

Why I Perform Weddings

By Laurie Israel, Esq.

I have always cried at weddings. When I ponder as to why, I think that it is because I am genuinely concerned for the about-to-be newlyweds, and especially so for the young ones. As a 61-year-old person somewhat experienced in life, I fear for them. Sure, the couple is in love. They innocently face their new life together with hope and promise, but do they really know what is in store for them?

As a divorce lawyer and mediator, and from my own life experiences and those of my loved ones, I know about the particular stresses and strains present in long-term (and short-term) marriages. Along with the joy, I have seen the suffering and ordeals that couples go through during the course of everyday life together. That a marriage ebbs and flows, happy and unhappy at times, is probably something the couple saying their vows cannot comprehend. In addition, when people marry, they are generally clueless as to the legal obligations they would face should they divorce. No one realizes that if one spouse becomes financially dependent on the other, the supporting spouse may remain responsible for the dependent spouse even after the divorce – possibly even until one of them dies. Alimony often comes as a shock to a divorcing payor spouse. People are also surprised when they learn that they have to share their retirement plans and other assets with their spouse upon divorce.

This is why I cry at weddings. I cry because the couple literally does not know what they are getting into. And no one would dare tell them on this happy day, nor would they believe it if someone did tell them.

So why do I perform weddings? Because of my desire to give a married couple all I can give in the form of encouragement and education, so they will have a better chance at having a happy and satisfying marriage.

In 2000, I submitted my papers with the Governor's Council to become a Justice of the Peace in the town in which I reside. Justice of the Peace is an office that has historical ties to the person appointed to keep the "King's Peace" by use of summary justice (trials, punishment) in remote areas. In our times, and in Massachusetts, a Justice of the Peace mainly performs marriages. Justice of the Peace is an appointed position, much like a judge or a notary public. The Governor's Council chooses from the applicants for these positions, and makes recommendations subject to the Governor's approval.

Each town has a fixed allotment of Justices of the Peace based on its population. My town has 18, several of which are filled by City Clerks. There is intense competition for the one or two vacant seats that arise every so often.

I zealously pursued the appointment. I secured the signatures of five prominent people in my town. I did everything I could think of, including providing letters of reference. Much to my surprise, on my second application, I was appointed by the Governor's Council as Justice of the Peace in November, 2005, and I have been performing marriages in Massachusetts ever since.

Why would a divorce lawyer/mediator want to perform weddings? It's certainly not for the money. I receive \$75 as a statutory rate if I perform the ceremony in the town in which I reside, and \$125 elsewhere in Massachusetts. I usually give a gift of a book on relationships when I perform a ceremony, thereby reducing my revenues by \$15. Often I bring some music to the wedding, and work for hours preparing and revising the wedding ceremony, which I customize for each wedding after speaking with the engaged couple. I find poems which I paraphrase shamelessly (all the dead white men are dead anyway). It is definitely not a profit-making venture.

I fight against my natural shyness about performing in front of people, and try not to mumble (which I have a tendency to do). The weddings are usually on Saturdays and Sundays, so I give up part of my much-needed weekend – and I even have to get dressed up, which I do not like to do.

I have honed my wedding ceremony so that it gives honor and support to the current feelings of love and excitement present in the to-be-married couple. But I also include in my ceremony the important things they must do with and for each other in order for their marriage to be successful for the long term.

I give the to-be-married couple the choice of whether or not to include “God” language. If “God” language is included, I talk about marriage as a “blessed state,” but how their actions here in this world and with each other are so important to nourish the marriage (a Jewish theological concept that I like).

I talk about how a marriage grows with time, and about the good and the bad times a marriage will have. I tell them that in their lives together there will be many setbacks and disappointments, and that confronting these setbacks and disappointments together is what will make their marriage stronger and more long-lasting.

I try to find out who in their family has had a long-term, happy marriage. Sometimes in these days it might only be one set of grandparents. I hold out these people as role models for the young couple, because I know that the more divorce there is in their immediate families, the more likely a couple is to divorce. I ask them to always envision their marriage as long-term and permanent – “to the end of your lives, whenever that may come,” as I say in the ceremony.

I talk about the capacity to forgive, and how that is so important in a marriage, and I talk about the random and not-so-random acts of kindness to each other that will strongly ease a marriage into pleasantness as nothing else can.

During the ceremony, I spend a lot of time talking about the ultimate commitment they are making to each other, and why that commitment is so important to their marriage. I have them take the term “forsake all others” very seriously. I don't beat them directly on the head by telling them not to have affairs while they are married. But when we get to the “forsake all others” part in the ceremony, I look them in the eyes kindly and sagely, but very intently. And after all the other guidance that I have already given them in the ceremony, they know these are not just words, but something very important.

By the time I get to the part about “in good times and bad times,” I have them on my wavelength, and I know they are now taking me very seriously.

Toward the end of the ceremony (now that they've agreed to all these things), I sign their marriage license, and present a book on relationships to them as a wedding gift. The book I like to give is George Pransky's *The Relationship Handbook*, which describes a positive, clear, and workable approach to addressing marital problems as they arise. I recommend it to them for spousal reading, chapter by chapter, in bed before going to sleep at times of trouble.

At the end of the ceremony, I give them a benediction, and present a copy of their wedding ceremony. I have it ready and printed on beautiful, watermarked, buff-colored stationery and sign it with a fountain pen and ink. They can read it later when they want to revisit the commitments they made and the love they felt on the day of their marriage. I hope that by all these ministrations I have made their ceremony an important event, and that they will remember what they learned on their wedding day and be more capable of carrying out their marriage in a way that gives them a good and fruitful life together.

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About Laurie Israel:

Laurie Israel is an A-V rated lawyer practicing in Brookline, Massachusetts. Laurie helps clients resolve their disputes with a high level of dignity, integrity and creativity.

Laurie works in the areas of collaborative divorce, divorce mediation, divorce negotiation and prenuptial agreements. She also helps people who wish to stay married through providing marital mediation (a/k/a mediation to stay married) and negotiation of postnuptial agreements.

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