A Humanistic Wedding

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Susan and Mark wanted to get married. They knew they were in love and desirous of living together, and didn’t need a wedding ceremony to bless their union. They wanted to share their happiness and joy in themselves and each other with their friends and relatives. Also, they wanted to commit themselves to each other before witnesses. They asked the authors to create and perform a wedding ceremony that would fulfill their wishes. Specifically, they wanted their guests to participate in and collectively experience the love that they were feeling.

At an initial meeting the writers and the prospective bride and groom explored the possibilities of using interactional group techniques to implement a participatory wedding. Our collective exploration of the symbols and meanings of weddings led us to focus on three principal segments of the ceremony. These were the giving away of the bride and groom by their respective families, the giving of gifts to the couple and a public reading of the contract between the bride and groom. The theme centered group method was a natural vehicle through which the various components of the wedding ceremony could be unified. After some discussion, the theme evolved into, “Our joyous rededication to LOVE through the union of Susan and Mark.” At the conclusion of this initial meeting it was agreed that the authors would create a wedding ceremony incorporating the ideas discussed, and the bride and groom would write the contracts to bind their union.

Following is a description of the ceremony as it was used at the wedding.

Setting: Two concentric circles with Susan and Mark in the center. The inner circle consists of all the relatives. The outer circle consists of all the friends. Everyone sits on the floor.
OPENING REMARKS: “Our theme today is the joyous rededication to LOVE through the union of Susan and Mark. It is the wish of the bride and groom that all present experience the love between them, through a sharing and participation in this important event.”

GIVING AWAY BY FAMILIES: “We will begin by helping the families give Susan and Mark away. Each person in the inner circle can do this in the form: ‘Susan (or Mark) the important thing I want you to know about Mark (or Susan) is ................................’ I will start. ‘Susan, the important thing I want you to know about Mark is that he has a sensitive and receptive heart.’”

At this point individual members of the families spontaneously picked up the task and verbalized some personal individual connection to Susan or Mark. When each one had taken his turn we went on to the next part of the ceremony.

GIFT GIVING: “We would now like to give the bride and groom gifts that will enhance their life together. The gift can be either from you as an individual or from your own marriage. I would like to start by giving a gift from my marriage—and that is a lock for your bedroom door. With this you can lock the world out when you need to get away from harassment, chaos and interference, and you can lock yourselves in and find refreshment in your love for each other.”

The gifts given were varied and imaginative. They ranged from “an appreciation of the ridiculous” to “the courage to share difficult times as well as joyous ones.”

SUPPORT EXERCISE: “It is important for the families to be able to support Susan and Mark’s individuation in order to strengthen their union. In order to concretize this idea, we are going to have first Mark, then Susan, fly off this platform and be caught in the outstretched arms of their families.”

Members of the two families were lined up facing each other. First Mark stood on a high platform and flew out and onto the outstretched arms. He was caught and gently lowered to the ground. Susan then flew out from the platform and was lowered on top of Mark. The guests were offered the opportunity to experience flying, and almost all of those present took a turn diving off the platform.

READING THE CONTRACT: “We will now form one large circle with Susan and Mark in the center. Let us all join hands while first Mark then Susan repeats after me the contracts they have written.”

MARK: “Susan, I promise to listen and try to hear. I will try to make every moment a beginning, a beginning based on what we’ve learned together. I will try to ask, not demand. I will try to see your emotions and thoughts, though different from mine, as just as important.”