

Blogs

When We Redefine Marriage, These Five Wedding Traditions No Longer Make Sense

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All this week I've been thinking about weddings. My husband and I recently celebrated our anniversary, and then Hallie Lord is hosting a little online party where [bloggers are writing about their honeymoons](#). Reading through the stories of all these Catholic weddings and the ensuing celebrations reminded me of something I haven't thought about much since my own nuptials: Many of our cherished wedding traditions make no sense with [the new, secular understanding of marriage](#).



I was an atheist when I got married, and I held a common secular view of marriage: It's simply a public statement that two people are going to stay together for the long term. That's it. Quite a few of my friends got married around the same time I did, and we all shared this view. I don't think any of us thought that our understanding of the institution of marriage was that much of a departure from that of the millenia-old Judeo-Christian tradition. Sure, some of us were atheists, but it was basically the same old thing, just without the God stuff. However, when we actually sat down to plan our big days, and started asking ourselves why we were doing all of this stuff, we were startled by what we found: Almost none of the time-honored traditions, practiced for generations by our forebearers, made sense anymore.

As the new, secular understanding of marriage sweeps through society, I think that couples who buy into this view will find that many of the traditions that they most look forward to incorporating into their weddings are either on shaky ground, or have been rendered entirely obsolete. For many young people, it'll a wakeup call as to just how very different this institution is from the marriages of their grandparents. To name just a few of these now-irrelevant practices:

1. Honeymoons: The honeymoon, which originated back in the early 19th century, has traditionally been thought of as a chance for a newly married couple to spend quality time together, to help them bond and get their new, shared life off to a good start. This may still make sense for couples who live apart up until the day of the wedding, but that's increasingly rare. For the [60 - 85%](#) of people who cohabit before their wedding day, the post-marriage trip has lost the mystique that we traditionally associate with honeymoons, and is simply another vacation.

2. Bachelor/Bachelorette Parties: Bachelor parties are usually thought of as a campy celebration of a man's (or woman's, in the case of bachelorette parties) "last night of freedom." But this all falls flat with most secular understandings of relationships and marriage. It makes no sense at all for couples who cohabit, since nothing about the couple's lifestyle will be different after the wedding. Even for couples who live apart during their engagement, the view that marriage is a path to each spouse's personal self-fulfillment takes away the energy behind the bachelor party. The concept that makes the "last night of freedom" meaningful is that a single person is about to enter a life of sacrifice, where his or her personal amusement will no longer come first, and thus there will be less time for recreation. When we reject these ideas about marriage and sacrifice going hand-in-hand, we lose any need for bachelor/bachelorette parties.

3. Wedding Registries: When my husband and I got engaged and began planning our life together, one of our biggest challenges was figuring out what to do with all the extra *stuff*. We'd each been living on our own for years, and so both of us had complete sets of everything you need for a home. Upon our marriage, we found ourselves with two microwaves, two couches, two blenders, four televisions, and more silverware and plates than we knew what to do with—and since we'd both been somewhat successful in our careers, it was all nice stuff! Instead of wedding gifts, I felt like we desperately needed a new tradition where the engaged couple has a garage sale, and all friends and family members are obliged to buy something.

The idea of a wedding registry is that young people who go from their parents' households or college dorm rooms to a home of their own need more household supplies than they could ever afford themselves, so they indicate which items they're in need of through a registry, and friends and family members help them out. But in these days when young people are actively encouraged to put off marriage for years in favor of career and personal pursuits, there is usually no need for a registry.

4. Dad Walking the Daughter Down the Aisle: This beloved tradition can be repurposed to fit into secular weddings, but our anti-family society has taken a lot of the meaning out of it. In more family-oriented cultures, a wedding is not the joining of two people, but the joining of two *families*. Along with traditions like the groom's family hosting the rehearsal dinner, a father walking his daughter down the aisle has long been an outgrowth of the fact that the parents were intimately involved in the engagement and wedding planning process in the first place. This may still be the case for some couples, but as a hyperfocus on personal autonomy continues to sweep through the culture, any roles of the parents in weddings will be rendered purely symbolic.

5. "'Til Death Do Us Part': When my husband and I were writing our wedding vows (yes, we wrote our own), we were surprised by how many of the romantic ideals we wanted to throw in there really didn't work in light of the secular understanding of marriage. For example, [if marriage is a contract, and not a covenant](#), and if the contract can be broken by either party at any time and for any reason, then statements like "'til death do us part" aren't all that meaningful. When I thought about what kind of statement would be more accurate, I imagined the little old ladies in the audience getting their Kleenex out for the big final moment, only to see us gaze into one another's eyes and say, "'til death—or until one of us feels like breaching the contract—do us part."

In theory, my friends and I should have had no problem doing away with these stodgy old traditions, since it would simply be a matter of following our views about marriage to their logical conclusions. And yet I think all of us felt sadness at that prospect. There was a sense

that whatever sparked these time-honored customs was something good, something worth preserving. As our culture's respect for traditional marriage erodes further and further and there becomes less and less need for honeymoons, wedding registries, and all the other things we immediately think of when we hear the word "wedding," I hope it will give people pause. Maybe the next generation of brides will take a hard look at their own views about this institution when they consider that you cannot hold to the modern view of marriage *and* have all the trappings of a fairy tale wedding; one or the other must go.

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