

## **Preparing to experience your wedding**

As you prepare for your wedding, it's likely that you will focus almost entirely its external features. Yet you probably believe that your wedding's value lies in the experience it will give you and your guests. Your control over your guests' experience of the wedding is limited: you can offer them a beautiful and poignant ceremony, you can offer them a festive celebration, you can offer them the mistakes of the day (the most touching gift of many weddings), but you can't make them receptive to these offerings.

You can do much more to prepare yourself to feel the significance of your wedding. Ideally you will start preparing your heart and soul for your wedding a few months or more before you marry. Whether or not you do this, you should plan to finish the external preparations for your wedding in time to spend a few hours preparing yourself inwardly for the ceremony. These hours are the focus of this chapter.

You should schedule your spiritual preparation as close to the time of your wedding as possible in order to minimize the time following your preparation that might alter your state. You'll have to decide how long this preparation should last. If spending a few days traveling or camping alone are possibilities for you, you might consider such options. I recommend setting aside at least three to four hours on your wedding day for preparing yourself to experience your wedding. If your wedding is in the morning, decide whether it will work better to wake early for these preparations or to carry them out the night before. It's likely that you spent four hours choosing and preparing your wedding outfit and accessories; most mainstream brides spend longer. Isn't your experience of your wedding just as important?

You will probably decide to spend this time alone or together just with your partner. If you do, retreat to a place where your friends won't find you. Only stay home if you are willing to unplug your phone and ignore the answering machine, and if no one is likely to come there looking for you – you'll be distracted by pounding on the door even if you don't answer it. Borrow a friend's home if your friend can assure you that no one will arrive while you're there, or go to an outdoor spot where you won't feel too self-conscious, or even rent a cheap motel room. Assign any tasks that need to be completed during this time to your friends, and give one or two friends the power to make last-minute decisions for you. If you have a cell phone, leave it behind, or at least ask your friends not to call you during this time unless there's a catastrophe. They will call you anyway. Like most of us, they value accomplishments above solitude and contemplation. Unlike us, they've had the opportunity to know you and love you, and they want your wedding to come off flawlessly.

### **Choosing your ideal wedding state**

Before you can decide how to prepare psychologically for your wedding, you have to decide what state you want to be in during your wedding ceremony. Do you want to be alert? Calm and comfortable? Excited? Attentive to the hour's sensations? Responsive to whatever unexpected

events occur? Aware of this momentous day of pairing for life? Steeped in love? Gushing with the knowledge of your partner's preciousness? Grateful to your friends and family? Quick to weep? In a state recommended by the content of your ceremony? The "state" you choose might be an emotion or a style of sensing the day's events. It might be a very specific feeling whose name only you know or a general attitude. It might best be called a psychological state, an emotional state, or a spiritual state, so I will use all these terms. Since the subject of this book is your ceremony, I will focus on your preparation to experience that. But it's likely that you won't have much time to prepare separately for any events that follow the ceremony, so your preparation for your ceremony might serve as preparation for the rest of the day.

Predict what state you will find yourself in on your wedding day – the state you will be in before you begin preparing yourself psychologically for your wedding. How different is this state from your ideal state? Does it contradict your ideal state, or is your ideal state a refinement of it? If your natural wedding day state contradicts your ideal state, you should at least consider an alternative ideal. You are most likely to achieve your desired state if you work with your natural state instead of against it – that is, if you tweak or redirect your natural state until it suits your wedding ceremony. Also, it might turn out that a state similar to your natural one will give you a better wedding day than the state you first considered ideal.

Say that you can rarely sleep much when your responsibilities are heavy, and you doubt you'll sleep enough to feel alert on your wedding day. Maybe the state that first seems ideal to you is "rested and alert." Then you consider the possible advantages of sleeping little over straining to sleep through the night. You recall that after you sleep less than a full night, it is especially easy for you to feel love gushing through your veins. So you decide to let yourself sleep as little as you might, and to cultivate love before your wedding instead of cultivating alertness.

Or maybe you expect to be nervous on your wedding day. A feasible goal might be to feel your nervousness in the form of a happy excitement and a giddy sort of awareness of the significant step you're taking. After all, nervousness is like a flashing sign that labels your concerns "IMPORTANT!"; it can help you throw yourself into full involvement with the events of your wedding day.

It's fine to choose an ideal wedding state that goes against the grain of your probable state. Just expect to work harder to achieve such a state, and start working early.

### **Methods to achieve your ideal state: An introduction**

Once you choose the state that you will try to achieve on your wedding day, you must choose the methods you will use to achieve that state – that is, the activities that will prepare you psychologically for your wedding. I'd recommend making a list of every activity you can imagine that might help you achieve your ideal state. If you're at a loss, recall those circumstances that put you in a state similar to your ideal one in the past. Carefully consider how you might deliberately create similar circumstances. And read on for some introductory

suggestions.

Once your list is long, remove those methods from it that are particularly dangerous to you or to anyone else, including those methods that are likely to move you deeply but in the wrong way. Then remove those methods that are particularly impractical to carry out in the hours or days before your wedding. You might remove other methods from your list as well, but I recommend that you use as many methods as time allows to reach your ideal state. For instance, if you want to calm down before your wedding, you might spend the morning of your wedding day taking a hot bath, doing your yoga routine, doing three different visual relaxation exercises, *and* writing about your fantasy of a peaceful world, one after the other. If you decide to use only one or two methods, be prepared to try alternatives in case your chosen methods fail to put you in your desired state.

Once you choose your methods, you should try them in combination at least once long before your wedding. This rehearsal will be incomplete, because you won't go into it feeling the way you will feel when your wedding day begins. But the practice run will allow you to refine your methods to some degree – or to dispose of your methods and seek different ones.

### **A few suggestions for reaching your state**

As you imagine and choose methods to achieve your desired state, consider whether you're most likely to reach that state alone, with your partner, or with other people. In most cases I recommend preparing for your wedding alone, and most of my suggestions reflect this. When you're with someone else, it's difficult to assert much control over your habits of interaction, and this leads to difficulty asserting control over your emotions. Only when you're alone do you have the space to recreate your emotions.

The methods that follow for preparing inwardly for your wedding are a small sample of the methods you might use. Because I don't know what state you want to be in during your wedding or anything about your unique psychology, I can offer little more. I have not described these methods of preparation in detail. You will have to develop a complete method as you adapt a suggestion to your spiritual palette and your goal.

If you are hoping to flood yourself with a particular emotion before your wedding, you might sit breathing a fragrance that has called it up before – your grandma's face powder, your partner's hair, or apples baking, perhaps. Many more fragrances than you would guess are available in the form of essential oils and fragrances produced by small companies that operate through the internet. Listening to a certain sequence of songs might help you invoke your desired emotion. It might help to read as much as you can of that novel that always makes you tear up with the vision of life you hope to see on your wedding day. Or maybe it's your own journal entries from the course of your relationship that you should read. You might prepare for your wedding by going on a long run the morning before the ceremony. You might walk all night, or you might wake in time to greet the sun. You might paint or play your guitar or go out dancing.

Your preparation might take an unusual form. To enchant yourself with the right emotion, you might have to sit overlooking a highway for several hours, focusing only on one feature of the landscape, its vastness, say, or the cars' fluid movement. You might have to attend several church services in a row at a church of the denomination you grew up in, even though you don't believe in this church's doctrines anymore. Be willing to do what you must to provoke your desired state even if it's odd or embarrassing. This will be easiest if you give yourself plenty of time alone.

In general, people who meditate or pray regularly should incorporate these practices into their wedding preparations. If you regularly practice any other religious devotions or spiritual exercises, you might want to incorporate these into your preparation – the day of your wedding if possible, otherwise the week of your wedding. Almost all spiritual exercises grow more effective the longer you practice them, so if you've always meant to try an exercise, start now. Even after you try it for a few weeks, any of the best-known Sufi and Christian contemplative practices might make you feel more loving on your wedding day. Or a few weeks of mindfulness meditation might make you more attentive to the sensations of your wedding day and happier about the day's unexpected twists.

Some people experience momentous occasions best by writing about them. In the hours before your wedding, you might write about everything you're experiencing. Or you might plan to answer certain questions or discuss certain subjects on paper in order to help you bring about the state you hope to achieve for your wedding. After your wedding you could treasure this writing as a keepsake, deliver it as a letter to your partner or a friend, or you could recycle it as soon as it serves its purpose.

Recently, a variety of people have advised that if we want to be happy, we should cultivate gratitude. One of their recommendations is that every week we should make lists of aspects of life that make us grateful – or that should make us grateful. In my experience, deliberate gratitude is surprisingly mood-enhancing (and it helps most people to *act* appreciatively as well). While dashing off a list before your wedding might not change your state much, fleshing out that list might do more. If you want to feel grateful or contentedly loving when your wedding begins, I would recommend proclaiming your thanks on paper for certain features of your relationship, and discussing those features of your relationship in writing for as long as you can. Alternatively, the subject for your gratitude might be your partner or some specific facet of your relationship or your partner. Don't try to create a definitive list of what makes you feel most grateful – just write about whatever subjects of gratitude your mind happens upon within the topic you set. Of course you might prefer to offer your thanks out loud to your partner before your wedding and hear your partner's thanks for the wonders s/he happens to recall.

If you think that you'll need more than a few hours to emotionally prepare for your wedding, you might spend the days before your ceremony away from home in a place that will help prepare you. For instance you might camp alone in your favorite national park and prepare for your wedding by contemplating what you see there, by carrying out a ceremony you planned that

requires a campfire, by taking a ritual bath under the stars.

Maybe you feel the significance of major changes in your life most intensely when your location is changing. If this is the case, you might spend the days before your wedding traveling to just about any destination – wherever the next bus is heading, or, say, the site of your last romantic relationship. Do consider what mode of transportation will allow you to achieve the state you want. Should you ride a bus or train, learning strangers' stories while you watch the land go by? Should you stay alone with your tape player in the car, free to zip anywhere you want? Should you immerse yourself in your surroundings as you only can by traveling on foot or on a bike?

### **Purification**

Maybe you don't want to arrive at your ceremony feeling any particular emotion, you just want to be receptive to the events of the day. Your main challenge in doing this might be to rid yourself of a certain attitude or emotion – a frazzled concern with completing tasks, for example. If you want to subtract from the state you will find yourself in on your wedding day rather than steeping yourself in any emotion, you might purify yourself in preparation for your wedding. You can bring most methods of purification to bear on whatever state or inclination you hope to banish.

Most major religions have amassed veritable treasuries of purification methods that prepare adherents for contact with the sacred. Even if you aren't religious, you probably regard your wedding as something like a sacred occasion. If you are attracted to the possibility of purifying yourself so that you are ready to receive the gifts of your wedding and you marriage, I recommend that you study some religious method of purification and adapt it to your circumstances. If you belong to an organized religion, you might use your religion's seasons and holidays of purification to prepare for your upcoming marriage and also seek ways to use your religion's methods of purification closer to the time of your wedding.

Methods of purification are so well-publicized that I will focus my discussion on just one method which I think many people will find useful: ritual bathing. But first I want to caution those of you who are considering another common method, fasting. I would discourage abstaining from food for more than a few waking hours before your wedding, and I would discourage abstaining from drink for any amount of time. Abstaining from food and drink makes many people feel too shaky, lightheaded, and incapable to carry out all the activities a wedding requires. My advice is not to abstain from food and drink before your wedding unless your religion encourages a strict fast before weddings, you already fast regularly, and/or you have an exceptionally calm temperament. If you want to fast, I'd recommend a mild form of fasting: restrict your diet for the hours preceding your wedding to certain food groups, but don't restrict the amount you eat. For instance, you might eat only vegetables and grains in the hours preceding your wedding, then eat rich foods like cake at your wedding reception to celebrate the richness of communion.

In many societies, each partner takes one or more ritual baths before a wedding. In most regions, bathers long used local products that were believed to have physical or magical powers to

enhance their beauty and appeal on the wedding night. But the ritual bath has another purpose that many bathers consider more important: with a physical bath, the bather cleanses something intangible from her/his soul that is unsuitable for the wedding day or for marriage.

Some Jews, most of them Orthodox, use ritual pools called mikvehs to purify themselves on a variety of occasions. But mikvehs are used most often by married women to sanctify their bodies for intercourse. The Torah forbids married couples to have sex during a woman's menstrual period. Orthodox religious law extends this prohibition so that married couples may not sleep in the same bed, touch, or act in a number of other intimate ways during a woman's period and in the days following it. Every month, a married woman who observes this law ritually immerses herself in a mikveh seven days after she finishes menstruating. Thus she cleans herself of blood, an important act in a tradition that regards blood leaving a body as potent and dangerous. She also ends her "niddah" or "separated" status, moving from the private part of her month into the time when she communes with her husband.

A woman who plans to immerse in a mikveh every month while she is married must purify herself of menstrual blood for the first time before her wedding. This immersion prepares her for the communion of marriage. Men also immerse in mikvehs to purify themselves in preparation for certain occasions, including Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) and marriage. But a groom's immersion is not mandated by religious law, and few traditions have developed around it. Many Jewish women purify themselves for their weddings by immersing in mikvehs regardless of whether they share all the beliefs of those women who immerse in mikvehs every month. Certain natural bodies of water including the ocean can be used by even the strictest Jew as mikvehs, and some women prefer to use one of these for their bridal immersions.

An immersion in a mikveh is not a bath in the usual sense. In fact, the person to be immersed must be freshly showered before she enters the water, her teeth just brushed, her hair newly washed and combed so that the water can circulate between its strands. The immersion is a series of one to seven quick full-body dunks in a small pool. Before each dunk, the bather recites a brief blessing. An attendant supervises the immersion to make sure that the bather's hair is fully submerged in the water. The water must touch every part of the bather's outer body simultaneously – even the bottoms of her feet and the spaces between her fingers.

In some regions, it is traditional for a group of women to accompany a bride to the mikveh for her bridal immersion (although not for her monthly immersions, which are universally considered private). Today, many a North American Jewish bride brings her closest female friends or family members with her to the mikveh. Before and after the bride's immersion, the group of women might say prayers for her or even carry out rituals devised by one of the women.

In many other traditions, a person preparing to marry takes a ritual bath not in a private tub but in a public bath or in a natural body of water. The bather might be partly clothed and the bath might be a public ritual that includes a procession to and from the bath site. For whatever reason, most ritual baths that precede weddings are taken at night. In the dark a bather can feel her cleanness

expanding into the cool air, and onlookers who glimpse the procession through the night streets to the public bath sense the mystery of marriage.

If you want to take a ritual bath, I recommend reading about some of the world's bathing traditions and public baths to get a sense of the many physical processes you might include in your bath. You can't include many of these processes in your own bath without having access to facilities that are unavailable or expensive in most of the U.S. and Canada, but you'll get some great ideas. The simple actions of a typical shower can also be turned into any number of purification rituals. You might script a series of actions and even words for your ritual bath or shower. If you prefer to delay external ritual until your wedding, you might just focus on feeling yourself cleansed during your ritual bath – for instance you might scrub and rinse practical worries or unkindness from each of your parts. And there are plenty of ways to make the inside of your body feel similarly clean. For instance, you might exercise vigorously before your bath or you might scent your bath with a clean scent and breathe the scented steam deeply.

### **Preparing your soul by preparing your body**

To prepare your soul for your wedding, you might ritualize any of the physical processes of preparing your body for it. Changing into wedding clothes, when done slowly, with an attention to gesture and to the significance of each item of clothing and decoration, can go a long way in making some people feel ready for their weddings. Once you dress, you might spend time concentrating on the way your wedding clothes feel or look. Or you might wear the clothes to help remind you of the day's meaning while you listen to music, write, or prepare for your wedding in other ways.

In a number of societies, the changing of the bride's hairstyle to that of a married woman is an important rite. One or several women might restyle her hair the night before her wedding in a ritual that includes hours of singing. A similar ritual takes place in some of the societies in which a married woman covers her head – although in most of central Europe, a woman traditionally covered her head in the style of a married woman for the first time during her wedding reception.

It's unlikely that you plan to wear a particular hairstyle for the duration of your married life. But you might be planning to wear a wedding ring. If you will wear a ring, consider putting the ring on before your wedding and concentrating for a few minutes on what it feels like. Whether or not you'll wear a ring, you might designate something else that you will always wear when you are married to help you feel married. For instance you might wear a ribbon around your waist, under your clothes so you can feel it against your skin. If you will wear something all the time after you're married, you might try it on to prepare for your wedding.

You might directly alter your body in some way to celebrate your marriage, and you might do this shortly before your wedding so that you can feel the change as you prepare for your wedding. I have long fancied the idea of two people getting tattoos on their hearts or solar plexuses when

they marry, although the chest and especially the solar plexus are said to be quite painful places to get tattooed. If you get a tattoo or a piercing a day or two before your wedding, you will probably feel a physical reminder of your new status as you prepare for your wedding. Getting a haircut the day before your wedding could have a similar effect. If you get a haircut that's drastically different from your last one, you might even start your wedding feeling like a new person.

### **Preparing with other people**

Perhaps you've heard of the "night of the henna," an evening celebration that has long been practiced from North Africa to South Asia by communities of all the ethnicities and religions represented there. This celebration centers around decorating a bride's skin and hair with a dye called henna before her wedding. It takes a different form in every community that practices it, sometimes including a dazzling sequence of rituals, traditional songs, and foods. In most cases the celebration is attended exclusively, or almost exclusively, by women. In many communities, grooms are also adorned with henna in their own exclusively male celebrations, but the traditions surrounding these parties are usually less elaborate than those surrounding the women's parties.

Western adaptations of the night of the henna have focused on the henna decorations themselves and on the event's female attendance. Overworked western brides enjoy being served food during the immobilizing henna-painting process, bonding with their female friends and relatives, and being painted with beautiful designs in their own versions of the night of the henna. An all-female event would prepare a woman for marriage to another woman differently than it would prepare a woman for marriage to a man. Either celebration might serve as excellent wedding preparation for someone who particularly values the bonds of her female community.

If your ideal state for your wedding is a relaxed readiness to celebrate with your friends, you might want to prepare for your wedding with some social event. One way to do this is to hold your wedding ceremony halfway through your reception or after your reception. This might be a good way to prepare your guests for your ceremony too: many guests who walk into wedding ceremonies with an attitude of readiness to tolerate a boring event are more willing to enjoy themselves once they've been mingling, drinking, and dancing for an hour or two.

If you and your partner both want to feel deep love or closeness during your wedding, you might spend part of your preparatory time together. It's likely that the preparation you share with your partner will involve a lot of touching. You might lie holding each other without talking for twenty minutes or an hour, trying the whole time to focus on your feelings rather than letting your focus drift. Or you might touch while you hold a conversation, discussing topics that pique your feelings of love or togetherness. Pick questions or topics before your wedding day that will yield discussions likely to help you feel the specific sort of love you want to feel: "What do you see when you imagine a peaceful home?", "Describe your ideal wedding night," and "How do you think our relationship will change over time?" will arouse different emotions.

### **Invoking an emotion: one exercise**

If there's a particular emotion you want to invoke to begin your wedding, you might try an exercise that is commonly taught to actors to help them feel whatever emotion they need to feel and express in a performance. The exercise works as follows: the actor tries to remember some event when he felt the emotion he wants to feel now. (Yes, let's say the actor is a man, just because I haven't paid enough attention to men in this chapter.) Once he has selected an event, he tries to remember every sensory detail of it by asking himself as many questions as possible about everything that might have stimulated his senses during that event: What was I wearing? What did the fabric feel like? How did the room smell? and so forth. He might fail to recall the answers to the vast majority of the questions he poses, but he should continue trying to recall every detail that was present to his five senses during the event. The developers of method acting discovered that, at some point during many of these sensory recollections, an emotion floods the actor. This emotion might not be the one he was seeking; it might not be the one he felt during the original event, and he might have little idea why it filled him while he recalled this memory. But when he recalls the same memory's details in later sessions, the recollection will tend to produce the same emotion as it did before. Eventually the actor might get faster at invoking the emotion by concentrating on a single sensory detail of that event. However, if he tries directly to feel the emotion, he will fail. Even if he tries too hard to feel the emotion while recalling the event's details, he will often fail. For some reason it's the focus on the sensory details of the event, or sometimes the focus on one or two sensory details, that produces the emotion.

You might want to start practicing this exercise a few weeks before your wedding in order to discover the memory that usually invokes the emotion you want to feel as you begin your wedding, and in order to perfect your use of that memory. Still, your exercise might fail on your wedding day. Plan other preparations in case it does.

### **A note of caution**

The only common method I don't recommend using to achieve your ideal wedding state is taking almost any drug, even if it's legal, mild, and accessible over the counter. Drugs' effects are often intense and unpredictable, especially when you introduce them into the unique event of your wedding day. These characteristics alone don't distinguish them greatly from other methods of changing your state. But another characteristic does: once a drug is in your system, you can't do much to remove it – you can only wait out its effects. The night before your wedding is not the time to begin experimenting with sleeping pills; they might leave you with a migraine or at least make you as groggy as you would have been without sleep.

It's okay to take a drug on your wedding day that you take every day. And I'd say that it's okay to take a very mild drug if 1) you take it regularly; 2) as far as you remember, the drug has always had the same effect on you; 3) you are certain that this drug will not detract from either your experience of the wedding or anyone else's experience; and 4) you inform at least two people who will be present throughout the day that you took it. But before you swallow, remember that

any pill might make you feel worse.

Taking drugs before your wedding might seem like a convenient shortcut to your ideal state, but it's a method that backfires or misfires in many cases. Accept the fact that "achieving" a spiritual or emotional state on purpose requires what other achievements require: work. Plan to put some effort into finding reliable methods to achieve your ideal state and into practicing those methods before your wedding. If you can't find the time to plan your psychological preparation, you might eliminate one or two of the external features of your wedding that you would otherwise spend time preparing. When you and your partner feel your wedding deeply, you will be so grateful that you put in the effort.

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