritualize; not just in terms of subject matter and theme, but also structurally, as form” (20). Schechner, Richard. *The Future of Ritual, Writings on Culture and Performance*. London, New York: Routledge, 1993.

Wedding services are often marketed as if they were a set of modules to be plugged in or pulled out at will. This kind of package enhances not only their portability but also their sales appeal. A buffetlike atmosphere is often the result. The lack of integral connections among the parts of the wedding can mirror the detachment of a wedding from a couple's history and community, writes Grimes (210).

Grimes is bleak when he jumps to the detachments that happen instead of the possibilities that arise. However, detachments do happen, and when they do, patterns shift and details are categorized accordingly. Contemporary practices have used the shifts in categories of performances and celebrations to make money.

Overall, the traditional and alternative are more similar than they lead on, as are most binary categories of ritual performances. The common base of practice and repetition is covered by material excess and superficial desire. But this covering does not stop ritual teaching. Change naturally happens when individual instincts merge with values important to the greater culture or societal need. Growth from what is already established is a purpose for ritual action. Practice and repetition, tradition and ritual fundamentals propel actions through time but incorporate changes of cultural desires. This is important to keep in mind when discussing the sources important to and lessons provided from our ritual actions and ritual performances.

## CHAPTER 2: THE IDEAL-TYPE

Max Weber, in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, lays out the framework for establishing what he calls an ideal-typical system or concept. Weber writes,

An ideal type is formed by the one-sided *accentuation* of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent *concrete individual* phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sided emphasized viewpoints into a unified *analytical* construct (Weber, 90).

Weber's ideal-type does not exist in reality but rather in a utopia. This type is all inclusive of what does exist, what could exist, and what has existed. What is the need for an ideal-typical construct in understanding mass phenomena and the social sciences? At the basic level, when dealing with the social and cultural sciences, as Weber articulates, the matters of concern are empirical, and filled with subjective experiences. These subjective nuances are infinite and range from person to person. Weber calls these "self-evident truths" and he argues that these truths, depending on the will of the examiner and actor, "can in this way estimate the chances of attaining a certain end by certain available means" (Weber, 53).

Ideas that are subjective in nature work in collaboration with the will of the acting person. People move according to their personal hierarchy of values. "Science can make him realize that all action and naturally, according to circumstance, inaction imply in their consequences the espousal of certain values – and herewith – what is today so willingly overlooked – the rejection of certain others. The act of choice itself is his own responsibility" (Weber, 53). This responsibility has the capacity to be realized when reflecting, or looking back on the experiences and choices with a different state of mind. Reflecting objectively is our purpose to creating an ideal-type system for wedding ceremonies.

Wedding ceremonies are a right of passage – we treat them as such by incorporating values of progeny and family, truths that relate to our human condition, into the ceremonial structure. Also, when the wedding ceremonies are tied to a biological truth such as procreation, age becomes a factor. Since age is inescapable, wedding ceremonies are thus associated with the life cycle and consequently norms and standards become potent. Ritual action sets us up with choices according to these norms and standards. When culture is mixed in, the choices are attracted by the business-economy: marketing strategies, trends, and materialistic fantasies. This merge of ritual practices and cultural patterns opens doors of flexibility to ritual details and nuances that are not rooted in biology but rather our will and values, the prompts of action.

To attain the desired end, awareness of available means is a logical beginning. It is the role of ritual to bring this awareness. From there, the individual makes choices and decisions, acts on them during the ritual, thus bringing to consciousness the original values of the individual plus more. Ritual brings us our structural reality to merge biology with the will; it brings us directions and paths to interact with and follow. We also shape them, change, personalize, and embrace them. The ideal-type is meant to show all possibilities without embellishment—what is objectively set and practiced. This objective framework directs our analysis to a foundation on how ritual reality works in practice and culture at large.

The structure of a wedding ceremony, including elements such as guests, officiant, doctrine, state law, rings, etc., is structured and formulated to teach, prepare, and facilitate a transition. These are real transitions, celebrated and cloaked by ritual reality. Individuals who choose to have a wedding live the change; their lives are different economically,

culturally, emotionally, and eternally. The performance is the animating factor and has a two-fold definition. First, performance means completing a series of actions to enliven the practical elements. This enlivening of ritual elements also changes our psychological experiences and the will. The second part to the definition attends to the audience and/or witnesses, the validators who can state the performance happened, taking the witnessed event into their futures. For these purposes, the stress of performance is with the viewer because wedding ceremonies depend on their presence.

This reality is proven by the infiltration it has in our legal system and government law. All wedding ceremonies require a witness and officiant to be legalized and filed properly. If the end desired is a union that is accepted by the government, the means require this aspect of performance. Documents are sealed, signed, and delivered to Clerk's office. From the City Clerk's Office website for New York, under "Marriage Ceremony" the specifics read:

At the conclusion of the Marriage Ceremony, the Marriage Officiant, the couple, and the witness or witnesses are required to sign the Marriage License. The Marriage Officiant must return the Marriage License to the office where the Marriage License was obtained within five business days. We will provide you with a return mailing envelope for that purpose when you obtain your Marriage License (Office of the City Clerk).

The legal reality is not an anomaly. Marriage infiltrates other socio-cultural realms such as economics, family structure, media, business, pop-culture and others. Rituals are mass phenomena, a common human experience and a need to comprehend our human condition. Wedding ceremonies are just one of many ceremonies and celebrations, the rites that act as teaching tools and life-cycle helpers to the fortunate given the option. *Fortunate* here does not mean excessive wealth or excessively wealthy or individuals we label as

spoiled. I use fortunate to highlight the helpful nature of rituals in general; the beneficial significance performance has in our lives. Proof of ritual's privilege can be seen, unfortunately, in how wedding ceremonies have recognized the market for highlighting this fortunate experience through wealth and prosperity.

Weber believes we have a desire to understand human behavior and that it is the task of the social and cultural sciences to show "what he *can* do" versus "what he *should* do" (Weber, 54). With this understanding, when analyzing a mass phenomenon such as a wedding ceremony, it would be pointless to judge individualized actions, for there are infinite variables involved in the motives behind the actions. It would not be pointless to analyze human behavior, with the purpose of establishing an inclusive model of empirical realities to lead us in establishing the elements involved in generating the foundations behind choices. This model is the ideal-type.

When it comes to culture and society, everything we do plus the systems/environments we function in, inform our reality. What each individual stresses as significant constructs his/her actions, which are physical and occur in reality. Weber writes, "From our viewpoint, 'purpose' is the conception of an *effect* which becomes a *cause* of an action," his italics (Weber, 83). When measuring what concepts and behaviors are significant and important, we look to our values as part of the driving force behind the action. *Importance* and *significance* are in relation to an idea or larger picture, the working means to future ends. "We desire something concretely either 'for its own sake' or as a means of achieving something else which is more highly desired" (Weber, 52). In the case of wedding ceremonies, and other rites of passage, ceremony is both the means and the ends. The ceremony structure is the *means* in which the transition from single to married is

achieved, and the closure/validity the completion establishes is the *ends*. Of course, this end is a new beginning.

Love, support, family, stability – all of these, but not exclusively, are values of the marriage system. For analyzing phenomena, identifying practical and structural values is useful in creating and establishing standards/norms that are important in our socio-cultural systems. Wedding ceremonies happen for various reasons, but all unions are designed for the joining of two people into a life-long partnership, validated to the state and performed for divine witness and acceptance. Whatever the socio-cultural motives are behind the individuals, the end is set and establishes the transition into a new beginning. The means and the ends need not align, for once completed, new standards for values are applicable/incorporated into the daily life of husband and wife. The ritual value is in the action, and all future actions continue, ideally (from ritual's perspective) to be forever influenced by the ceremony past performed.

What are the bones, or framework for an ideal-type wedding ceremonies? First, values work with ritual reality to bring animation, and therefore significance, to our cultural interests and biological truths. These values direct our interests into choices of action, which eventually creates pragmatic and psychological relationships. Once these relationships are active and interacting with ritual realities and standards, these values evolve into our physical and categorized experiences; experiences add to our histories and with time, inform our future motives, choices, and actions.

The distinction between psychological and pragmatic experience is slim in theory, but obvious in practice. Our senses feel the concreteness of reality, and our mind interacts with it. They work together, exist in each other, and are separated only through reflection

and analysis. Noting the distinction is important when dissecting ritual experiences, because in ritual experience, the connection between physical and psychological stronger than in ordinary activities. In ritual, they are designed to reinforce each other. The ideal-type gives an all-inclusive backdrop to lean against, the setting to begin distinctions.

Every conscientious examination of the conceptual elements of historical exposition shows however that the historian as soon as he attempts to go beyond the bare establishment of concrete relationships and to determine the *cultural* significance of even the simplest individual event in order to “characterize” it, *must* use concepts which are precisely and unambiguously definable only in the form of ideal types (Weber, 92).

When examining wedding ceremonies, their structure is active and, as shown above, it has two sides (pragmatic and psychological). These sides are codependent because the ceremony requires mind and body. One side is our physical realm, and the other our mental states. The physical realm includes reality with all social and cultural ties/obligations, biological truths, physical infrastructures, and family life. Mind states are abstract, rooted in experiences, motives, and emotions we continuously weave through.

But as regards exposition, to the extent that it wishes to be unambiguous, the use of precise formulations in the sphere of cultural analysis is in many cases absolutely necessary. Whoever disregards it entirely must confine himself to the formal aspect of cultural phenomena, e.g., to legal history. The universe of legal norms is naturally clearly definable and is valid (in the *legal* sense!) for historical reality. But social science in our sense is concerned with practical *significance*. This significance however can very often be brought unambiguously to mind only by relating the empirical data to an ideal limiting case (Weber, 94).

Even a legal expert cannot restrict himself to only the formal aspects of cultural phenomena for his opinions would be lop-sided and difficult to relate to. Legal history stems from actions; rulings and legislation comes from a need created by actions and



desires. This is reversed when laws are being opposed, and a need for a new or changed law presents itself. Practical significance (Weber's term) cannot be accessed through a study of legal history because significance is matter of the individual will, which laws are designed to control and structure. This is why the ideal-type for wedding ceremonies, and ritual in general, requires concern of psychological and concrete realities. The empirical data is relevant because of how our psychological states weave them into experiences. Because of this, the structure of our ideal-type wedding ceremony requires analysis of both independently, and how they work together.

What I will call *experience-states* are: conceptual, affective, and pragmatic. When active, concrete elements hit on at least one experience-state, but in ritual, they commonly involve all three. A conceptual experience-state is catalogued according to general ideas, common truths and trends we think about, yearn to have, and attempt to cultivate. In wedding ceremonies, some conceptual qualities, among various others, are trust, loyalty, security, family, divine grace, and love. Affective experience-states are defined by moods, feelings, and intimate intricacies. Our affective experiences in wedding ceremonies are generally positive, because weddings are a time of celebration. This heightened time of daily life sets the emotional standards higher than the norm. The stress to show positive affective states is real, and comes out in practice. Some affective experience-states are love, euphoria, pride, and faith. The last experience-state is pragmatic. This experience is classified by the practical experience provided, the matter-of-fact cause and effect. Examples of pragmatic experience-states are rooted in reality: wearing a ring to show marriage status, choosing a place to bring people together, getting married to fulfill a cultural or personal need.

Our question is then, “what is the logical function and structure of the concepts which our science, like all others, uses” (Weber, 85). Here, I am replacing Weber’s *concepts* with the three experience-states. Before we lay out the structure our experience-states use, the importance behind the question should first be addressed. Weber rights, following the question he proposed that I quoted above,

In the natural sciences, the practical evaluative attitude toward what was immediately and technically useful was closely associated from the very first with the hope, taken over as a heritage of antiquity and further elaborated, of attaining a purely “objective” (i.e., independent of all individual contingencies) monistic knowledge of the totality of reality in is a *conceptual* system of metaphysical *validity* and mathematical *form* (Weber, 85).

The objective knowledge of wedding ceremonies is our goal. The objectivity guides us into establishing the totality of a wedding system, which will ideally guide us into a clearer view to what our question asks: what is the function and structure of the conceptual, affective, and pragmatic experience-states when active in wedding ceremonies? Attaining the objective standpoints is not simple or easy but by creating the objective structure, a model for an ideal-type wedding ceremony, we have base to begin. Weber continues, “It was thought that this hope could be realized by the method of generalizing abstraction and the formulation of laws based on empirical analysis” (Weber, 85).

When referencing wedding ceremonies, our empirical information is gathered by articulating the fundamental elements present in all ceremonial performances. These fundamental elements, or components, in no hierarchical order are: place, preparation, objects, community/witnesses, documents, personalization, and script/scripture. This empirical information is our frame, the other side of our chart for analyzing wedding ceremonies. This is our structure into understanding how ritual realities and experience-

sates interact in our social and cultural realms. These fundamental elements are centered in culture and executed in consistently in practice. There is no wedding ceremony that does not acknowledge these elements. The choice to involve them in the particular ceremony to-be-executed is subject to the will of the initiates. Not including an element is a specific choice, and thus decided specifically against what is available. Therefore, these are the fundamental elements of the ceremonial ideal-state.

Place is never excluded; location is the basic, the meeting point for the performance. Preparation varies in scale but no matter the length of time, informed participants is standard in practice. Objects also vary in use, detail, and importance, their presence is impossible to ignore. The community and witnesses are the basis of performance, mandated by ritual and law. Documents are vital because of cultural evolutions but nonetheless vital. Personalization is the element most susceptible to flexibility and variation, but no ceremony is exactly replicable because they take place in both space and time. The script or scripture is fundamental to continue repetition and maintain meaning; the script dictates the sequence of events and comforts the initiates in the correctness of their actions.

Social and cultural realities weigh heavy into how the fundamental elements act in ritual ceremonies. Pragmatic elements are intertwined with the socio-cultural obligations, and our psychological experiences are bound by these realities. Particular to the wedding ceremony, under socio-cultural obligations, is how they operate under two kinds of rule – state law and divine law. Divine law validates the union under religious doctrine. Acceptance by officiant represents acceptance on behalf of the religious community they represent, which includes the religious history. Each ceremony adds to the histories. Those

joining in on the pattern are aware of the historical backing. This awareness comes in many degrees of knowledge, but by having an officiant and a religious prayer book to follow, importance of the history becomes clear as the ceremony progresses. The language of the divine law the active ingredient should the initiates identify with the belief system used.

Examples of the language used, the divine law called upon from *The Book of Common*

*Prayer*, first words of officiant in “Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage:”

Dearly beloved: We have come together in the presence of God to witness and bless the joining together of this man and this woman in Holy Matrimony. The bond and covenant of marriage was established by God in creation, and our Lord Jesus Christ adorned this manner of life by his presence and first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. It signifies to us the mystery of the union between Christ and his Church, and Holy Scripture commends it to be honored among all people. The union of husband and wife in heart, body, and mind is intended by God for their mutual joy; for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity; and, when it is God’s will, for the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord. Therefore marriage is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, deliberately, and in accordance with purposes for which it was instituted by God (The Book of Common Prayer, 1979).

State law validates the union to the government. Papers are signed and filed, which begins acknowledgement of the union on behalf of the state. The officiant is also working for the state; their word is government approval and their role is how the state manages adhering to laws required. State law changes from state to state, but the basics manifest universally: all states require a marriage license – others also require a blood test. Because officiants require marriage license, the role of the officiant is directly tied to state law.

The combination of “institutional consequences” (state and divine law) and “psychological preconditions” (Weber’s terms) helps create a pattern to fill-out our chart.

This conceptual pattern brings together certain relationships and events of historical life into a complex, which is conceived as an internally consistent system. Substantively, this constructs in itself is like a *utopia* which as been arrived at by the analytical accentuation of certain elements of reality (Weber, 90).

This pattern involves the combination of legal requirements and psychological cultural trends. In ritual, once the relationship between legality and psychology happens, the complex comes to life: strict categories become less defined, and the active mixing creates emotional experiences and longevity of their teachings. It is the officiant who upholds both the legal requirements and the psychological preconditions of the wedding ceremony. His/her duty differs from legal to psychological.

In practice, it is the collective job of the community, family, and officiant to accept the psychological conditions of the couple as valid and endorse continuing on with the ritual realities planned. For ritual reality to smoothly integrate with social obligations, the acceptance of the community and families involved is essential psychologically, but not legally. It is only the officiant who has the responsibility of upholding the laws of wedding ceremony logistics. There is no hierarchy in accepting the psychological or legal marriage preconditions; they hold equal weight. There is a hierarchy to who is accepting.

Psychological acceptance can come from anyone who is significant to the bride or groom but the requirements of state or divine law require someone specific. Only an authorized person can legally confirm and validate a union. Their role is irreplaceable and their word is distinct from the usual community, congregation, or guest. The officiant is a third party, working between categories and helping to blur multiple experiences into the one rite.

The upcoming chart is set up with *experience-states* on the x-axis and fundamental elements on the y-axis. The fillings of the chart are purposefully vague to not exclude any

oddities that may occur in practice, when the two axis merge in ritual performance. Specific examples from case studies and personal remembered experiences with wedding ceremonies follow.

*Chart for Objectively Analyzing Wedding Ceremonies*

	PRAGMATIC	AFFECTIVE	CONCEPTUAL
PLACE	The need for a specific location.	When place is associated with sentimental values.	All places/locations have abstract effects on individuals in them.
PREPARATIONS	Get to know your officiant—lock down ceremony specifics.	Seriousness behind intent, emotional and physical.	Sets standards and a verbal consensus of important values.
GESTURES +OBJECTS	Fulfilling the essential steps of ceremony; Societal representations and meanings.	Values take a tangible and/or concrete form, secured emotionally by experience.	Following pattern to add to established histories and communities.
GUESTS/FAMILY +WITNESSES	Legal requirement of the witness; proof of the experience/rite fulfilled by chosen community.	Reinforces support; values transmitted to loved ones; acceptance of community	The bigger picture; connection to humanity, ancestors, and the divine.
DOCUMENTS/ CULTURAL TIES	State laws; validity for government acceptance; satisfying cultural responsibility.	Security in our reality; objectifies family structure, and progeny	Divine values to be practiced in reality; Till Death Do Us Part
PERSONALIZATION	To make the moment about them.	Differentiates the couple from previously married couples; day out of the ordinary	Stress individual values with communal ones in the marriage structure.
SCRIPT/SCRIPTURE	Structure to follow; standards of performing	Concrete connection to history and the divine; strength of the bond	Bridges the values of divinity with reality; God as witness and the word, the officiant.

In practice, our ideal-type chart is much less defined, which aligns with how ideal-type works; the lines separating each experience-state do not exist in ritual, instead they are merged, complete and successful because all are present. During the ceremony, and other rites of passage/rituals, our conceptual, affective, and pragmatic connections are one,

hard to distinguish from each other. This lack of distinction among experience-state categories is part of how ritual teaching happens. The human will is the ultimate decider and prompt to ritual action. Once active, the needs of the will have the possibility to be fulfilled during the ceremony. A transformation happens because of completion: the initiates enter as single and depart as married.

Marriage is not just a pragmatic institution. Fulfillment of these ideal-types varies and is constantly changes. Integration of the pragmatic, conceptual, and affective experience-states is part of ritual teaching. The motivation for a wedding ceremony should ideally stem from all experience-states, which are the categories we equate values and motives behind experiences into: conceptual, pragmatic and affective. Therefore marriage defines in our daily and ceremonial lives 1) theories we have about conduct for sexual relationships and family structure [conceptual], 2) psychological needs and emotional dependency/stability [affective], and 3) entrance into a culture and family structure [pragmatic].

Officiants are cultural and religious icons because of their intermediate role involved in divine word and state law. All interviewees, during their time with the couple, define some version of an unknown need marriage can provide. The relationships created and lessons illuminated during ritual teachings are grounded in practice that enables future practice to be instructed from tradition. Comfort in precedent assuages fear of the unknown – including the unknown journey of matrimony ahead – by representing it with previously experienced symbols, gestures, and values. When we practice the teachings in a specific time and place, the representational reenactment synthesizes our need for meaning with our need for community as both an icon and shared experience.

The beginning of a wedding ceremony is hardly the beginning of the wedding ritual process. The initiates undergo much more than what happens at the specific time and place printed on the invitation. The ceremony is a process; it is a pragmatic structure to follow, which opens a path of choices and steps for a means to an ends (which is both an end and a new beginning). The requirement of a designated time and place constricts, but does not limit, all fundamental elements to the *pragmatic* experience-state. If matrimony is desired, a wedding needs to occur. Along with the place and time, there are objects, documents, guests, and scriptures essential to ceremony completion.

No matter the degree of importance or ceremonial significance, because of their material form, the objects, documents, and guests fulfill the pragmatic experience-state just by usage, no cultural or religious specifics required. Preparations and personalization are not restricted to a materialistic form, and therefore function pragmatically different. Preparations require the addition of time, and personalization requires recalling specific psychological ideas/values. The effects of time and psychological nuances both remain unseen until they are pragmatically incorporated into the ceremony and performance experience. The addition of a meaningful poem to a “prayer book wedding ceremony” changes the pragmatic experience from just replication to individualization. The result is changes in body language, relationship agreements, and an elevated emotional response to the overall experience of the ceremony.

A wedding ceremony in a church, with a chuppah, ketubah text, rabbi, ring, glass-to-smash, marriage license, bridesmaids and groomsmen, and planned itinerary of events touches all fundamental elements and fits them into the pragmatic delivery of the wedding ceremony. Specifics in the ketubah text, for example, are put to use in the pragmatic



experience-state because the text becomes specifically tailored for the couple in that moment; it is their ceremony and their marriage because they made it so. This same ceremony, without a glass-to-smash or ketubah text still hits all fundamental elements. The change is in the values displayed, or performed, for each other and a gaze (not restricted to human gaze). This brings, or neglects to bring, ceremonial output to-be-labeled and categorized in the minds of all participants. Just as an elaborate diamond ring, or a banquet hall adorned with religious iconography emit certain values, the pragmatic use of fundamental elements secures a tangible outline that we rely on to make choices and continuously teach us.

Fundamental elements of wedding ceremonies in our contemporary culture retain purpose because of sentiment and comfort – and idealized happiness that drives us in repetition. This is the *affective* experience-state. I attended a wedding that took place in a garden part of the backyard of the house of the brides-to-be. The garden itself was a project, created and maintained by the couple; the trees were filled with leaves, vegetables and fruit blooming throughout, supremely colorful with life.<sup>12</sup> This type of location purposefully has an affective residue for multiple reasons. First, holding the wedding in their place of residence pushes the couple to draw connections between their daily/common usage of the garden and its use in the remembered wedding ceremony and celebration. Second, the officiant (and elder sister of one of the brides) tailored her script to include metaphors of the flourishing garden to, prosperity, love, and success in their relationship and marriage. This specific affective attention brought direct and sentimental value to the historical landmark of the wedding location.

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<sup>12</sup> Turner, Sativa. San Francisco, October 2, 2011.

The affective experience-state, in times of celebration is hard to pinpoint because emotions are inherent to ritual reality. Often affective experiences do not take form, or take a length of time to come out; feelings and sentiments are personal, forever manipulated and changing by experience. The preparation period is a fundamental element where the affective experience is strongly hit at and palpable. In the interviews, all four officiants followed the norm of digging (but ranging in depths) into the history and background of relationships seen. Familiarizing oneself with insight into how the couple functions, to later call upon when officiating and composing script, vocalizes affective intricacies that are otherwise left unspoken. A successful officiant could use the preparation period to alleviate any stress surrounding the ceremonial performance and marriage to come. From the relaxed environment, feelings, values, and ideals of matrimony can flow more freely in the calm environment. Belief and trust in the officiant also aids a successful preparation period, and ideally marriage. It does not seem unrealistic that feelings or fixation hidden in shadows, or not addressed before the ceremony, have the potential to remain poignant but covered, a struggle to come out later.

Objects hold meaning because of their use. When someone wears a wedding band, on the left ring finger, we are socially aware of the implications – it is a symbol of betrothal. This symbolic meaning holds weight because of the ring-giving section in wedding ceremony tradition. Originally this was only from groom to bride, but in contemporary and egalitarian ritual of today, now also from bride to groom. It is speculated that this started as an economic statement, a way of branding to show the bride as the grooms' property. The gesture symbolized the bride and her family accepting the monetary situation of the groom and his family. Today, in all four case studies and most casual conversations, equity is the

practiced norm for ring giving – this why social symbolism of the wedding band is unaffected by gender. Seriousness of intent cannot be overlooked when using objects in wedding ceremonies because the symbolic and affective realities are both heightened and specified by form alone. We project these affective experiences onto the objects, which give both heightened ceremonial meaning and socio-cultural purpose to their material.

Guests, audience, and witnesses work in the affective experience-state by nature. As discussed earlier, the viewer is an essential component to why ritual exists. The presence of guests is enough of an action to trigger affective results. Part of the definition of performance is validity through the viewer; without the fundamental element of guests, ceremonies go unnoticed by culture. The essence of being watched, or witnessed, comes out in scripture that calls upon divinity frequently in various ways such as, from *The Book of Common Prayer: God as Witness*, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony, to send thy blessings to this man and this woman, and live according to thy laws; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Practices and belief in divinity is one solution for the need of a witness. The other solution is the mark of culture, the documents and paperwork for government officials, which require the signature of a witness.

As Jean Genet, officiant in the Florida Keys, believes (and I summarize): when it comes to marriage, relationships tend to change after the ceremony because we slowly begin to realize the realities of marriage, specifically the binding nature. This slow change is psychological, hits emotionally after the physical, pragmatic change happens. The documents add a legal and binding side, ties to government and freedoms are felt through practice and time spent married. No longer is leaving just a matter of will.<sup>13</sup> However,

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<sup>13</sup> Genet, John. Personal Interview. 06 April 2012.

should preparations be thorough, the realization of change should start at the beginning of the process. Matrimony is recorded and the process to change or reverse ceremonial actions is real. In order to be married again, all divorces need to be legally finalized, not just emotionally over. Regardless of symbolic change or belief in change, the legal documents hold affective weight to marriage as a structure and to the individuals participating.

Affects of personalization can happen discretely and naturally, and also by force or decorated and paid for. Weddings today are signs of privilege. Initiates are meant to feel pride, responsibility, ownership, and realize a certain distinction from the hoi polloi; this is part of the intent backing the decision to be married, consciously or not. We have, as a culture, held individuality important to success and happiness. When following patterns from our histories, there is a pressing need to illuminate individuality and keep it underlined when joining in on patterns and repetition. Knowledge of the ceremonies past performed drives some to personalize publically, or outlandishly, branding their ceremony with initials, names and ceremonial iconography such as hearts, flowers, candles, glitter, and pictures.

Personalization happens when it is not deliberate. Each ceremony happens once, space and time used in a moment, only to be remembered and never exactly replicated. Photographs and anniversaries allow us to celebrate and remember the memory – bringing the moment on a journey through time, which refreshes the experience and values associated. The rarity of the ceremony adds a time-based importance; we know it will soon be a memory and therefore cherish the heightened moment more than moments of daily life. This reality brings stress to some, others fear, excitement, anxiety, or relief, and many

other affective responses. No matter the affective response, the experience remains theirs because of personalization.

The script/scripture used helps viewers gain information on values important to the couple, and community values honored. The degree to which couple and officiant adhere to a prescribed prayer book creates affective connections for some, most likely the individuals already personally familiar to the practice. Connections to religious doctrine vary according to how one was raised. Alternatively, as was the case for the both David Feder and Jean Genet, the officiants who practice in the Keys, there is no set scripture. Instead a mashing up of scriptures, to call on many religious practices and methods of belief, is the norm.<sup>14</sup> In these circumstances, the officiant writes (or sets), in collaboration with the couple, the vocal script by drawing from various sources. These sources are chosen by way of the preparation process, where initiates and officiant get personal. The affective experience-state is enhanced all parties feel a personal and significant relationship to the words being said, and are motivated to practice what was preached.

The last column, the *conceptual* experience-state, is fundamental to the success of ritual teachings. Theoretical questions seek to be answered, or alleviated, by ritual performance. We accept and perform rituals to satisfy a need for meaning and find comfort in our walk through life. Weddings are bound to our biological condition because the marriage structure is a household staple and adds standards to family life. Procreation and sex are unavoidable topics and are directly addressed in written scripture; they affect the will to be married including sexual intricacies. Weddings are designed to facilitate transitions from single to married, which conceptually satisfies the values we develop and

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<sup>14</sup> Feder, David. Personal Interview.

Genet, Jean. Personal Interview.

regard highly. In this context, I use *satisfy* in the vague sense, which means only the performance and completion of prescribed ceremonial events. Satisfaction comes from completion, the symbolic statement and icon of transition. Completing the wedding shifts concepts, such as love, partnership, stability, fidelity, etc., from existing only in the mind to existing in the mind and body.

The location of the ceremony will ideally forever be remembered with sentiment and meaning. A visit to one's wedding location is to some, an experience to be celebrated. The location has the potential to renew values that were important when the wedding happened. This is a major difference between the values inherent to wedding destination sites and those inherent to places of worship. In the latter, the location/structure is a vehicle for values of an established religious practice; the emblems, displays, and insignia are all tailored to connect with divinity, a religious community, and a practice of devotion. In contrast, wedding destinations sites are vehicles for values of ease, a picturesque landscape to show off significance of beauty and perfection. Location, as a model for concepts of marriage a couple identifies with, is informative by appearance alone.

Conceptually, preparations facilitate a slow transition from single to married. In some interviews, the process with officiant starts early, so the ceremonial event is the conclusion to a longer process, versus having beginning, middle, and end all in one moment. In other interviews, the preparations with officiant happened directly before the ceremony. In these cases, the ceremony is still longer than just performance, but conceptually the preparations are not as poignant and therefore the specific teachings of preparations are not as strong. All interviewees stress the importance, in their role as officiant, of establishing the foundational values grounded in the couple's relationship.

Once officiant enters the process, his/her symbolic form adds a cultural validity that cements matrimony values inherent to the couple to an exterior, vocalized, and witnessed ceremony.

Objects and gestures hold conceptual weight because they bridge our past to the present and future. Materials and instructions pass the test of time in ritual because of repetition and pattern; a consensus in usage must occur and eventually a familiarity of practice arises. Smashing a glass may represent a historical specific of morning the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, but the smashing also conceptually represents something more complex. Without knowledge of the religious history, there is still knowledge that the gesture/object combination is done for a purpose and is conceptually relevant when done. What smashing the glass means on an individual level is different compared to what it means on the cultural level. Should a couple identify with smashing the glass, whatever their reasons, to join in on the tradition and feel the ancestral community/motivation, the couple needs to smash the glass.

Religious practice relies on conceptual power. Belief is a concept and without an attachment to a belief system, there is no drive for a practice or way of sustaining belief. Wedding ceremonies are a practice and therefore require belief: on the most basic level, that the means bring the desired ends. Weddings are inscribed not only with belief, but also with culture, including the legal system. The freedoms granted by government, concepts of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are complicated by the binding legal documents of matrimony. "Till death do us part" implies a specific duration of time, and conceptually hints at experiences to come, during that length of time, where the phrase could be put to the test. However, this phrase, which is part of a larger view on proper marriage conduct, is

bound only to those who follow the Word in the scripture it lives in. This proper conduct is based off conceptual values that create utopias for the marriage system. In practice, these utopias of marriage may seem connected to the binding legal documents but technically they are not; when fundamental elements combine into one performance or ceremony, words of scripture and legal laws blend. Utopias in scripture are enforced if personally desired – but marriage laws are followed because of state obligation. Should scripture be sworn on, it is up to the couple to uphold the holy matrimony oaths. Alternatively, should a husband and wife wish to divorce, there is a procedure to follow. The couple needs not remain together until death. Divorce is a valid, and accepted choice in our contemporary marriage practices.

Personalization through materialistic symbols and decorations adds to the conceptual experience-state in a way that is reliant on the views of others. Constant visual reminders of who the newlyweds are work as memory triggers to recall moments of importance with a personalized and sentimental stamp included in the memory. Personalization in a less commercial way – the nuances and intricacies specific only to the couple at hand – does the same thing. The oddities/alterations made to a ceremony, for personalization reasons, distinguish the couple from their peers in the moment, and in remembrance. It is the degree of personalization and the means of generating it that tailor the focus of concepts presented and remembered.

When the officiant calls upon God as witness, this means more than His attention. In theory, God represents the divine realm, the teachings in doctrine, and the religious history of a community. The officiant, in the proper time and place, is able to conceptually represent an entire religious practice and community. The values regarded as divinely



important, such as fidelity, health, freedom from sin, and salvation, are in conjunction with the role of officiant, the bride, the groom, the families, and the guests. Bride and groom are expected to practice the values stated, and honor the concepts important to their marriage and the established religious community. The conceptual experience-state directs future actions, prescribed in scripture, into a practice: the follow-through of a promise. This motivation stems from belief and trust in what the doctrine reads, as a guide to salvation and prosperity.

Ultimately, the wedding should bring happiness and closure of the period of life where one is socially regarded as single. There are economic and cultural benefits to marriage, an incentive. Social and cultural progressions have affected our trends and norms that revolve around the ideal relationship. Advertisements and pop culture fantasize the ceremony, urging us to spend money and invest in the institution of marriage. The ritual fundamentals are designed to be guides to decisions, providing a framework for each decision to manifest. All decisions add to the individuality of the ceremony. The choices of the couple create the experience provided for all who attend. They spread into our memories, altering values, future motives, and ways of fulfilling our human needs.

### **CHAPTER THREE: INTERVIEWS + ANALYSIS**

The following four interviews are with officiants from various backgrounds. David Feder and John Genet practice in the Florida Keys, and Bruce Chilton and David Nelson practice in the Hudson Valley, NY. My goal is to find patterns and similarities between the basic fundamentals of all wedding ceremonies, and how location, religious subscriptions, and desires of the couple affect the execution of wedding fundamentals. The execution serves as research into motives behind wedding choices and the experiences gain. All officiants were asked the same questions, each question relating to a fundamental element or stage of a wedding ceremony. From the interviews, information regarding motivation to have a ceremony, and teachings important to the initiates and community, can be analyzed. The following chapter separates the four interviews into pairs based on similarity of region of practice: the Florida Keys and the Hudson Valley. Questions and answers are grouped based on fundamental elements and topic. These are single-spaced. My commentary and analysis is double spaced below the questions and answers. This is designed to curate the information, to keep focus on the significant data for my research with the interest of relating ritual action to our experiences and needs.

### **WEDDING PRACTICES IN THE FLORIDA KEYS**

In white wedding practices of today, there is an underlying sense of pride, or an energy about living up to standards and reaching a state of “perfection.” This ideology shows itself in many ways during the ceremony, particularly with the family members involved. Dark shadows and the secrets hidden behind closed doors are intentionally put aside, ignored, and denied. The urge to live up to cultural perfection and/or expectations

invades many realms of the wedding process including the preparation period and the idealized fantasies of different parties involved. In our modern day, the obsession with a white wedding has led to the commercial use of wedding destination sites. These are usually places of exceptional beauty, and they typically have an aura of relaxation, and stress-free days.

The use of wedding destinations sites is prevalent, strong, and economically beneficially to the locations/venues in today's culture. For some places in the United States, having a constant economy of couples eager to married is a staple of their business economy, as well as the lives of the permanent residents. In these situations, the couple to-be-married regards a picture-ready location as a main priority. They are commonly drawn in by the beauty and easily accessible nature of the wedding packages offered. The checklist is already made, all they have to do is pay and show up.

These wedding destinations sites are known for being vacation-like, laid back and comfortable. The picture-perfect landscape is part of the deal and the appeal. The Florida Keys are a top wedding destination. They are a chain of islands located in the southern most part of the continental United States. Much like the Caribbean, the weather is tropical, the beaches are white, and the water is blue. In advertising campaigns, hotels show off their sunny days and quiet hammocks, palm trees and a textbook sunset. Wedding celebrations that are planned based on geographic locations are more bought for an image, rather than planned to represent the life conditions to come. The sentimental, religious, and personal effects are added on as desired or required. In these situations, couples and families are more clientele than community members.

Wedding destinations are part of the show and the performance: to show the best side of all families involved, and entertain the guests. The couple, families, and guests are a displaced community. This means that while they are enjoying the beauties of the world, they are not in their hometown and therefore not seeking to establish their changed identity in the place they will together reside. Those attending, the guests, are meant to enjoy themselves above all else. They come together to get some sun and support the couple in their celebration and endeavor. However, the concerns of life beyond the ceremony are hidden behind white sand, booze, food, music, and dancing. Being away from home helps to keep the secrets locked away. The moment is of utmost importance. The values and duties of matrimony blur away into the temporary utopia that has been paid for.

Included in these wedding destination packages is the officiant, or the instructor who knows how to complete the ceremony. In the Florida Keys, these are locals. The majority of officiants in the Keys are boat captains, but others include the few priests and ministers who enjoy officiating and do it for the pay, as well as hotel managers and city officials who are authorized to do so. It is common for the officiant to be a friend of the hotel or boat owner. Because of the water surrounding the Keys, boat captains can marry off shore, in uncharted territory, if they are a registered Justice of the Peace. Few of the officiants in the Keys attend religious services regularly or consider themselves an active part of a specific religious community. In my case studies, the officiants “fell into” the business because of their geographic location, people they know, and the abundance of wedding ceremonies year round.

Below, I will analyze two interviews with officiants of the Florida Keys. In these case studies, I found that the officiants set out to accomplish what the location sells: a stress free

celebration. Their image is associated with the geographic location, and to a certain extent, their role must continue to play the part. Both subjects illuminated their similar desires to provide the couple with that they paid for: a quick and fun ceremony that legally binds them, words and gestures sealing the union in the holy realm and/or with a higher power, and a performance in front of family and friends. The officiant is needed for the first two, but just a time and place for the last. According to the officiants, this higher power the couple takes oath under ranges from faith in Winnie the Poo to God and Christ and His people. All wedding ceremonies require a marriage license for the union to be legally binding. But not all wedding celebrations need to be legalized; the officiant is needed for the Man and Woman to be officially married, but not to show their dedication to each other in front of their family and peers. However, wedding packages that include a wedding destination advertise the crucial nature of the role of the officiant. They do not specify what their role is and what it brings to the wedding ceremony as a whole. The desire of the individuals to be recognized as a family by state and holy law would require an officiant figure. But the desire of individuals to celebrate their love and happiness with close family and friends can be paid for, performed, and remembered without the officiant's role. This would not be considered a marriage, but instead a party. It seems logical that wedding patterns of today, particularly white wedding patterns, embrace the celebratory elements more directly, and include the officiant as a way to remain religiously and historically legitimate. Performance is not enough when laws are involved in the rite of passage.

During the marriage ceremony at a wedding destination, the seriousness of the couple in their marriage endeavor is less centered on the realities they will be facing and more directed towards the worry-free life they imagine (the life sold to us in

advertisements). It could be generalized that wedding celebrations planned according to a wedding destination site are aimed at completing the short sacred matrimony ceremony in front of their guests, and then swiftly moving on to the longer party where all guests collectively enjoy the fortune and love they are experiencing on a beach at sunset.

From my experiences with interviews in the Keys and growing up there, it seems that wedding ceremonies are a show of both wealth and happiness, but are not required to be accurately representative of both. The ceremonies are more commercially driven, and the officiant is hired to create a ceremony that presents the couple in great lighting. The magic of rites of passage works regardless of motives, because the power is in the action, or the completion of the ceremony. However, in these cases the values inherent to marriage as a system – the cultural purpose and social significance – are hidden under the advertising methods and the wedding planners, instead of addressed and verbalized.

The officiants are brought into the process by the wedding planners, and usually late into the planning period. The couple meets with the officiant before hand, but usually right before, sometimes in the thirty minutes before the bride walks down the isle. For the most part, the officiants are strangers entering into an established web of relationships and emotions. During the ceremony they become important to the guests, families, and wedding as a whole, but once it is over, the couple returns to their home without the intention of interacting with the officiant or returning to their wedding location (unless vacationing again). In comparison to officiants interviewed in the Hudson Valley, the time of meeting with the couple before the ceremony is much longer. However, the goals during the pre-wedding sessions remain the same by all parties. The Celebrant sets out to “get to

know” the couple, find out what makes them tick as both individuals and pair, what brought them together, and what keeps them together.

The celebrants’ role in the ceremony is significant and unique, identified as an essential ingredient because of the particular qualifications they come with. It is a business position on one hand, and a spiritual position on the other. The officiant brings state and divine legitimacy, and bridges the two categories together. Celebrants have the power to call upon the divine, their words legitimated by their religious credentials and past. However, in ceremonies based off wedding destination sites, the officiants personal/religious history is less of a concern. The couple knows the officiant is qualified because that is what they pay. It is of no concern that the personal history of the officiant matches with the values the couple hold true. Instead, the officiant is part of the package, the memories, and the pictures; the speaking of the true word and sealing the legal documents to keep the customers happy and without stress.

**OFFICIANTS:** David Feder + John Genet

**PLACE OF PRACTICE:** Islamorada, FL

David Feder is a long time resident and local celebrity musician who lives in Islamorada, Florida. He has officiated at an estimation of 15-20 wedding ceremonies in the Keys, but has played music for over one hundred. Before moving to the keys, he was on the path to becoming a rabbi, but never completed the requirements. Today, he is authorized to officiate as a licensed minister under the New Life Church and has been performing marriages since 1980. He is the minister of music – paid \$35 dollars and got the idea from an ad on the back of a rolling stone. The New life Church exists “solely so people can get

their ministerial licenses, and do not need to go through a religious practice to do so” (Feder).

Jean Genet identifies as a lama, a teacher, in the Buddhist religion but only practices individually. He does not identify with any particular sect of Buddhism, and his wedding practices are not Buddhist by majority. His status as a lama grants certain ceremonial rites such as performing weddings. He became a lama in 1995 and started performing marriages in 2000. He moved to the Keys in 1990. The average amount of weddings Genet has performed ranges from 75-100.

***1. What is your background with marriage ceremonies? How did you start and how long have you been practicing?***

FEDER: My first wedding was a fluke. Someone called me with their nine month pregnant daughter. The guy [Feder is referring to the groom] came in on a backcountry boat, he smelled like fish. I played the wedding song by Peter Paul and Mary. They gave me 500 bucks and I said, “I’m doing weddings.” And that was it, it was five minuets and she was about to have her baby – it was non-denominational. And the majority, maybe 60 percent of the weddings I have done have been non-denominational. Because we live in a tourist area people who officiate are usually a Justice of the Peace, clergy member, or boat captain or friend of the family.

GENET: My friend David Feder plays music for a lot of weddings and he noticed the growing requests for someone to do weddings of mixed religions – they didn’t want a rabbi or a priest, so they went for the Buddhist. This was usually a choice that worked because it is in between, a compromise. Neither party would have wanted me if I was a rabbi or a priest, but a Buddhist both parties can usually agree on. That’s how I got into weddings. In the Florida Keys, boat captains can perform weddings. These are really expensive ceremonies usually six or seven hundred dollars, compared to what I charge, which is maybe 150 dollars, and I give fifty back to the wedding planner, or something like that – because she is the one who got me the job and its good payment for your time.

Both Feder and Genet view marriage as a business opportunity. In both cases, the reasons for first starting to officiate do not stem from a tie to a religious institution or a devoted practice to sacred religious customs and scripture. Both officiants started by an accident or on a whim – a chance experience – when they realized the opportunity to make money with the qualifications they have. Without identifying with a specific institution,



there is no community that publically associates with the divinely related word spoken when they officiate. Instead, with both Feder and Genet, their personal lives, family and friends in their social circles, are their equivalent to the congregation of an institution.

Couples that hire Feder or Genet, through a wedding planner, word of mouth, venue recommendation or other business reasons, are unaware of the community their officiant identifies with. The relationship between officiant and couple is lopsided, a one way street; the officiant knows personal information about the couple, but the couple lacks personal knowledge about Feder and Genet's values and upbringing. However, in wedding ceremonies when the role of the officiant, which symbolically represents a community, redirects values expressed from couple to officiant, back to the couple. This reflection comes with the added symbolism transmitted by officiant: a trusting, accepting, loving community. In these cases, couples can feel sentimental connections and closeness to an officiant they know nothing about because they see their close friends and family – the guests – in the officiant, who was hired out of convenience.

With both Feder and Genet, the lack of a long personal connection to the couple, or lack of familiarity, connection, or piety to the couples system of belief, does not affect the seriousness of their practice. It is important to both interviewees that they know information about the couple's history, and the relationships of their families. Naturally, in the officiate business of a wedding destination, situations and clients come last minute, poorly planned, and on a whim. It seems safe to say, given his first weddings, that Feder has a routine for getting to know the couple, and it is important to his process and role, but his standards for a proper marriage are lower than that of common society, and therefore his

well of couples married will have individually defined matrimony values, versus conforming to what a community finds valuable to building a marriage.

***2. What is the average time between first meeting the couple and the ceremony? What are important conversations to be had during this preparation period?***

**FEDER:** It varies, sometimes people rush into town and I'll meet a half hour before hand. I try to figure out where they are from. We want to make sure we have things that please grandma and then after she goes to bed we can play what pleases our party side. But really what is important for me, when meeting them before the ceremony, is to get the vague picture of what they work with, how their lives work together with the hierarchy of what is important on the personal level. My job generally is to design a wedding out of what I gather are the interests and values of the couple, their relationship, and their family. Sometimes I've played music and officiated at the wedding at the same time. I would read the script that the couple and I both agreed on, and then play the score – which is commonly a mix of choices I make for the couple and the songs they request, or songs that hold personal and romantic meaning to their relationship.

As the musician, I usually spend more time with the couple than the officiant does because they are really concerned with their wedding music: during the ceremony, during the cocktail hour and during the reception, all that – they are really concerned with the mood to be set, more so than the words binding them in during the ceremony. There are people who want super fun and happy walking down the aisle, and others want super dreamy, beautiful down the aisle and then something like “Tequila<sup>15</sup>” walking back, something light and celebratory.

When I officiate, no matter the service or words recited that call upon God, it is the music that sets the vibe and lets the guests know how the couple views their marriage. In church services I find that people who are forced to go to church because their parents want them to, they play the wildest music, something like a rebellion. There is a lot of focus on the music played while people are sitting down and waiting for the bride, even before the walk down the aisle. They want people to be either relaxed, or in a party mood, and very rarely do people ask me to try to create a spiritual mood, unless in a church.

**GENET:** Usually the day before. People know where they are getting married months, or even years before the date – because there is so much planning – so they call me to secure the deal and services, make sure everything is in place. Rarely do I establish a relationship when the location is locked down. I come in close to ceremony time, late in the planning stages. Sometimes I do a conference call with the couple when this happen. But in-person meeting usually doesn't happen until the day before. I'll meet with them a few hours or minimum of 30 minuets before the ceremony. A lot of times the team at the venue gives me a call about a wedding happening the next day, and I get in contact with them as soon as possible.

If I can, I take some time with the groom and the bride. I want to know how they met, I want to know the relationships to the family, because I want to know the brides

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<sup>15</sup> The Champs, “Tequila” 1958. Song.

relationship with her father, and I want to know his relationship to his mom. These connections determine the relationships with your future mates, not in a lot of detail but with the basics. The brain says, "last time we were in this situation what did we do?" and it reverts to old habits. I always want to know the woman's relationship with her dad because if that's a good relationship then he becomes the model for how the relationship should be. If that is not the case it is a model for what the relationship should avoid.

As compared, to trust, companionship and other things that make up a relationship, one of the things you will measure a relationship by, is the relationship they have to their father. There are cases, where after talking to the couple, I don't want to marry them – I've told couples that I really don't think after a weekend in the keys, and waking up less than sober, is going to justify you guys getting married. Several people, this is not large in number, but some have come back to say "I'm glad we didn't get married." They realized it was an impulse induced by vacation and not a thought-out decision, visualized and planned for the long-term.

The preparation period for officiant is the time between first meeting the couple and the time of the ceremony. In this time frame, both Feder and Genet identify with the common need to find personal information about the couple, familiarize with what values keep the relationship in motion. Feder has rare viewpoint of being officiant and musician. As noted in his answer, his experience with weddings has shown him the importance of music – in his opinion the music is what sets the mood, and the role of the officiant, the prayers and ceremonial steps are secondary to the music played before the bride walks down the aisle and after the ceremony is complete. The music generates a sense of what is important to the couple and his heard by all in attendance.

Feder, no matter musician or officiant, strives for similar goals when researching what is important. For both music and script, Feder needs to know what the values of the couple, and the family; he feels a pressure from the couple to get a certain mood across because he is aware the mood set manifests itself in part of how the guests view the marriage at hand. Feder has no minimum for time between meeting the couple and performing the ceremony, but he does have personal standards for what information he needs to know about the couple.

Naturally, time between meeting the couple and start of the ceremony affects what is discussed between officiant, bride, and groom. Genet, like Feder, needs to know about the couple. His standards are specific, and he has paradigm for measuring, or gauging strong relationships. This is based on family ties, specifically the relationship between daughter/son and the opposing-sex parent (groom and his mother, or bride and her father). This strategy for assessing strong relationships is narrow-minded, but useful when applied to the bigger picture of relationships; when the groom/mother and bride/father relations are added to infinite other complexities that exist to relationship mechanics.

Genet's way of evaluating the strength of a relationship sets standards to his practice; standards he puts to use. He will not marry a couple, but refer them to someone else, if he feels the relationship or the inter-family connects are not strong or if he feels they are compelling enough to effect the marriage in a negative way. Genet compares the relationship of bride/groom to mother/father so marriage incentives such as trust or companionship. Concepts like these require practice and experience, otherwise they remain just terms, labeled ideas that remain in the mind. Family relationships are where we practice these concepts and find ways to implement them into our daily actions. While the relationship between bride/father and groom/mother is an indication of how concepts are practiced, by only looking at these relationships, we block out other family/friend variations and intricacies that affect how *trust* and *companionship* get played out.

### ***3. What is the importance of location in your practice?***

**FEDER:** Most couples want to get married outside. It is very important for them to have sunset or sunrise. Most parents, who aren't from down here, prefer a church or synagogue. Lots of parents don't believe they are married unless they are married in "god's house" but it is not important to me at all – all I need is shade and power sometimes. I find that a lot of the young couples will pick the location based on its coolness. They say "I want to get married on a beach, I want to get married barefoot, I want to get married on a boat – and if

it rains it's a total bummer for everyone. Underwater weddings are done all the time now. But back in '92 when I played at my first underwater wedding, it was really new and good. We went out on captain slates boat, out to the reef, and the bride, groom and officiant (who was captain slate) and attendants were in scuba gear – they had suits and dresses over their scuba gear and had the tanks on their backs. I was playing from a boat above and I set up the hydrophone so I could play the guitar right above and watch them and they would hear the music from a speaker underwater. They were at Molasses Reef by *Christ of the Abyss* underwater statue.<sup>16</sup>

GENET: I have no specifics when it comes to the place. The place is really important to *them*, the bride and groom, more than important to me. The reason people come to get married down here in the islands is because of the water. They don't want to get married in a church that is not connected to the water—that is why they get married on a beach, or some top of boat, sailboat or something like that. You can have as right as you can afford if finances permit. I've done million dollar weddings, which I know usually don't work out because that kind of money could be a down payment on a house, or a practicality of wedding life, but the fantasy is in the way of the marriage. If I were to pick a place, I would want that place to have a certain energy, one that was common to me. Like, if I got married by the ocean, every time I saw the ocean I would want that energy to be part of my marriage. If I lived away from the ocean, then I would want to get married in something that represented my surroundings because my brain would trigger a memory and the energy would bring back marriage qualities. It may not be the same physical space, but it is represented by the same energy. Few people think about this, they are more inclined to think about price or standards. But if every time you see a place that has similar energy to where you were married, you receive that energy back as an added gift, may not be same physical space, but is represented similarly by the energy.

Both Feder and Genet have strong feelings about how the place is meant to be important to the couple, not them. Performing the ceremony in a specific infrastructure has no relevance to the values their practice hold important. Instead, their role is to maintain and add to the meaning given off by a location. Feder has noticed generational differences, where the elder and traditional parents relate the success of the ceremony to the history of the location. Feder has also notices trends. In these situations, the couple makes choices based on what is commercially standard or relevant, what popular culture has accepted as fashionable and fresh. It is common for a wedding destination ceremony to put fashion

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<sup>16</sup> See Fig. 1 in Bibliography: Image of *Christ of the Abyss* statue, location for underwater wedding in 1992.

over personal importance. In these situations, the couple wishes to show their guests a social status versus matrimony qualities.

To Genet, choice of place should be at the whim of the couple, or those financing. However, Genet is hyper-aware of what a place contributes to a ceremony. He relates to the “energy” of a place: similarities in energy of locations trigger memory responses. Having a ceremony in a location common to daily life is helpful when seeking to keep memories and feelings around the ceremony alive. For Genet, place is more than a pragmatic necessity or a scenic social statement. Also, Genet notes of the financial realities wedding destinations deal with. Venues are an expensive ceremony detail – what a couple chooses to spend money on is telling of the values they hold true and important.

***4. What objects are commonly used and what objects are necessary in your practice?***

**FEDER:** The only object that has always been there is the ring. In some ceremonies it is traditional or common for the bride and groom to take two lit candles and merge the flame into one. A lot of people have a canopy. Recently, people, for reasons because of weather and stuff, blow the candles out but others let them burn. Birdseed has replaced rice because it is better for the birds. There are a lot of organic bubbles used too. No litter this way. There is usually something said about the rings, their significance, the material or a story behind the material – the representation of the circle of life with the shape of the band – symbolism is really big. The vows that people talk about when they give the exchange of the rings vary quite a lot.

**GENET:** I use so many objects. The ring is always present, as a symbol to show marriage status and also because the nerve endings in the left hand go straight to the heart. A lot of people want a symbol for the transition. For example, sometimes there is sand, which represents time. The couple moves the sand from one bowl to the other to symbolize the change.

It is obvious how important the ring is. For both Feder and Genet, this is the only ceremonial object always present. This could be for many reasons, but an obvious reason is the social importance, showing to the public, with a fashionable materialistic symbol, marriage status. Feder points out modern adaptations to traditional standards.

Environmental factors cause change to patterns, showing our cultural flexibility and awareness of environment (in a small, superficial way). Symbolism also happens momentarily – the use of rice or candles to show the change from single to engaged. Unlike the ring, gestural symbolism is fleeting. Moving sand is important during the performance to show change visually through the form of objects, a visual aid for guests. But the ring, its material form, keeps the essence of the gesture alive on the individual and societal level.

Genet point out the infinite possibilities for objects used, and therefore the infinite variations to the symbolism brought about their from. What each object symbolizes is personal, and different for everyone. Couples and officiants can choose to use, or not to use, whatever objects they pleased based on preferences. It seems logical that a couple wishing to show their alliance to a church or religious practice, would integrate objects used for worship into their ceremony. In contrast, couples wanting to perform a ceremony unaffiliated with a known religious or cultural tie, will refrain from objects that symbolize such ties.

### ***5. Do you have a pre-made ceremonial script to follow?***

FEDER: It depends. A lot of couples like to suggest adding other things depending on what their values are. And other times they want nothing to do with it, so I pull out a generic set of things that I find nice from many different religions, mostly Judaism, Christianity, or Buddhism, or some symbolic combination of all three. If they (the couple) do not find time to go over it with me, I try to keep it simple, egalitarian. I would say, of all the ones I've officiated, I have suggested things that are unusual – the idea of involving other people, saying something like “the couple just made a commitment to each other. But before we conclude this event and wish them well, in this group of friends and neighbors and family, are you willing to help them be successful as a couple? Will you babysit and change dirty diapers? If you see the groom wandering with a woman will you turn him around? And vice versus?” things like that depending on what you can say to people.

Most ceremonies are the same, so picking something generic is easy and pleases many people. Unless individual are conservative religious, they don't really care what is said, they just care about rings, vows, and some prayers being said. Most of my weddings aren't religious at all so there is plenty of liberty and couples take advantage of the freedom allowed. Every wedding I have done as included a personalization of some sort. They

always do some excerpt or significant quote, story, poem, things like that. I've heard excerpts from Winnie the Poo, the Dalai Lama, things like that.

GENET: No. If you have a protestant ceremony, it follows the general prayer book and all organized religions have their instructions. But I have never done a wedding that is traditional. They always want something that is a little different, something that defines them apart from the ceremony itself. You can have "Death till you part," but I never use this in ceremonies anymore – it is too strong of a commitment in today's reality. If I am going to write the ceremony, I ask them about how the met, where they have traveled together, so I can create something that joins them together as far as marriage is concerned.

If time permits, I send them a draft, and they change as desired. We go through the service and take what they like, what they feel comfortable with, and we write and edit the ceremony together, so it is not just me creating the ceremony; they are part of the creating process as well. There are a lot of different ways to address it.

What I want to do is make the event as stress free and simple as possible. Because even with all the planning, it all comes down to the end: you can plan everything out, but in the end, it's the small things that shove you over the end. When details are uncovered, fewer surprises come up and more energy can be focused on the wedding rather than on the planning.

For both Feder and Genet, there is no set scripture they associate with their practice. Both officiants rely on information gathered during the preparation period to fuel their choices when deciding on elements of the script. Both officiants accept edits from couples. Officiants value what is personally important to the relationship and integrate these ideals into the words scripted during the ceremony that binds them. This is a verbal contract, and both officiants want the couple they are marrying to feel comfortable with what is in the contract so they ideally follow-through with the oaths stated.

Feder is accustomed to scripture repetition through history. He knows the significance prayer books have for communities, and uses what is set when appropriate or requested. Otherwise, he choreographs a script based on various religious traditions and divine vows. Additionally, the active participation of the community is important to his practice. Their presence is one set, but a verbal statement from the community – to show their support – is incorporated into his service should the couple agree. This verbal



acknowledgement from the guests is a reiteration of what ritual does naturally. But by repeating, the guests are directly asked about their commitment to the couple versus the indirect assumption of commitment based on their presence.

Genet claims to have never performed a traditional service, and this may be so from his experience. The general truth is that even an edited and rewritten service has elements of the traditional. A modified ceremony from a prayer book, with insertions and edits, is still traditional, the only difference is its modern revisions, but these are secondary to the traditional formula for weddings the moderations are derived from. Genet performs alternative ceremonies that stress the uniqueness of the couple, but association with tradition is unavoidable. In fact, trying to avoid tradition would be detrimental to the ritual: the teachings of matrimony would fade away if the historical backing and symbolic connections did not exist. The promises made and word of the officiant would be grounded in nothing but the moment, connecting the couple to only each other and the ceremony at hand, no common ground or connection to society.

***6. Do you have a performance presence or performance practice?***

**FEDER:** I try to use humor, its my personality so this is natural, and I try to stay not too racy. I have a booming voice, so I don't use a microphone but if I do, I try to keep people as interested as possible. If I notice someone passing out, I single them out and make them feel important "we need you hear, we need you with us." This has only happened once to me. Usually there are more people zoning out into the landscape, focusing on the water more than the event. This is hard to notice because usually the water is the backdrop for the audience, which is the direction my back is facing, so when people look out to the water they are still facing the ceremony and me.

People usually, especially on vacation, invite the people down (to the Keys) they love and respect and want to be witnesses. It is not just about the party. They want people to see that they have made this promise, and I think they feel that people surrounding them will help them out. I ask, when officiating, "will you help them keep their vows?" and by being there, they are showing they dedication to this promise and role in the couple's life. And sometimes everybody says, "yes we will" out loud and together. So they have their group of friends that they already know and have known a long time.

GENET: I do. My job is to take the pressure off. I do this by bringing light to circumstances. For example, I married a nine-month pregnant bride when no one else would and I said “we all three want to welcome you to the wedding” because it was him, her, and the baby – and that took the pressure off. When the bride comes up, I always tell her “you are beautiful,” because she is – usually there is a radiance, a positive energy about them and they like to know others see it too. In the keys environment can make a performance presence difficult. But usually I use the difficult circumstances to acknowledge a positive side and keep the mood light and stress free. The audience is tense, especially the parents, and the pressure to keep it cool can come from anyone but I have to get them past the point of presentation, into the teachings of the ceremony. I don’t use a microphone, because I can carry my voice, which makes it more personal. If there is a screw up I make something funny about it and we move on.

Mindfulness of audience is prevalent in both Feder and Genet’s reflection on their performances. There is a technique to keeping the atmosphere and energy of the ceremony focused and strong. Neither officiants use a microphone because they have loud voice and know how to project. This helps keep the ceremony intimate, and the words of the officiant more personal. Humor and lightness is key to both practices; Feder and Genet realize the importance of a stress free environment. A wedding can be a stressful time, hence the growing desire to have the ceremony in a tranquil, natural setting. A nervous, anxious, or worried officiant would influence the ceremony in a negative way, and the anxieties and insecurities of the couple would not be put to rest.

There is a distinction between the energy/mood of the ceremony and the attentiveness of the guests. Of course, all these factors play into the overall feel of the ceremony, but when officiating, Feder and Genet have distinguishable tactics to keeping the attention of the guests and maintaining the mood of the ceremony. Feder is prone to making the drifter feel important – giving them positive attention that is linked to the positive energy of the couple and their endeavor of matrimony. Feder also incorporates the community verbally, giving them a role in the ceremony that is just about witnessing but

also about active participation in the moment and in the future. Genet does not specify specifics in pulling back a wandering mind, but he does mention examples on setting up the lightness not just for the couple, but also for the guests present.

### ***7. Do you have a special wardrobe you wear when officiating?***

**FEDER:** If it is a formal occasion I dress as formally as I can for the weather. If it is a normal wedding gig I like to wear something that blends in and doesn't interfere with the pictures, something grey or white and usually linen because if I sweat it just dries out. If it is indoors and everyone is dressed in black tuxedos, and I don't have to wear one, I'll wear black, but only if indoors, otherwise black is too hot in the sun. Some people prohibit shoes, so I'll be barefoot – it's a trend thing. If a wedding planner is involved, I just do what they tell me.

**GENET:** I do not have ceremonial robes or anything like that. The robes I wore when I became a lama in 1995 are made of all the colors present in the Florida Keys. I have pants that go along with this robe and I wear them at casual weddings where I haven't been informed of any specifics to attire. I try to look presentable for pictures – the boat captains usually don't think about this and come to the ceremony looking like they just finished fishing.

The lack of a specified wardrobe is indicative of the relaxed atmosphere surrounding wedding ceremonies in the Florida Keys. Weather impacts color and material for Feder, as he is mindful to protecting himself from overheating and sweat marks. Genet has robes for lama purposes, but does not always wear these – his officiating practice does not align with his personal religious practices. Instead, his desire is to look professional and neat, to blend in with the etiquette of the ceremony and not stand out in pictures. The goal of blending for photograph purposes is important for both Feder and Genet. The memories of the couple should not revolve around the officiant in their minds.

### ***8. What documents are necessary for the wedding?***

**FEDER:** Need a marriage license, that's all. No blood test for the state of the Florida, which some states require.

**GENET:** They have to have a marriage license. In the state of Florida I have to sign it right after the ceremony, with the couple and the two witnesses. Then I have to send it off to the clerks' office, and they file it – that is what makes it legal.

The license was created to prove that that man owned that woman. So if a couple wants “Till death do us part,” I will put it in – but I explain where it comes from and my feelings about it: There is a part of genetic coding that has happened with time, a shock with “I’m going to be with the person until I die” that causes us to think about the commitment, and then realize there is license involved, and then we realize there is a commitment beyond having fun that eventually gets played out.

The marriage license legitimates the marriage to the state. A couple who wishes to perform a marriage for personal validation, or a couple unable to legally get married, will not fill out the license involved and will not be recognized as married by the state and government they reside in. Both officiants, in these cases, uphold their legal obligations when filling out the marriage license and use their authorizations for those in need. Only qualified individuals are able to sign the license as an officiant, and bring the marriage to the state. Without officiant, the documents lack substantive proof of marriage and the couple does not legally change into the new family they expect to be treated as.

Genet points out the affective response from a marriage license. Even with ceremonial symbolism and vows, if an individual has not fully mentally accepted what the marriage symbolism means to his or her reality, concepts of binding law remain only concepts. With the license, Genet claims there is tangible transition, an alteration of freedoms granted by government, and the binding elements of the ceremony become real, and manifest themselves into the psychology of the relationship.

***9. Do you have involvement with the couple after the ceremony?***

**FEDER:** Yeah sometimes they will come back after their honeymoon, visit the location one last time before entering real life. A lot of people show up with their kids, on vacation later on – helps strengthen the bond of the place in the keys to the couple. They often come find me, look up where I’m playing or something, and want to touch base, reestablish the bond and reflect on the wedding.

**GENET:** I rarely stay in touch with couple’s I’ve married, but occasionally they come back on vacation and want to say hello.

Noticing the desire of the couple to meet with their officiant again shows us how potent the effective experience is to the wedding ceremony. Unlike with Chilton and Nelson, clients of Feder and Genet do not reside where the wedding took place. Their wedding is not adding to the histories of a church. However, the need to connect to officiant and the place of the ceremony is never lost. It is more readily accessible when community and place of ceremony are near or regular, but should the means be available, visiting is always an option.

### **WEDDING PRACTICES IN THE HUDSON VALLEY, NEW YORK**

The Hudson Valley, while beautiful, does not qualify under my definition of a wedding destination site. This is mainly because of the winter, and therefore large amounts of wedding ceremonies do not happen year round. The Hudson Valley may lure people in by the handsome mountains and spring flowers, among many other satisfying commercial reasons. This is not a comparison between Hudson Valley and Florida Keys landscapes nor is it an analysis on what draws partners to a location for their ceremony. All locations offer experiences others do not. Taking consideration of the site does lead to information that may guide us in painting the picture of the officiant's clientele and therefore the officiant's practices. After all, the role of the officiant in wedding ceremonies relies first on the move of the two individuals seeking union under holy and legal matrimony. In the interviews to come, with officiants who practice in and around the Hudson Valley, their clientele are more prone to becoming residents of some type, residing in the same geographic area as their practice, rather than the continuous cycle of hotel guests that occurs in the wedding destination site of the Keys.

Of the two wedding ceremony practices examined in the Hudson Valley, it was not typical for brides and grooms to choose their location based on like of officiant or like of religious establishment, but not uncommon either. Of course, brides and grooms come and go with time, but one main difference between case studies in New York and those in Florida revealed to be officiating at the ceremony of a family member or known acquaintance along with allegiance to religious customs of practicing officiant. The motives behind specific choices are difficult to pinpoint, but the relationship spoken of between officiant and the Man and Woman alludes to more than a superficial commercial desire. In these practices, the officiants have been part of a church or congregation, titled as priest or rabbi, and therefore associated with an established organized religious community. Their role as officiant places them as a leader among the people, one who is graced with spreading the divine word and doctrine followed.

The position officiants fill in our society, specifically in wedding ceremonies, lends their words and actions as representative of a system greater than themselves and the human realm. In the two Hudson Valley practices to come, the added inherent social and cultural relationships has constructed a marriage system that prioritizes highly maintaining the values set forth in the prayer books and joining the religious body established. Because matrimony is ruled by the state, and because the officiant is necessary to ceremony completion, wedding ceremonies bring together state and define law and cemented by performance and word of officiant.

**OFFICIANTS:** Bruce Chilton + David Nelson

**PLACE OF PRACTICE:** Hudson Valley, NY

Bruce Chilton has been a professor at Bard College since 1987 and is currently the Bernard Iddings Bell Professor of Religion. He was ordained by the Church of England in 1975 and has received his Ph. D. from Cambridge University. He is the author of several books including *Abraham's Curse* and *Rabbi Jesus: An intimate Biography*, to name only two. He is the Chaplain of the College and Rector of the Church of St. John the Evangelist in Barrytown, New York.

David Nelson was ordained as a Rabbi in 1980 and has been performing wedding ceremonies in the New York metropolitan area since. His practice has ranged from officiating at weddings for family, family friends, members of his past congregation, and free-lance work, which has been the majority of his practice. In his 30+ years of officiating, he was Rabbi of a congregation (Garden City Jewish Center, NY) for five. The estimate amount of ceremonies David Nelson has officiated at is 60-100. Currently David Nelson is a professor of religion at Bard College and received his rabbinic ordination from Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion.

***1. Do you have a standard location for the wedding ceremony?***

CHILTON: I have done beaches, gardens, and parks, other settings, as well as churches. Usually people ask for it to be in a church.

NELSON: For me, I would guess fewer than a third are in synagogues. The others being in either a place where the party is going to be or outdoors. I've married a couple in a home or backyard. The place where it happens is not very important because the place that a Jewish wedding happens is under a chuppah, under the wedding canopy. As long as you have a chuppah, it doesn't matter where it is. The most traditional weddings are not held in synagogues, they are held outdoors, because of the biblical promise to Abraham that "your descendants shall be as numerous as the stars in the sky." Actually, there was uproar in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century when the early neo-orthodox rabbis in Germany dared to have weddings indoors, which probably meant in synagogues. And there was outrage because it was traditional to do them outdoors. So for Jewish weddings, as long as there is a chuppah, it doesn't really matter where the chuppah is, it's more, actually much more traditional, to do them outdoors. But as long as there is a chuppah it doesn't matter if it is in a hotel... the chuppah is the important *where* question not the building in which it takes place.

*Q. Have you ever done a wedding without a chuppah?*

No, never. A chuppah is required, just some sort of canopy held up by some sort of poles.

Chilton and Nelson identify with a specific religious practice and institution. Chilton follows the words in *The Book of Common Prayer* and Nelson is a rabbi, a teacher and leader of Jewish customs and traditions. However, only Nelson has specifics when it comes to place, but this place is not necessarily architectural, it does not need to be a permanent establishment. For Nelson, Jewish custom prescribes him to officiate under a chuppah, which only a canopy and the poles to hold up the canopy. Nelson is flexible in materials used, size, how it was built, etc., all that needs to be is a covering under which the ceremony can be conducted.

Chilton is less specific about requirements for place. In the Anglican community, the location for weddings is not limited to the house of worship, but these sanctuaries are designed to bring values of the church to the people who follow. Therefore, as Chilton states, it is usually the case for the ceremony to happen in the church, but not mandated. All that is mandated is “At the time appointed, the persons to be married, with their witnesses, assemble in the church or some other appropriate place” (1979 Book of Common Prayer). Time and place are acknowledged with out any further specifics, and the place is specified based on appropriateness. Chilton recognizes how place is up to the discretion of the couple, but ultimately his role as officiant has power in determining appropriateness of place.

***2. What is the average time between first meeting the couple and the ceremony? What are important conversations to be had during this preparation period?***

CHILTON: This will vary; it could be a year, or even more. It would be a minimum of a month or six weeks. I have very occasionally done a wedding in shorter time than that, but very occasionally. I’ve done that for people about to be deployed overseas or those coming back from overseas.



I like to know how they became acquainted with one another. How grounded their relationship is and when they decided they wanted to become married, and what led to that consideration. So for that reason, what I am looking for is a mature, emotional decision on their part. If you counsel, there should be no surprises. I've had to say to couples that you have to make sure a previous divorce is final before you go on. Even if you feel no longer married, but you actually have not to be married and need a marriage license to do it legally.

Often the problem when people approach me late in the day and late into planning, is that they have read these wedding guides. I have not encountered a wedding guide that has figured out what the role of the officiant is at the wedding.

NELSON: Four to six months. In that time I prefer to see them probably twice. Typically I will spend an hour to an hour and a half, two times before the ceremony. That varies greatly because if they are complete strangers and I've never met them this will be the only time, just two or three hours before the ceremony split into two meetings. If they are friends of the family the wedding preparation meetings are part of an ongoing relationship.

First we talk about what plans they've made. I describe the traditional ceremony and they ask questions: "can we do this and that, do we have to do this?" type thing. We then talk about how they met, especially with strangers I want to get to know them a little bit. So I'll ask questions like "tell me how you met," "tell me your favorite things about each other" to get some sense of the kind of relationship they have.

I've also had several weddings where I have known one of the parties and not the other. In that case, I come into the relationship being well acquainted with one party and not the other. But my time with them is split between the mechanics of planning the ceremony and the more difficult and important task of getting to know them. Partially so that I can do a little bit of very informal premarital counseling and partially so that I can have something to say – because I think it is very important. Maybe because I do so few weddings, I don't have a canned wedding speech, or two or three canned wedding speeches. Really each one is tailored to who this couple is, what they like, how they met, how long they've known each other, their professions – it is very personal.

In comparison to wedding practices of the Florida Keys, the time between officiant and couple first meeting and the start of the wedding ceremony differ vastly. For Chilton and Nelson, this is a counseling period, a time when they can meet with the couple, leisurely, and establish a personal relationship to them. Like officiants in the Keys, Chilton and Nelson use this time to inform themselves of what the couple holds valuable to their relationship. This information is used in the personalization of the ceremony, in the

rewriting and editing that Chilton and Nelson do to bring a customized and intimate touch to a standard ceremony of their religious practices.

While the length of time between meeting and ceremony is longer for Chilton and Nelson compared to Feder and Genet, the meetings are not extensive for any officiant. In Nelson's practice, the time between could average four months, but the time spent counseling and reviewing is two to three hours. However, the longer the time frame before the ceremony, the longer the couple has to reflect on what was established during the meetings. Also, as Nelson explains, the longer time frame also gives the officiant more time to write a personal ceremony, which is expected by the majority of brides/grooms/guests.

Chilton's comment on wedding guides correlates nicely to practices found in the wedding destination of the Florida Keys: "I have not encountered a wedding guide that has figured out what the role of the officiant is at the wedding" As shown with Feder and Genet, their role comes at the end of the marriage process; the wedding planner or wedding guide was not prone to explaining the importance establishing a connection with officiant. Instead, the officiant is portrayed as a checklist item, something to have and something necessary to complete the union. When this is the case, it is clear the priorities of the couple align with the priorities of wedding guides, which is ultimately to bring happiness through materialistic means. Wedding guides are made to make profit and therefore tailor matrimony values to the profitable elements. This is not the officiant. Couples using wedding guides and wedding planners in the extreme spectrum want to show their wealth – which is why the wedding industry is profitable.

The mature, emotional decision Chilton is looking for is not just from his personal preference. The text and rites are blunt in their claims of the function of marriage and its

purpose in our society. The union is fleeting; it is permanent till death. This oath is what adds the effective experience to the documents. Divorce may be a pain but it is not impossible, the oath is not enforced yet, according to Genet, has the power to ruin relationships by mingling with our concept and papers of freedom.

***3. What objects are commonly used and what objects are necessary in your practice?***

**CHILTON:** They don't need to have any objects. However, every time I've done a wedding, the bride has had a ring. Usually both the bride and the groom wish to have rings, and that is fine with me. The only other object I use is my stole, which I wear as a priest, which I use to join them together after they have said their vows... I prefer to use a white one for weddings. I wear this during the service and after the couple has exchanged vows, I take it off me, wrap around their joined hands, and that is when I pronounce them husband and wife.

**NELSON:** The only variation I am willing to permit is whether they do one ring or two. My preference is for two rings, for egalitarian reasons. Everything else is not up for discussion. Under the chupah, the wine, the reading of the ketubah, the ring or rings, and a glass to break are the only objects. The only other issue I've had with objects is the light bulb versus the glass, and I will not use a light bulb. The only material culture variability is one ring or two. Because of who I am, the vast majority of weddings have two rings.

Again, the ring is a common denominator. Chilton adds his personal use of the stole, which is used symbolically to join the couple together, much like the purpose of moving grains of sand or merging the flame of candles. This gesture is accompanied by Chilton's pronouncement of husband and wife, which vocalizes the union. The guests therefore have vocal and visual cues to know when the union is complete.

Nelson, like Chilton, is accustomed to two rings given, the bride to the groom and the groom to the bride. This is a modern change, historically the giving was one sided. This was a form of branding, to show society that the bride was a grooms property. Today, the branding quality is less in terms of property and more about social status. It is common for wedding bans to never be taken off, and therefore when in the public sphere, marriage status is visible because of the ring.

Nelson's practice includes other objects for staples of the service. Along with the chuppah, there is wine (and prayers said over the wine) and the ketubah text. The ketubah is the marriage document, singed by couple and officiant and witness, and commonly displayed during the ceremony and post-ceremony events. Should a couple desire matrimony that is recognizable within the Jewish community a ketubah text must be present.

***4. Do you have a pre-made ceremonial script to follow? Do you allow variation and edits to what is scripted in the ceremony?***

**CHILTON:** There are three major sections of that service and that is characteristic of services over time. In the first part, the purpose is to explain what marriage is. There are prayers, there are readings, and there is the declaration of consent on the part of the woman, the man, and the congregation. Then we have readings that speak about the nature of marriage. This is giving a reprise of what we have already done with the couple in counseling, but now everyone is going to hear it. Then you have marriage proper. After the readings, I preach a sermon, and then the couple joins hands, exchange vows, and if they have rings that is when I bless the rings, and they put the rings on one another. Once that occurs, they are actually married. I say this is so, and then we pray for the couple beginning with the Lord's Prayer and then series of prayers appropriate for this occasion.

After that is the third part, which is called the blessing of the marriage and for that, all three of us, the bride, the groom, and I, continue with blessings to each other and the congregation. Then there is variation within the service: sometimes people like to have additional readings and to have the readings done by members of the family. Within this structure there are ways to customize the service by the desire of the couple.

Different prayers address how the marriage works to produce children and nurture them, how the marriage works to serve people in the community, how the marriage works as a representation of divine beauty in the world. All those are themes, within the prayers, for example, and usually one of those is the leading edge of what people are thinking about when they are getting married.

I have found that the couples tend to express this in terms of preferences. "They would like this reading or like that music" type thing. Usually these values come out during the course of counseling and as a result of that, I choose the options because there are a lot to choose from. You could use them all but it would get lengthy. So I choose the ones that correspond to their particular emphasis. These will usually be family, children, or career.

**NELSON:** With every wedding I've done, I speak outside the ritual recitation of blessings. I speak to the couple. Sometimes they have asked that I say, or not say, specific things, but usually not; usually that's up to me. So if they have made a request, which happens, but not often, it's that one of them wants to read a poem, or each of them want to read a poem, or something like that. But the kind of vows that we are accustomed to hearing in movies and television weddings don't happen in Jewish weddings. Where they come in is when the

Ketubah is read. If it is a non-traditional ketubah text, the vows are in that text. So they are being read as a document that the bride and groom have already signed before the wedding ceremony – immediately before the ceremony takes place. So they will say things in the ketubah like “we promise to support each other physically, emotionally, financially, spiritually, etc.” This is in the form of the reading of a text that has already been signed by the bride and groom. It is not a recitation that they do under the chuppah.

Occasionally I’ve had couples ask if they can add more stuff, if they can do a reading, or add vows, and I am happy to let them do that. But the bare bones of the wedding ceremony require them to say virtually nothing, so if they want to say more I have no objection.

Chilton and Nelson are officiants who practice from standard religious texts.

However, during the marriage ceremony, both acknowledge the vast opportunities and variations allowed in the ceremonial structure. For Chilton, the ceremony is divided into sections, starting with explaining the marriage, discussing values and qualities of the couple and the holy state of matrimony. This moves on to the marriage proper, the binding moment, the time of change, and then comes the blessing of the marriage, calling upon the divine to add the permanent role of the omniscient witness. Within these stages there is flexibility for the couple to add and subtract as they wish. However, should they want specific values to be noted, but do not have specific personally important additions in mind, it is Chilton’s role to assess their relationship and choose prayers he finds appropriate and accurate to bless their marriage with.

Nelson’s practice follows these standards as well. For him, no wedding is ever the same, and personalizing, making it known that the service is specifically designed for the couple, is a priority. For these reasons, the preparation period is a time of learning for Nelson, for he uses the information during the counseling to write the one of a kind service.

As Nelson points out, we visualize vows in a specific way because of popular culture and commercialization of wedding ceremonies. To Nelson, the vows in Jewish weddings are different from the popularized version. In Jewish ceremonies, the vows are in the ketubah,

the marriage contract. They are written down and signed, sometimes recited and displayed. Nonetheless, these are promises made from man to woman about the future stability and dedications to each other in their marriage endeavor. No matter the form, the promise is the vow, recognizable by white wedding practices or not.

***5. Do you have a performance presence or performance practice? Are you aware of the guests during your role as officiant?***

**CHILTON:** I do not regard inattention. The most I would do is try to catch that person's eye. Sometimes all you have to do is that, to track them back. If that doesn't work, you are better off ignoring the problem and keeping your attention on the people you are dealing with.

I am very much aware of the guests during the ceremony because they have a role in the events. Basically the first part of the service is a reprise of what I've already done with the couple. Namely, investigating with them, what the nature of marriage is; that they understand and that they are entering into it with full intentions and without reservations. That is something I want to seek to during the period of counseling. That is something we are asking the congregation, in so many words, to support this decisions. So I am in fact reacting to that the whole time. And if anyone were to object to the wedding I would stop everything and speak with that person aside... There is a particular reason: that if any of you knows just cause, why these two persons should not be joined together in holy matrimony, you are to declare it or else forever hold your peace. That is your last chance.

**NELSON:** This is a very subtle thing. My goal is for it to appear and sound as if I am talking only to the bride and groom, and yet, to be speaking to the entire room. What this means is, it has something to do with volume. It means I am speaking to people who are facing me at 2-3 feet in front of me and I am actually speaking to the whole room, which could be 100-300 guests. But it also means that it is a voyeuristic thing. I am having a private conversation with them. But everyone is aware that everyone is listening in and watching – and they are aware that I am aware. Now, having said that, there are some times little side comments that I say to the bride and groom and that is just for them. That needs to be said in a whisper (especially if I am wearing a microphone).

In general, I want to make the wedding as much about the couple as possible. As opposed to many other Jewish ceremonies where it is not about the people there. This is really about the people there, they are the spotlights, and their lives are the ones that are being focused on.

My goal is to make the event, make the ceremony, make the wedding, memorable and moving both for the couple and for their families. What I found over the years, is that the best way for me to do that, is to speak to them in ways that hook into specifics in their personalities, and in their histories – in other words I'm speaking to these two individuals, and to the people who know them. That is to say, the people who are there resonate to that. I spend a lot of time and energy thinking about who these people are. I'll ask them, as we meet in advance, for anecdotes. Where they met is very often a big deal.

There are certain aspects of marriage: commitment, mutual support, love, and things like that. But I get at them through a very personalized approach. And what happens is that both the bride and groom find that very moving because it is clear that this was “their wedding” not just a typical wedding to which they were inserted.

Chilton is aware of the role of the guests to the ritual success, but does not avert his attention to specific guests should they be dozing off. Although Chilton disregards inattention, the presence of the community is important to his service and role as officiant. Like Feder, Chilton believes the community to be a support system, their presence during the ceremony as a statement for their support. Chilton points out the ability of guests to object to the marriage. The opinions of the individual objecting would not be looked over, but the ultimate decision is still the officiants.

Alternatively, it would be wrong for Chilton to overlook an objection from a community member because they are also responsible in upholding standards of matrimony. Should a valid objection be presented, Chilton would take time to review. “The wording of the service is quite plain. It can’t be ‘I don’t prefer this,’ or ‘we might do this differently.’ The issue is, can they be joined in Holy Matrimony? And if it is lawful, and they have decided that it is their intention to proceed, and if my assessment is that they understand the nature of the vows and are fully consenting, it is lawful, and then we go ahead” (Chilton, Personal Interview).

The practical side of performance presence, volume, is a pragmatic technique Nelson is mindful of. Any stage setting where the audience can range upwards of 50 would qualify as a large performance. As in any performance setting, if there are vocals on stage, in order for all guests to hear what is said or played, a certain volume is required. It is important, as Nelson informs, for guests to feel special. Hence the compliments and

camaraderie: words of comfort from officiant to bride/groom common in happening routine and evident in Genet and Nelson's practice.

It is important for all attendees to feel a purpose; the effective quality is important – there is a universal need for the couple to feel significant yet unique, special for the moment. This feeling comes because of the guests, validating their significance and in Nelson's case, enhanced personalized service. Wedding destinations are proof that no matter how shallow the relationship between officiant and couple, a great performance is enough to satisfy our egotistical desires – but with a price tag. Nelson's practice is proof that with time well spent and given to officiant, significance and elevation can be found and thought-out.

***6. Is there a specific wardrobe you wear, or requested attire?***

CHILTON: Depends on the choice. If I am simply doing the wedding service itself, without the Eucharist, then I wear the black cassock and the white surplice, with the stole. If it is a Eucharistic service then I wear the Eucharistic vestment, which is the white alb, a cincture (rope belt) and a chasuble.

*Q. In a place not affiliated with religious worship, would your vestments change?*

If I were to do an outdoor wedding with Eucharist say, I would actually wear Eucharistic vestments. However, usually when people want them outdoors, they don't want Eucharist, so I would wear my cassock and the surplice. And if weather conditions are funny for that, then I'll just wear my suit and use my stole over the suit.

NELSON: I have never been requested to wear something specific. In all but one of the weddings that I've done I have always worn a dark suit. Nothing more ritually – in my middle sons wedding it was in the back yard and he and his bride explicitly planned for it to be an informal, outdoor wedding and I was given permission, as were all the men to not wear a jacket and tie – but there is not clerical garb that I wear.

It seems logical, with most of Chilton's practicing happening in a house of worship, that specific religious symbolism associated with the house of worship would be present in the material aspect of his officiant role. The vestments are visual clues to pull a wandering mind back to the ritual teachings. They add to the symbolism he represents: Christ's



followers and the divine word. This unambiguous enhancement of the symbolism for officiant adds to the desired branding of marriage and relationship at hand. However, a wedding outside the house of worship would not limit the symbolism through vestments used. Chilton would still wear his priestly attire, bringing the church to the wedding site.

It is impossible to remain unbranded. Nelson tells of his routine to wear black, the opposite of desired color for Feder and Genet. However, Nelson's choice to wear black is to blend, not stick out, which is the same motive behind Feder's choice to wear white or grey. The region of New York has more indoor weddings because of climate, and trends for indoor weddings are prone to dark, formal attire. The climate in the tropics affects trends of the Keys differently shifting the wardrobe palate from dark to light.

### ***7. What are the required documents?***

**CHILTON:** They need to show up with a marriage license and I need to know that they have it at the time of the service – I have to know that because of state law. And for that reason, when we have a rehearsal, they bring it to the rehearsal so there is no question about it. Likewise, that has to be signed immediately after the service and by the witness they choose [two are required by the state]. I always send it directly to the state of New York. And then the state sends them the state marriage certificate. Along with that we always make them up a marriage certificate from the church. Either is legal but the state one is a requirement from the state. The state does not regard it as a valid wedding without those witnesses – putting their names down and getting the signatures.

**NELSON:** It varies from state and county but there is a civil license that I have to fill out to some degree and sign, and send in to the registrar. And we also sign the ketubah immediately before the wedding. Bride and groom and their witnesses have to get there early enough to do both the civil license and the ketubah. What's interesting is this used to be only a private ceremony but in the last few years – and now I've begun to suggested it a few times because I think it's nice – is has become a public ketubah signing. In other words, the ketubah singing becomes part of the ceremony. It is sometimes in a different room but it is a nice thing because it is a ritualistic event. There is the ritual where the bride and groom take hold of the ends of a scarf or kerchief or something and everyone sings and cheers after the signing.

There is an additional religious document involved in both Chilton and Nelson's practices that are not present in Feder and Genet's. There is always a marriage license,

validity and promise to the higher government body we reside in and are protected by. For Chilton, an additional document is the certificate from the church. This is a gift, a sentimental addition to the wedding package that will continuously remind them of their allegiance to the teachings and beliefs of the religious body. For Nelson, this is the ketubah text, which adds the couple to Jewish custom, regulation, and family body.

It is interesting to note Nelson's observations on the ketubah signing practices becoming part of the ceremony. Our desires have shifted a once private tradition into the public realm. This is naturally more validation from the support system, and therefore more awareness of allegiance to a specific custom. The slow change from private to public is indicative that the specifics of a ketubah text were once private matters, and may still be, but our desire to keep them private are now malleable.

### ***8. What is your experience with co-officiating?***

**CHILTON:** It has worked out very well, but it can be very difficult. There are specific questions of the discipline of the religions involved that will feed into how you will do the service. And even at the early stage of the counseling, they feed into the families concerned. And sometimes they feed into the attitude of the couple and they don't know it. For example: the assumption of one has always been, although unstated, that the children will be brought up with X [one religion of the parents]. But this issue hasn't been discussed yet. This helps them digest this issue. Because they haven't been through this, I can give them some indication of the kind of issues they are likely to face.

**NELSON:** If for example I am the rabbi of the groom and the bride has her own, or something like that, occasionally there are co-officiates. Personally, I will not object or refuse. I would rather do it on my own because then I can be completely responsible for creating the atmosphere, creating the mood, creating an event, whereas if I am sharing it with someone, I don't have that complete control. And rarely when I co-officiate is it someone I know or have a relationship with. It is someone I've met maybe over a 20-minute conversation on the phone, and then we meet at the ceremony, so it is co-officiating with a stranger.

Co-officiating at weddings prescribed to religious institutions is an interesting development. This shows there is a growing inter-cultural and inter-faith community. The

disciplines of specific religions are less strict in the practice of those mixing religious customs. Yet in scripture, the regulations are still defined, upheld and taught purely. When co-officiating, ritual teachings converge into one lesson, one experience. Both customs are represented equally, each officiant representing the religions. Compromises in the personal practice of Chilton and Nelson are imminent: control becomes a shared experience, as does the officiant and couple relationship. The performance gains meaning and therefore the no values of the couple are compromised. Both customs of the couple and their families are exhibited and proved important, and there is a symbolic religious icon for all to connect to.

Feder and Genet have the freedom to create any service requested or desired. Their practices are not authorized by a religious institution, even though their services are. Because of this, their role is valid by the state, and their practice has no restrictions from religious doctrine, hierarchy, or belief subscription.

**CONCLUSION:**

All ritual practices identify with categories and labels, experience-related semantic meanings. These meanings drive individuals to make choices regarding what best suits the motives and needs for performing the wedding service. All interviewees display knowledge of what categorical labels represent to the greater social and cultural realm. How these categories affect the choreographic choices of officiant and wedding service details depends on the personal preferences of individuals involved in the creation and performance processes.

It is natural for labels and categories to bleed into the tendencies of a practice. Tradition and religion are cultural in that their *definitions* are secondary to their *practice*: superficial terms describing a practice only hint at the affective, conceptual, and pragmatic experiences undergone. The actions are defined by our semantic and psychological preferences but completed somatically, by the mind, body, and cultural relationships. As emphasized throughout this paper, meaning and values are transmitted by actions, not semantic terms.

Therefore, examples of practices from officiants are meant to inform us of the values and needs behind the semantic specifics and categorical inclinations. This information is then applied to the ideal-type chart. When the needs and values of wedding practices are inserted into the ideal-type formula, the information gained adds to an objective picture for wedding practices and purposes. For example, Feder and Genet are prone to including sentimental symbols and prose/verse that represent fundamentals of the couple's relationship. Some may label the editing and rewriting of scripture as *alternative* or a variation on *traditional* histories. From our chart, we know that personalization in wedding

ceremonies has pragmatic, affective, and conceptual seeds for action and also pragmatic, affective, and conceptual residue in motives and desires. Personalized edits to the wedding service therefore retain what the *alternative* category includes, but as an affect, not a cause. The intent of personalization is not to create an alternative service, but rather create a category of unique and distinctive features to separate the couple from their community. *Alternative* is still an applicable category, but what alternative is defined against is an ideal, rather than a subjective viewpoint on a semantic specific.

Objective viewpoints are gained only because the ideal-type shows how personalization, and other wedding service fundamentals, manifest as needs and desires. These needs and desires are universal to all, rooted in our need for meaning and our need for communication, which prompts performance and ritual practices. All interviews have proved the truth to ritual fundamentals; no wedding occurs without including all fundamentals, to varying degrees. The interviews also prove how ritual teachings are transmitted. Because all experience-states were always present, ritual teachings enter all experience-states and create new motives, desires, and needs for future questions and actions out of the blending.

Ritual is an ideal-type for ways of living. It provides insight into what *could* be, and the ways to get it. Should a specific end be desired, the means are available. Alternatively, if a specific end is meant to be avoided, the means of avoiding are also available. All life choices and possibilities are defined by ritual as an ideal-type. Reflecting on personal ritual choices and desires, and what they have satisfied, lends to the objective knowledge for cultural realities and standards of living.

With the interviews, I was confronted by the challenge of having to pick and choose actions and decisions described by officiants for the purpose of my analysis. Inherent in every decision of the ritual actors is the ideal-type. All possibilities exist within the choices of an ideal-type framework. For these reasons, specific choices of the officiant are not the information that would lead us to an objective view of the purpose for the wedding service. Rather, this information shows that regardless of detail in choice, the fundamentals are always present and therefore the specifics of the wedding service are acted on to fulfill the greater need of ritual action and cultural traits. In doing so, the officiate and individuals fulfill their individual purposes and needs, learning from what satisfies and what is left yearning for more.

Consider other ceremonies and performances such as a birth, funeral, baptism, and puberty. These all have a unique and significant role in illuminating paths of the future, of fulfilling a present or future need. Ideally, the form of the ideal-type for weddings would be applicable to other ceremonies in gathering information about the desires of a culture, through the details in the rites performed. All rites have framework fundamentals and our experiences are universally made-up of pragmatic, conceptual, and affective relics. What a culture requires from the moment of the rite is directly indicative to the cultural trends, belief systems, and motives of action: the ideology and utopias that comprise the phenomenology of the rite and ideals of the people. A marriage is a pact with the divine, God, the unknown – a greater force not manifested in society or culture, but something void of human experience and greater than the life cycle. However, regardless of subscription to belief or devotion to the pact, people get married.

Marriage is romantic. The increased levels of sentimentality and symbolism attach themselves to advertising campaigns, reflecting back to us our extreme utopias corresponding to the purpose and desires the marriage institution fulfills. There are three needs backing marriage practices in our contemporary history: need for meaning, need for communication, and need for organizing biological truths. Weddings effectively can fulfill all three, but only in the celebratory moment. When conceptual, affective, and pragmatic experiences are active at once. As is the case with wedding ceremonies, the lines of distinction between them blur. This is part of the phenomenology of the ritual – its way of inhabiting all realms of existence while satisfying the cultural and communal needs of a moment.

The performance aspect of marriage is unmistakable. Aside from being a rite reliant on witnesses, marriage is one of the only contemporary ritual practices to join an individual directly to another individual. The bond is conceptual, aside from the legal documents involved in matrimony. In our contemporary present, the governing body has less control of personal freedoms. Aside from reproductive debates, sexual preferences are free to act without rule from a higher power. Therefore the individual has more agency; more control in the choices of cultural and sexual ties intrinsic in weddings. Contemporary rituals have further categorized cultural and divine manifestations. Freedoms and needs are diverging from a common source of power, dispersing their influence among all social and spiritual commitments. The unique significance of marriage on the pragmatic level is decreasing, but as shown through white wedding practices, the symbolic, affective, and sentimental levels are increasing.

When the celebration is over, fulfillment of our needs is less poignant because needs are categorized back into daily life. Fulfillment is difficult without the elevated nature ritual action creates. It is easy to categorize daily habits and necessities with the experience they provide to our overall preferences and individualities. But ritual practices do not play out the same way as mundane habits. The experience provided by ritual action, specifically performance ritual, lends itself to the identity of the entire practicing body. Therefore, ritual teachings must comfort the practicing body, satisfying their needs continuously but also temporarily.

We owe a thank you to the temporary nature of ritual satisfaction. Otherwise our standards for cultural norms and divine obligations would remain frozen and passive, unchallenged or changed through time. Instead, we naturally organized our minds and bodies into a practice that accept standards and challenges them at the same time; that incorporates past teachings only to uncover new ones. Our search for meaning is not a quest for a direct answer, but a choice to follow, or not follow, the previous footprints that guide to the promised belief.

Ritual action brings shifts in communal consciousness, attitudes and desires, practices and ideals. Performance ties us to old patterns and pushes us into new ones. Wedding traditions will always be motivated by our need for meaning and our needs for connection, but the ways our motivations manifest are forever in flux. Because ritual can bring a shift in cultural consciousness, we remain at the whim of the greater scheme of performance. Therefore, participating in ritual action has the reward of adding our individualities and preferences into the mix, a contribution to the recipe.



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**IMAGE**

Fig. 1: *Christ of the Abyss*, located in the reefs of Key Largo, Florida.



Image from: "That's Amore! Dive into LOVE-ly Key Largo Resort." *NileGuide Travel Blog*. Web. <<http://www.nileguide.com/destination/blog/florida-keys/2010/03/19/thats-amore-dive-into-love-ly-key-largo-resort/>>