

Weddings are for Cake

Getting married should be a fun adventure! Our culture places a lot of emphasis on marriage, but it wasn't until I proposed to Lauren that I really began to think about the specifics. My thinking was focused in part by the surge of weddings I've been seeing, as my peers seem to be at the marrying age.

After I became engaged, questions that had lurked in the depths of my thoughts began to rise to the surface. Questions like, what does a wedding mean? And, why do we have them?

Judging from bachelor parties I've attended, marriage changes everything. It's described as a ball and chain. Strippers and binging are a must-have because hey, marriage is an end to the freedom to enjoy life as you like it.

From what Lauren has told me, for the bachelorettes a common theme is one of 'learning to be wife', and bracing oneself to deal with the crude realities of living with a man.

Marriage is steeped in rich history and tradition. There's talk of deep cultural roots, and marriage has specific meanings, typically religious in nature.

I've attended wedding ceremonies where the Bible is quoted in a joyful and happy context. Here's a familiar verse I've heard read, often by the bride's own family:

Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. (Eph 5:22-24)

Many wedding parties view marriage as a sacred act of receiving the blessings of gods and kin. It's when the community validates the commitment of one person to another.

I've been to a marriage where the bride and groom, who had known each other for over a decade, took a written and verbal exam with a priest neither of them knew, in order to receive the priest's permission to marry one another.

The traditional words of the ceremony itself avow that it is the highest expression of love. Marriage is seen as an unconditional bond, with a commitment to sacrifice for another person through thick and thin, till death do you part.

None of this reflects how Lauren and I view marriage, and we don't think it would be right if it did. We became engaged recently, in Death Valley no less! So we've been hearing a fair bit about marriage, and we've naturally been thinking about it in some detail.

We are committed to each other because of how much we value one another. We hold each other to high expectations. Getting married is a celebration of this already-existing commitment, and the wedding is just the party, with cake!

Since our view of engagement, weddings, and marriage is about as far from the traditional view as we can get, it's caused a bit of social friction.

I've been told that I must not really be in love because to me the wedding ceremony doesn't mean much more than cake. It doesn't go over well when I try to explain that Lauren and I are already committed to one another. From our experiences, we've gathered that the traditional, normal view is that the marriage ceremony *is* the commitment. You can't really be in love, joined together, or committed to one another without marriage. Marriage is the foundation of society, etc.

But the ceremony isn't the commitment. Our commitment to each other is not a product of the marriage, like a postcard of the ceremony. In fact, the marriage is a postcard of our commitment, and one that can be easily photoshopped -- and there's nothing wrong with a little photoshopping! We get dressed up and have cake and a good time because of something that already exists.

It sometimes seems that it's forgotten that celebrations are for people who have something to celebrate. I look around and see folks holding celebrations, and it seems as if they hope that by having this party, then they'll have a reason to be happy. But that isn't right. Parties aren't a reason to celebrate; that's confusing the order of operations.

Our culture overall has made this mistake, or at least the culture in which I live. As a result of this inverted view, the committed life of lovers has been cast as a cramped rut, full of sacrifice. I'm not talking about abstract pop-culture view, either. I'm talking about marriages I have attended, and people who have spoken to me about my engagement.

I've grown to appreciate the corporate interpretation of marriage. Functionally and legally, the way marriage works is comparable to the way corporations work. By marrying, the married couple becomes a single legal entity -- individual parties but treated as a single whole for financial and legal purposes.

This has appeal because it emphasizes the business-like nature of any worthwhile relationship. An abusive relationship is one where at least one party is not receiving a fair return on their investment -- they're being taken advantage of. A productive relationship is one where all parties are benefiting from each other, to their mutual satisfaction. No sacrifice, just investment.

In the business world, we accept as obvious the fact that you shouldn't throw good money after bad. Why keep buying a product whose prices have skyrocketed, value has plummeted, and has become mired in safety and ethics scandals?

But somehow, when it comes to personal relationships, and marriage in particular, this good sense becomes less obvious. Why keep investing time and life in an alcoholic spouse who wastes their life -- and yours? Well, because you're married and you made that whole unconditional love vow. Till death do you part, right?

The traditional view of marriage looks less like a corporate entity and more like a hostile takeover, with one company consuming the other. The tragic part is *both* parties in this view of marriage fulfill both roles -- each one feels as if they've been taken over by the other, and now must make sacrifices.

In our view of marriage, neither party makes sacrifices for the other; they make investments, and expect to receive returns.

This is a crude view of marriage, I've been told. Why all this talk of investments and expectations? What about unconditional love and devotion? I've been told that this is what you lose when you disrespect marriage.

Have I lost unconditional love in my view of marriage? That's a feature, not a bug! It's ironic that what has become the icon of love and commitment in our culture -- marriage -- also has built-in the absolute corruption of the participants.

Unconditional love, that fairy-tale concept, is hardcoded right into the traditional wedding vows, "to love and to hold till death do us part." I won't even go into the religious and cultural underpinnings of the concept, but they're certainly there. The problem is that unconditional love grants absolute power, a sense of entitlement to affection and commitment. It props up a fairytale of the happily ever after.

Unconditional love is a moral blank check, one the traditional marriage demands of both parties. But if one is honest, then one does not need the predated confidence of others. The person who craves a moral blank check of that kind, has dishonest intentions, whether he admits it to himself or not.

The only way to avoid abusing that kind of a free pass is to reject it in the first place.

Marriage is about merging with another person to facilitate greater ventures than could otherwise be accomplished alone. It involves a great deal of trust, and a commitment to hold one another to high expectations, but this trust -- love -- is earned and must be renewed on an ongoing basis.

A wedding is a celebration of what already is. Some people use celebrations in a misguided attempt to create something. By holding a celebration they think they will receive validation, or approval, or a beginning of love, a new life, or of something else. But that's an exercise in wish-fulfillment. After all, celebrations are for those who have something to celebrate.

For lovers, every day is a day of union. Each day the contract of trust is reviewed, terms renegotiated, and the wages of love are earned and paid. Weddings are not for forming bonds of love and commitment. Weddings are not for traditional meaning or receiving permission or approval from the community. Weddings are for cake.