



Yitzhak Husbands-Hankin



Marilyn Kalstad



David Jaspers



Johanna Mitchell

The Marriage Makers

Who will knot the ties that bind?

BY ANNA GRACE

It's a mad flurry of decisions; caterer, cake design, floral arrangements. Amid such madness a singularly important question is almost overlooked by many couples: Who will perform the ceremony?

Much more than a choice between a chuppah and the "Hallelujah Chorus," wedding officiants set the tone of not just the ceremony, but the entire marriage. Many require extensive pre-marital counseling and have the experience of working with hundreds of couples as they begin a life together.

For a peek at their thoughts on weddings and the wisdom they have to offer, read on about six extraordinary Eugene-area marriage makers.

CREATING MARRIAGES FOUNDED IN THE WISDOM OF JUDAISM

"Each marriage has a place in the flow of history, beginning with human's first discovery of love and reaching to the ultimate hope of humankind," Yitzhak Husbands-Hankin, senior rabbi at Temple Beth Israel, says.

A Jewish marriage ceremony is rich with symbolism. It takes place beneath a chuppah (a canopy) representing the home. Yet the chuppah is supported by friends and family members, and it has no walls. "A wedding has personal and private elements, joined with communal and public ones," Husbands-Hankin says. It is a prayer service that is as focused on the couple as it is on their supporting community.

The rabbi's view of marriage has changed over the years as society and his faith have changed, too. He does not require that both partners be Jewish, but that "Jewish tradition needs to be the source of wisdom in the home," and that any children are raised with Jewish identity and education. He performed his first same-sex marriage about 10 years ago and believes it is an honor to take part in this historic period.

He likes to meet with couples several times before a wedding and asks each member of a couple to write a letter expressing his or her vision of marriage and how the chosen partner fits into that vision.

Husbands-Hankin says, "Marriage is a fantastic institution," and adds that every marriage increases the love in the world. To all couples getting married he wants to shout, "Mazel tov!"

PREPARING COUPLES FOR THE COVENANT OF MARRIAGE

"People come to us planning for a wedding," the Rev. Janet Scott says with a smile. "We want to prepare them for the marriage."

First Congregational Church has an exemplary pre-marital curriculum, taking three to six months for completion, focusing on expectations, communication and even finances. "We work with each couple separately, as there are different needs for older or co-habiting couples." But, she adds, "Preparing for a marriage should be fun!"

As for the weddings themselves, Scott is open to any type of ceremony. "We rarely do weddings at the church anymore," Scott says, gesturing out the window. "So many people want to be married out of doors. It's

all God's house!" Of utmost importance are the vows. "Saying them out loud, before a community, shifts everything."

For Scott, the blessing of a marriage ceremony is all friends and family that come to celebrate. "Weddings are a magical time," she says.

IN HARMONY WITH THE HEAVENS

One of the most beautiful weddings I have ever attended merged Jewish tradition with New Age sensibilities, painted sparingly with Zen Buddhist overtones and just a touch of childhood Methodism, all done at the astrologically auspicious time of 2:17 pm. Combining diverse spiritual backgrounds into a stunning ceremony was astrologer Johanna Mitchell.

Marriage, according to Mitchell, "is an affirmation of life and a promise to the future. Marriage is the creation of a unique bond between individuals and a celebration of community. It is a prayer for peace."

Mitchell only performs marriages on astrologically auspicious days. "The heavenly bodies that represent love and commitment must be in harmonious relationship with each other," she says. She does not require premarital work, but often people choose to have Mitchell do astrological charts individually and as a couple.

Performing marriage ceremonies that are nontraditional but sacred is definitely a labor of love for Mitchell. She works extensively with each couple planning a unique ceremony. "Marriage is a sacred contract, and the marriage ritual is highly significant."

A MARRIAGE IN THE CATHOLIC FAITH

For some, the ultimate traditional marriage ceremony includes the beauty of a candlelit cathedral, a white gown, a lace veil and stained glass bathing the couple in muted rose and gold tones.

But to Father David Jaspers, a Catholic ceremony is something much more. It is an expression of faith.

"In marriage the two become one ... To do so the couple has to be committed to dying to self so that they may rise as a couple," he says. "It's fun when you see that the couple understands that today is beautiful and fun, but more deeply and more importantly, they are making the commitment to die today so that something new will be born: a family of love."

In the Catholic Church, marriage is a sacrament, right up there with communion and baptism. A Catholic marriage consists of a man and a woman committed to the good of their spouse, the procreation and education of offspring, unity and indissolubility. There are premarital classes couples take, and an expectation that Catholics will marry other Catholics.

Ultimately, Jaspers explains, "Marriage is a reflection of the love God has for his Church; faithful, forgiving, fruitful, sacrificial, loving ... It is a covenantal commitment of three: the couple and God."

DIY PASTORS

You can, of course, rope your friends and family members into marrying you. Anyone, anyone, can go online to the Universal Life Church at www.themonastery.org and become a minister in about 15 minutes. Once ordained, a person can legally perform marriages.

Mike Plavin is an all around good guy; good husband, good father, good friend, wicked good gamer. Eleven years ago he was bored at work and thought it would be a capital joke to become the Rev. Mike Plavin.

That's when the invitations started rolling in.

"It was really cool to do my sister-in-law's wedding," Plavin says. But for better or worse, he performed a beautiful and moving ceremony. "Then some random people who heard about me through a hairdresser called." While Plavin enjoyed performing weddings for a while, he's set his foot down about doing any more, saying, "They take up a lot of time." And he's still feeling a little bad about the 12-minute nuptials at the Oregon Electric Station that ended in divorce.

Lesson learned? Be careful what you say yes to. And stay off the internet at work.

For Marilyn Kalstad, with 12 marriages under her belt, instant ordination had a different outcome. Originally ordained to help out friends, she is at the forefront of commitment ceremonies for gay friends and enjoys performing unique and personal ceremonies.

"Anything we can do to bring peace and love into our world, our community and our relationships," Kalstad says, is her primary goal in performing marriages. The responsibility of marriage is to "not allow your ego or fear to get in the way of experiencing true love." Marriage, she believes, "offers hope through love. We can't do it alone."

THE RIGHT DECISION FOR YOUR WEDDING

The choice you have in who will guide you in embracing marriage are limitless, but it is a choice that will set the foundation of your life together. You can connect a number of spiritual practices, commit to one exclusively or eschew them all together. And you can always call the courthouse (541-682-3653).

But if you want to stay on the good side of our area's officiants, you can avoid their pet peeves. Contact your officiant early in the planning process, before the caterer. "The rabbi really shouldn't be an afterthought," Husbands-Hankin says ruefully. Jaspers gets exasperated with "photographers that don't understand their job is to capture the ceremony, not be a part of it ... especially disappointing when they interrupt the sacred moments of prayer." Scott's only concern are people who enter the planning process with the idea that "This is my day! I want it to be perfect."

"Weddings," Scott says, "are never perfect. There are always surprises."

Universally, all these marriage makers most enjoyed watching the love that flows on a wedding day – not only between the couple, but of all the people who have come to witness the event. "It just tunes me up!" Husbands-Hankin says. "I love to marry people!" are nearly the first words Scott utters on the subject. Mitchell sums up the hope of all by saying, "Marriage is the union that embodies love's exquisite possibilities."

Amen.