

THE  
**Conscious Wedding**  
HANDBOOK

HOW TO CREATE AUTHENTIC CEREMONIES  
THAT EXPRESS YOUR LOVE

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# A Conscious Wedding: Gateway to a Conscious Marriage

introduction

**E**very year, over two million couples get married in the United States alone. Statistics on 182 countries compiled by the United Nations (Fertility and Family Planning Section) show that, from Albania to Zimbabwe, in wealthy countries and in poor, in times of conflict and times of peace, many millions of people marry!

How many realize the fullness of this opportunity? Weddings often turn into a flurry of activities and to-do lists, while the potential to cocreate a ceremony that could be magical and foundational to the rest of the couple's lives is overlooked. It's as though the Beloved sits in the middle of the living room, neglected and ignored, because the energy is going toward dresses, food, and wine. Instead of focusing on building the core connection with the Beloved, the wedding industry has hijacked many of the resources and much of the attention involved in creating a deep and meaningful wedding ceremony.

Statistics from 2013 reveal that the costs of weddings have escalated since the financial crisis of 2008, with the average wedding in the U.S. costing \$29,858. The dress itself averaged \$1,281. Averages can be deceiving, and we know weddings can range between hundreds of thousands of dollars to near zero (a pot-luck wedding we attended, where friends brought food and music, the couple wore recycled clothing, and the celebrant was an old friend). That the wedding industry drives many of the choices is obvious. Explore any wedding magazine to see what is promoted as "absolutely necessary" to fulfill the dream you have for your special day. Then calculate the costs involved! With these prompts, a bride is far more likely to stress over her wedding gown than

to give deep consideration to the vows she is making to her partner, which are intended to form the foundation of their life together.

Accurate wedding and divorce statistics are challenging to pin down. Divorce rates are high; the threat to long-term, sacred, and fulfilling relationships is real. However, there is a way to build a firm foundation for personal growth, deep soulful support, and true delight in partnership. All of that can be woven symbolically into the vision of the ceremony. Your wedding can be one of the most significant and meaningful celebrations on which you will possibly ever collaborate!

When recognized as such, a marriage and a deeply committed relationship provide an astonishing opportunity for growth. They open a portal toward understanding Love—how to create Love and how to receive Love. We capitalize “Love” (and “Beloved”) in this book because we recognize the astonishing power of this wonder, this cohesive and cocreative energy of the universe itself. The vision of the relationship you choose to craft can be enhanced by the highly valuable project of cocreating a wedding. It is an opportunity, a “mythic” one, to build a ceremony that captures the depth, the magic, and the passion of your Love. And, it doesn’t need to cost a fortune! When the soul is present in the ceremony, the cost of creating the “look” in the staging of the ceremony becomes secondary—not unimportant, simply secondary.

The portal to a conscious marriage is a conscious wedding. Both require a conscious relationship, which in turn requires skills. These skills need to precede the design of a ceremony. In this book we will focus in Part One on some of the tools we have found useful. Many of those tools will then work their way into the design of the actual ceremony in Part Two. Our research and counseling with couples has indicated that the wedding provides an opportunity to script what’s most important to the couple. In your life there are mythic moments, which we might call rites of passage, threshold crossings, or points of initiation: meeting the challenges of puberty safely and wisely, the first time you make love, the death of someone close to you, marriages, divorces . . . All are meaningful transition times in life. Our culture has lost many of the rituals for marking threshold crossings. A wedding is one of the few remaining rites. We can use that opportunity to create a ceremony with meaning.

## Defining “Ritual” and “Ceremony”

It’s important to clarify what we mean when we use the words “ritual” and “ceremony”; in many contexts they are interchangeable, but they have distinctions. We use them together in this text, often as “the ceremony or ritual you are creating.” We prefer to deepen the word “ritual” to regain some of its original meaning, related to “rites” and to “spiritual” (“spirit-ritual”). Ritual is often defined as the repeated practices of a religious order; psychologically, it can include the daily rituals of eating the same breakfast each morning or repeating an affirmation every time you look in the mirror; spiritually, ritual means a repeated action that engages both seen and unseen energies.

Ceremony can include many different rituals, and it is its own thing. When you do something ceremonially, you don’t necessarily repeat something you’ve done before. Rather, you invest it with meaning. You notice the subtleties of your senses: what you see, taste, hear, and feel. Color becomes not only a sensory impression but an emotional tone. You notice the nuances of gestures, and often you slow them down so that you can feel them more deeply. In short, you become present to the moment in all of its diversity. You do this because you sense that these experiences have consequences for the depth of your being, and at times consequences for others and the world. A true ceremony matters for the whole world.

This book speaks about reclaiming the depth of spiritual practice and expressing it through a wedding ceremony as well as through rituals you develop in your relationship. When a relationship develops greater intentional depth, it often involves more ritual—the performing of repeated spiritual rites with each other, most of which we take for granted. Many of us don’t have the same allegiance to religious rituals that accompanied many cultures in the past, and yet we do have the right to create rituals and give them meaning. Repeating rituals is what gives them power; repetition is one of the foundations of magic.

For example, we, David and Lila, have a ritual practice in the mornings. It has grown out of many decades of studies, practices, and meditations. It is now uniquely our own. Because we repeat a version of it daily, it has become our morning ritual. It has assisted us in developing our will forces in the relationship; it gives us a container to strengthen the spiritual work we are doing together; and it gathers strength because of the repetition, just like building a muscle by repeating the pump of the weights.

## **Our Story**

We (David and Lila) met after each of us had been married twice before. We were in our mid-forties. We had each reached a point of recognizing that living as a single person would be fine. We had both independently acknowledged that we would not create another marriage unless it was founded on the solid ground of Sacred Union and true partnership. Our coming together has depended on understanding the value of relationship as a spiritual practice. It fits our cosmology and our sense of universal principles, and we have made it the most important element in our life. Because we sense that all life generates from the balance and integration of opposites, we know that our ability in relationship to create harmony, passion, ritual, joy, and emotional support is fundamental to creating anything at all.

Our decision to work together is part of this spiritual practice. We have written theater plays together. We created a community around our property in Boulder, the StarHouse, which relies on spiritual practices and rituals in the course of the seasonal year: solstices, equinoxes, full and new moons. We also spend part of each year in Tasmania, Australia, where we have created an Arts and Wilderness Retreat Center dedicated to connecting with the wild in nature ([MountainSeas.com.au](http://MountainSeas.com.au)).

We each have our own areas of individual expression and creativity, as well as our areas of expertise in the relationship. We have learned to effectively negotiate around the mundane (Lila usually cooks, David usually cleans up—and sometimes we shift roles), as well as the financial, emotional, and spiritual areas of our lives. Our emphasis is on cocreating a fun, functional, and inspiring life together, not on being right or spending a great deal of time in processing our relationship.

## **An Overview of the Value of Relationship**

Relationships are easily the most challenging, promising, compelling, and misunderstood part of our lives.

People are drawn to relate to one another, especially in a one-to-one primary relationship, even in the most extraordinary circumstances. A friend of ours has the job of assimilating refugees from war-torn African countries. She

reports from her initial interviews that, even after her clients have lost everything, lived in horrible conditions on the edge of starvation, and survived a difficult journey by boat from the site of conflict, they tell her, “On the boat I met this guy, and he was really cute. What do you think?” Through thick and thin, in sickness and in health, we are drawn to relationship.

Some people who have died and then recovered report that one of the questions of the final exam after a life is, “How have you learned to love more?” Whether you believe in near-death experiences or not, these reports open an inquiry about the purpose of a life. Because relationship is the way we grow Love at our deepest foundations, we offer this book to create more consciousness in the crafting of relationship, and therefore of Love.

Excellence in any art or craft requires practice. The exercises here will offer you and your partner that opportunity. Whether you are planning a wedding or a simple dedication ceremony, you will find useful tools. You can see these tools in action in the companion DVD, *Couple's Illumination: Creating a Conscious Partnership* (along with its predecessor, *Brain Illumination*). We focus in this book on the design of a ceremony or ritual, and dedicate our work to the pursuit of deeper clarity and expression of Love.

The word “relationship” has in it a genius. The prefix “re-“ means bringing back, or coming back to. The next part, “lat,” comes from *latus*, meaning something you bear or carry. The next part, the suffix “-tion,” confers on the word a thingness, as in a state or condition. You keep coming back to this thing, whatever it is, that you are bearing. The “-ship” part comes from the Proto-Indo-European *skap*, meaning to create or ordain. You create or ordain or recognize a thing that exists within every relationship, and you keep coming back to it. The word itself collects reminders about what relationships are and what their possibilities can be. It also lends itself to the metaphor of a “relation-ship,” a vessel (ship) whose structure and form is intentionally designed to carry you both from where you are now to where you wish to be, as you craft the form of your relating, your creating, together.

In this book, we emphasize the one primary relationship/partnership in your life. However, nearly everything we say here can be applied to the many relationships in the numerous areas of your life. We are interested in increasing your level of consciousness: “con . . .” meaning with, “-scious” meaning to



know, and “-ness” meaning a state—thus a state of knowing with oneself or another. Becoming more conscious means increasing your awareness of that of which you have previously been unaware. When you are conscious, you can make use of more possibilities and not come to regret opportunities missed.

We also want to help you find and create the magic in that great occasion of the conscious wedding, whether it’s your first wedding, your second, your third or more, a rededication of an existing marriage, or a commitment ceremony to a relationship that does not involve legal or religious documents. “Wedding” comes from older words involving a pledge, a covenant, a promise. We will guide you to better understand what a pledge means to your being, and to that of an apparent other.

Some people may say, “Let’s have great music, good wine, all of our friends, beautiful clothing—the rest of the ceremony will take care of itself.” In our experience, “the rest” won’t take care of itself. You have to take care of it. We have found that the wedding’s success and its memorability rely on the foundation of your knowledge of yourself and your partner. The exercises in this book can help you increase this knowledge. Then your wedding becomes an honoring of the beauty of your union, which can bring healing to yourselves, your family, your community, and, honestly, to every living thing.

## **Who Is This Book For?**

- For those planning marriage to which the gateway is a wedding
- For those who want to create a conscious ceremony that represents their uniqueness as individuals and as a couple, and who have not found the full potential of the wedding they envision in the choices available through their religious or cultural contexts
- For those who sense their partnership has changed and would like to mark their recommitment with a ceremony
- For couples who have been through a difficult time and wish to deepen and redefine their partnership

- For those who would like to bring their relationship agreement to an end (chapter 17 deals with “Divortex” as the basis of divorce)
- All of the above, for couples of both heterosexual and same-sex relationships, though we will use the traditional “him/her” pronouns. Just make the adjustments as you need so that the book works for you!

## **How To Use This Book**

There are other workbooks on relationships. What makes this workbook different are the ways in which it can help you to experience your relationship and your wedding as sacred. The short-term rewards of relationship may seem important, but the long-term—and the very long-term—rewards are even more important. In service of this sacredness, we offer the notion that ceremony or ritual can add vitality and depth to relationship.

Toward that end, we invite you to engage actively in this process with each other. Each chapter gives you an opportunity to apply the information in an exercise. It can be highly valuable to do the work together, and bring some of your discoveries into the creation of your wedding, maybe in crafting your vows, or writing a poem together that you will read aloud. This book will help you build a lasting “ship” for the creative passage of the time you spend together.

Our culture has largely lost touch with the power of ritual and ceremony as an enactment of transformation, its stimulation and confirmation. We will help you plan an event that becomes a reflection of the values and vision of your relationship. A ceremony is like the seed of the tree you are choosing to grow—it has all the information in it to get the tree growing in the best way.

Whether you are planning a wedding or wishing to deepen your relationship without a formal ceremony, this workbook will be helpful to you. Committed couples of every sort—indeed, partners in every relationship, no matter what their gender or age—can make the tools and processes in this book into the vessel that will carry that partnering, the relationship, into new territory. Dedicating time to crafting that ship together will support its strength and integrity. Making agreements now about how you will choose to

maintain the ship will help ensure a vessel more likely to weather storms, even to be strengthened by them.

The process we present can—and likely will—bring up difficult places in the relationship that many couples avoid addressing. Our philosophy is that these challenges should be celebrated, as they present an opportunity for expansion. Some have spoken of “relationship as guru,” meaning that the process of relationship is a teacher of your development. Very few experiences will bring us face to face with limitation, denial, exhilaration, and ecstasy as clearly and perfectly!

If you’re already married but find that both you and your partner have changed through the years, you may wish to create a rededication, the focus of Part Three. Much of Parts One and Two will also be useful to you. Or you may simply wish to enliven your present relationship by doing some of the exercises in this book with your partner, to get things going again. That in itself will be rewarding.

We highly recommend that you each buy a personal journal for this work. Use these journals throughout the recommended exercises. What you discover by tracking your own experiences can serve as a basis for your ceremonial design. We recommend that you make a commitment to spend time together on some or all of these exercises, especially if you are planning a formal wedding or ceremony, because you will be cocreating this event. We will respect your individual belief systems, so don’t worry that we may try to coerce you toward any specific design. This workbook will allow you to make choices with full respect for your religious affiliation and what is sacred to you. We simply share tools to help you create a design that will be the most fulfilling given your goals, dreams, and visions.

We’ve designed the book in three parts. Part One, “Creating a Conscious Partnership,” includes tools and perspectives for the crafting of your vessel. The exercises here will assist in making the whole adventure more real for you.

At the end of Part One (chapter 9), we suggest that you work actively together on questions about the foundations of your relationship—whether you are planning a formal commitment or not. Along with these questions, we suggest some exercises that you can use to work on your physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual capacities, sensitizing yourselves to the possibilities of conscious relationship.

Part Two, “Creating a Conscious Wedding,” addresses the logistics of ceremony and preparation. We emphasize the structure of a ceremony that makes space for a magical transformative event that we call the Sacred Moment. Part Two also addresses the details of a wedding and how to put them in perspective. There exist many guides for wedding etiquette—which side whose parents sit on, who pays for what, whom you’re supposed to choose as bridesmaids—and you may need one of those guides as well. This book is dedicated to the often unseen, yet palpably felt, essence of ceremony and communion. We emphasize the creation of meaningful vows and how to sustain your relationship past the wedding. Ideally, these vows, which express the living word of your Love, are woven into your “ship maintenance.” We repeat our vows on a regular basis, because it keeps the focus of our attention on positive creation. You can’t hire out these essential elements to a specialist or expert. Only you can create them.

We also recognize that because relationships are forms, by their nature, those forms will change. Part Three, “Endings and New Beginnings,” addresses the ceremonies of divorce, renewal, and rededication. A healthy couple can bear to look ahead at the possibility of change, and in doing so may be freed from certain fears. Indeed, we recommend the divorce chapter (“Divortex”) for everyone in relationship in order to clear out the past for a new relationship. In addition, more and more couples are finding that after ten, twenty, thirty years or more, the relationship needs to be dedicated anew. Over the course of a life, family structures change, children leave the nest, careers shift, goals change, and visions modify. Again, the power of simple ritual and ceremony can acknowledge and actualize these changes, making them more conscious and therefore more enduring for the evolving future of you and your relationships.

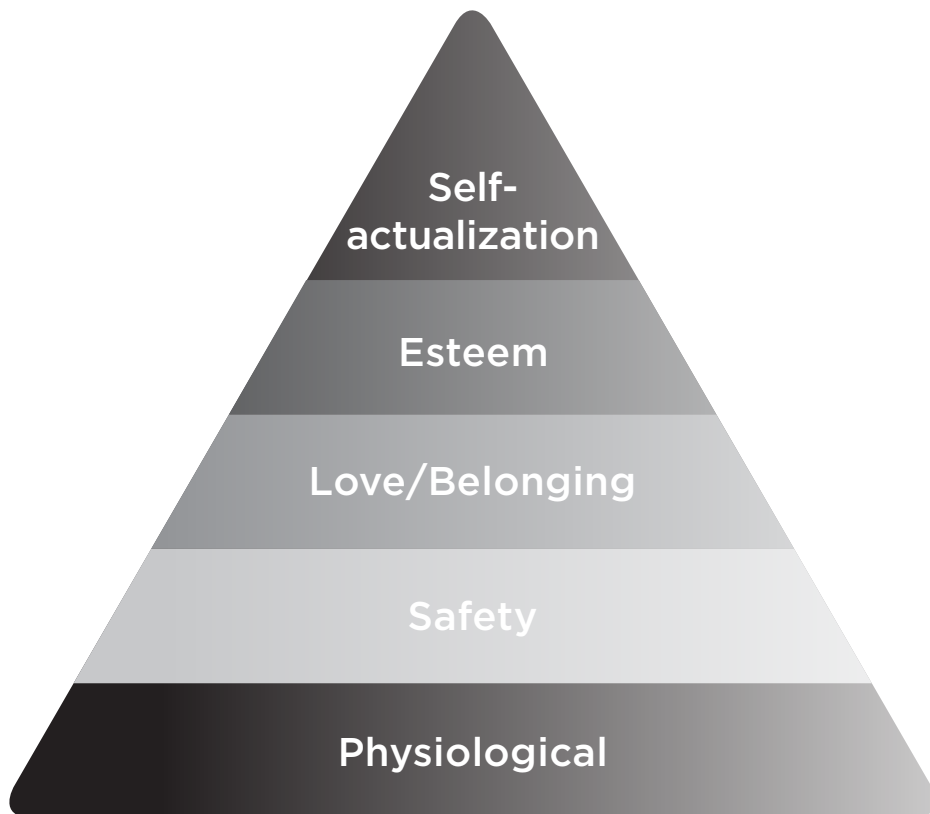
We call this a workbook because it takes work, and leads to transformation. Without someone to relate to, you could easily stay the same. Relationship provides a compelling opportunity to transform.

We believe that the intelligence and spirit that go into creating a successful wedding ceremony reflect the foundation of the whole relationship, which deserves to be well thought out, watered, and nourished. We emphasize conscious weddings in Part Two because they are a sacred opportunity to become more aware, more awake, more present to the spiritual realities that will arrive at a well-designed ceremony.

## Mount Maslow

Our culture holds a subtle prejudice against the sacred, which we ought to investigate. In 1943 Abraham Maslow, a psychologist at Brandeis University, wrote that humans operate according to a “hierarchy of needs”—basics first, then relationship, and finally spiritual needs. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs was picked up immediately in the professional and mainstream media. It was depicted widely as a pyramid, which eventually became known as Mount Maslow.

At the bottom of Mount Maslow lie the lowest-common-denominator items, essential foundations for living. You spend most of your time and energy on these basics. Only when you’re warm and fed can you rise to relationship or, eventually, at the top of the mountain, to “meaning.”



*Mount Maslow: The hierarchy of needs*