A vibrant, stylized illustration in shades of teal, orange, and white. It depicts various wedding rituals: hands holding a bouquet of orange flowers, hands clinking champagne glasses, hands exchanging a ring, hands holding a document with a wedding ring icon, and hands holding a slice of wedding cake. Small figures of a bride and groom are on the cake, and photos of couples are scattered around. The central text is framed by a white border.

CRAFTING
MEANINGFUL

WEDDING
RITUALS

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

Jeltje Gordon-Lennox
Foreword by Tiu de Haan

**CRAFTING
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WEDDING
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A Practical Guide

Jeltje Gordon-Lennox

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*To couples everywhere who learn
about and from love today and every day.*

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RITUAL TOOLBOX

LIST OF TOOLS WITH THEIR ICONS



SEVEN DESTRESSING TECHNIQUES



Remedies (Smell and touch)



Hugging (Using touch with others)



Butterfly hug (Using touch alone)



Near and far (Eyes)



Humming (Voice and breath)



Heavenly drum (Ears)



Finger labyrinth (Touch)



PLANNING PHASE



Questionnaire on my ritual profile



Inventory on ritual profile for weddings



Checklist for a wedding ceremony



Who presides?



Prioritizing



Key to the questionnaire
on my ritual profile



Key to the inventory on ritual
profile for weddings



CREATING PHASE



Why and how?



Core values



Two inboxes



Keywords



Composing your vow



Plumbing the meaning



Writing a meaningful text



Just the right music



Small gestures, big impact



Format of the ceremony



Coherence test




REALIZING PHASE



Guidelines for readers



Ritualizing step by step

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FOREWORD

There's a magical shop in a cobbled street in North London where they sell vintage dresses. This is no charity shop, with bountiful bargains and colourful bric-a-brac, but rather a museum of antique artworks which happen to be able to be worn on the body.

There are beaded gowns in metallic hues, hung like shimmering paintings on the wall, kimonos of hand-painted silk adorned with muted birds and faded flowers, a rack of improbably dainty shoes. There is a bowl of satin gloves fastened with tiny mother of pearl buttons at the wrist, a glass cabinet displaying buckles and brooches and a vase of ostrich feathers erupting in regal profusion beside the brocade curtain of the changing room.

Imagine a wedding dress is on display. It is clearly made for a woman born in another era, one where we had to contain our emotions, as well as our bodies, in tighter constraints than perhaps we do today. This dress is stiffened with whalebone corsetry, embroidered with intricate patterns, its fragile threads sewn together by a seamstress whose minute, precise stitches show her deftness and skill.

Now imagine asking if you can try it on, watching as it is lowered from its pride of place on the wall behind the till. Imagine drawing back the sweep of the curtain in the changing room, heavy and thick on its brass hoops, pulling off your jeans and boots, wriggling out of your t-shirt, shedding one era in readiness for another. Imagine taking it carefully from its satin hanger and easing it over your head and shoulders, feeding your arms into its delicate sleeves, worried you might snag its lace, inhaling as you slip it over your belly for fear that you might accidentally force its seams as you do so. Perhaps you ask a friend or shop assistant to help do up the innumerable buttons at the back, arranging its flowing fabric to hang over the curve of your hips.

You turn and gaze at yourself in the mirror. You look like you are from another time, transported by the dress into a bride to be who has

no mobile phone with which to share her outfit on social media, whose innocence hasn't been sullied and whose romantic ideals haven't been shattered by breakups, broken hearts and pragmatism.

You might quite like this new old you. You might even long for a time of formality and decorum, where you didn't have to feel the weight of so many choices. You certainly love the dress. It's beautiful, after all, so precious and so old, carrying in its folds the invisible echoes of the wedding day of the woman for whom it was made. You can picture her young and blushing as she wore this gorgeous garment, then bright with newness and freshly fitted to her form, now carefully preserved through the years for this moment, unimaginable to its maker and original owner, when a twenty-first-century woman would try it on to see if it might just be her dress. The dress. The one that you will wear on what is purportedly the biggest day of your life.

But it isn't quite you.

It just doesn't quite fit.

It is perhaps a little too small, a little too stiff, the boning of the corsetry a little too tight over a body accustomed to the gym and healthy, hearty nourishment. It comes from an era when we were more willing to confine ourselves into straitened roles, more inclined to hold ourselves back and hold ourselves in. It is beautiful, but it is not us. It is not you.

And, as it is with the dress, so, perhaps, it is with the wedding ceremony itself. The wedding ceremony, with its vows so familiar we may feel inured to the full force of their meaning, its expectations of tradition and formality, its bride being walked up the aisle by a father who is called upon to give away his daughter, to a man who is there waiting to relieve her father of his beloved burden and promise to care for her in his stead... All of these traditions may have their own beauty, their own poetry, their own power and their place – but when put all together, they no longer quite fit.

The stays of the old ways dig into our ribs. They are too tight, too constraining. They afford us a sense of the past, which is valuable and worthy, but they restrict our movement, confine our creativity. They demand that we fit our love into the rules of times gone by, using the

expressions of another era, the vows of other men and women. They no longer encompass our expansive world view, our intercultural understanding and our brand new love story, which demands its own telling, its own celebration.

We are too big, too bold, too free and too creative to confine our celebration of the love that is to form the foundation of the rest of our days to the rules of the past. Yes, we can appreciate their beauty and their origin and, yes, we can enjoy their poetry and pageantry, the legacy of the past that brings with it a certain weight, a certain gravitas.

But what if we were free to take the very best of the old and recreate our wedding anew? What if we were liberated to adapt and change the construct of the greatest celebration of love we are likely to experience or at least witness in our lives, and make it our own? And what if we had our very own experienced guide to help us to do just that?

The invitation in Jeltje Gordon-Lennox's book is to bring a new and fresh sense of liberation to this most cherished of rituals. To add in our own emotional needs, our own spiritual beliefs, weaving all the elements together to create a brand new kind of wedding ceremony, one that calls upon the beauty of our ancestry while also allowing us to make it something bespoke and bold, something personal and powerful.

This is a guidebook for wedding ceremonies that can become big enough to encompass our hearts, embrace our complexities and meet our need for independence from dogma. Jeltje is an experienced and versatile guide through these as yet uncharted waters, bringing her creative toolkit to twenty-first-century couples seeking something unique, special and profoundly celebratory.

May each and every wedding ceremony created as a result of this book be suffused with blessings, love and a sense that everything feels like a perfect fit for the unique love story at its centre.

Tiu de Haan
Ritual Designer

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

What couple does *not* want a meaningful wedding? The personalized wedding concept is now a mainstream feature of our ultramodern society. Pressure to make the wedding a totally unique experience for wedding guests is extremely high. Unabashedly, the consumer system arouses desire and feeds expectations for a perfect wedding by fabricating glossy hooks that bond couples to the buying process. Borrowing money to cover the often substantial costs of such an event is one thing. Succumbing to the allure of a wedding centred on alien values may well cost a couple their relationship.

First off, I want to express my gratitude to Natalie K. Watson for her enthusiastic support which led to the publication of three practical guides on creating secular ritual. The team at Jessica Kingsley Publishers admirably rose to the challenge of making accessible this new approach to ritual. After the publication of *Crafting Secular Ritual: A Practical Guide* (2017), which covers six life events or occasions, it was decided that the two main ceremonies in Western societies, weddings and funerals, needed in-depth treatment. This guide deals with wedding ceremonies; *Crafting Meaningful Funeral Rituals: A Practical Guide* will come out later in the year. In particular, I would like to thank team leader Emily Badger, for her ability to keep everyone on track, to production editor Hannah Snetsinger for her good humour and organizational abilities, Helen Kemp for her attention to copy detail, Louise Gill for her skill in clarifying and reproducing my visual world in the layout, Alexandra Holmes for her help with proofreading and publicity executive Lily Bowden for her expert advice. Their patience and close attention to the myriad of details are what turn a manuscript into a book.

My nephew Piet Aukeman deserves credit for wading through an early version of the manuscript. Piet's (im)pertinent questions and suggestions helped me unpack some of my denser ideas. A special thanks to James Peill for stories about life at Goodwood. I am also grateful to Manuel

Tettamanti at the Department of Mental Health and Psychiatry of the Geneva University Hospitals for kindly sharing his research into couple's tensions and conflicts and to Stephen W. Porges and C. Sue Carter for their visionary work on what makes love what it is.

Love and thanks to my children, Sushila and Jefferson, for giving me the physical space I needed to write in our home and for distracting me regularly with silly jokes and photos of their meals and adventures on WhatsApp. I would also like to acknowledge Ian's immeasurable contributions to my life. This year marks 30 years of mutual support in the pursuit of our respective artistic projects.

PREFACE

Congratulations!

Your decision to publicly commit to your partner deserves to be celebrated in a meaningful way and shared with your nearest and dearest. I'm honoured that you have chosen me to accompany you as you craft your unique and meaningful ceremony.

This is how I greet couples who ask me for help in celebrating their union. The ceremony must make sense, first of all to the couple and then to their family members and friends. The practical guide you are holding provides step-by-step support for the creation of an authentic custom ceremony, with or without a professional celebrant.

Few brides wear second-hand wedding gowns, and grooms rarely don fancy dress clearly tailored to someone else's measurements. Yet, when it comes to the ceremony, couples too often settle for off-the-rack or slightly altered wedding rituals. Most are unaware they have a choice. This is particularly the case for fiancés who adhere to no particular religious tradition – sometimes referred to as 'nones'¹ – as well as to those who do not share the same cultural or spiritual practices and of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) couples.

The first wedding ceremony I performed was in a religious context for a couple who told me right off that they were not churchgoers; they just wanted something more meaningful than a civil ceremony to mark their big day. The challenge for me, as representative of the institution, was to meet the couple's need for meaning with traditional rites and ancient texts that reflected neither their convictions nor the basis of their relationship. Needless to say, a ceremony that is not terribly relevant

¹ 'Nones' refers to people who do not practise, adhere to or associate themselves with any religious institution.

to the newlyweds is unlikely to have a lasting impact on them or their entourage. This couple's quest for a spirituality that corresponds to the way they live motivated me to consider alternative ways of ritualizing life events. As time went on, I observed that none of the weddings I performed were for couples who attended worship services.

During this same period, I created my first secular ceremony for my sister and her husband. The couple upped the ante by combining it with a naming ceremony for their newborn daughter and honouring their Jewish and Christian cultures. I was flattered by their request and motivated by the challenge. Nonetheless, I saw it as a one-off event: this kind of wedding was for trendy New Yorkers; it was unheard of in Europe where I lived. As we prepared their ceremony, I realized that – trendy or not – this was exactly what the couples who came calling at my Swiss parish really wanted. What should, or could, I do to respond to these couple's needs?

As a representative of a religious institution I was paid to perform traditional rites, even for non-traditional people. As a psychotherapist I am free to meet people where they are at and accompany them as they find their way. As I saw how effective fitting ritual can be for facing and celebrating the uncertainties of life, my frustration with this ethical quandary grew.

All fiancés, whether they are deeply religious, culturally religious or profoundly secular, deserve a wedding ceremony that proclaims to the world who they are as a couple. Ritual accompaniment should be respectful of the culture and spiritual traditions of each individual, couple and family. This conviction led to a profound shift in my own ritual profile.

Soon after creating the ceremony for my sister and her husband I left my salaried post to craft custom secular rituals for people who need to celebrate their life events, from cradle to grave, with integrity and without the institutional trappings.

Early on, a British couple working in Geneva contacted me to do their wedding ceremony. They explained that, although they would not have minded a church wedding, they did not want to offend religious friends who knew full well that the couple were not practising Christians. Shortly after that, another non-religious couple who practise a kind of Buddhist meditation for two hours every day asked me to help them create their

ceremony and include the bride's children from a first marriage. A couple who were engaged on a pier rented a nearby holiday home so that they would have that same view of the lake during their wedding ceremony. A group of buskers who had impressed them on the street a few weeks earlier heralded the bride's arrival in a motorboat driven by her father. Two years later, we crafted a naming ceremony for their daughter.

RESPECT FOR VALUES

As a secular celebrant I was surprised by my clients' enthusiasm for the creation process and their involvement in identifying the profound values they share. I was awed by the power of ritual to enhance their lives and make them feel happier, stronger and more connected to each other.

A couple from Colorado asked me to help them with their wedding ceremony in Paris. This was a second marriage for both of them. As they moved into their late thirties, they observed that their needs had changed. They were less interested in tradition than in a ceremony that authentically marked their mature relationship and commitment. A recent death in the family made it a poor time for a big celebration. So their friends and family organized small receptions for them in four different states. We crafted a ceremony that suited their need for intimacy and adventure in a quiet corner of a public park. After a champagne toast, the photographer and I accompanied the couple to the most famous sites in Paris for their wedding shoot. The newlyweds were applauded at each stop by busloads of tourists and Parisian well-wishers. Years later they wrote to tell me how the words spoken and the gestures accomplished that day supported them in the different trials they faced.

Ritualizing special events, including courtship and partnerships,² is an innate behaviour we share with the animal world. A male Adelle penguin living along the Antarctic coast will collect special rocks to attract a female he has his eye on. If the rock he presents her strikes her fancy she will use it to line her nest and allow him to mate with her (Peterson 2016).

2 In this context, a partnership is an arrangement between two people, or partners, who agree to cooperate to further their mutual interests by consolidating their relationship. This usually involves a public and exclusive agreement, contract, pledge or vow.

The difference between the Adelie penguin's rock and the engagement ring ritual is that human beings want more from their union rituals than seasonal mating. Human couples expect closeness, meaning and long-term commitment.

In a throwaway society strongly influenced by consumerism, where overconsumption of disposable items is the norm and marriages are notoriously short-lived, couples yearn for rituals they can identify with, that make sense to them and that tend toward long-term commitment. They need union rituals that correspond to their values, that are powerful enough to touch them on their special day and to sustain them as they move together through their daily lives in an unpredictable world.

Working with fiancés on the lookout for 'new rituals' put me wise to a major paradigm shift³ that untethers ritual from religion. Few of us think of ritual as decorative commodities or sports accessories, but the simple fact that Rituals® global lifestyle brand cosmetics and Ritual® hockey sticks in shiny looks and funky colours have sprung up is proof enough of the unsettled place of ritual in contemporary society. Current dissatisfaction with the ritual status quo is not a rejection of traditional rites but a call to reclaim ritual from institutional – and consumer – monopolies. This paradigm shift is not about replicating the conclusions of tradition – in this case, practising rites that confirm bygone notions of the institution of marriage – but about entering into the same problems as the ancients and making the rituals one's own. That is how a tradition remains alive (Crawford 2015, p.244).

THE PERFECT FIT

An authentic ceremony is the key to a successful marriage or partnership. This audacious statement is not about shiny looks, funky colours and mirroring a global lifestyle. It does not promote a perfect ceremony where everything goes to plan. Authentic means that, like wedding garments, the ceremony should be a perfect fit.

3 Scientist Thomas Kuhn popularized the concept of 'paradigm shift' nearly 60 years ago, arguing that scientific advancement is not evolutionary, but a 'series of peaceful interludes punctuated by intellectually violent revolutions'. During these revolutions 'one conceptual world view is replaced by another' (1996 [1962], p.10).

This practical guide is intended as a simple hands-on approach to crafting original rituals for specific situations, people and contexts. It does not tell the couple whether they should marry but helps them express, ritually, who they are together and why they are marrying.

Pertinent questions help the couple concentrate on what is at the heart of their ceremony: What values do we want to convey? How can we transmit them simply and sincerely? What makes sense and feels right to us? Specially designed tools such as *Seven destressing techniques*, the *Questionnaire on my ritual profile* and the *Checklist* keep the fiancés on course while they are creating a ceremony that meets their unique needs.

Those who want a grab-bag of ready-made rituals to celebrate their partnership must look elsewhere. 'Ritual is work, endless work. But, it is among the most important things that we humans do' (Seligman *et al.* 2008, p.182).

Note: This handbook is designed principally for amateur ritualmakers who need to craft a secular ceremony to mark their wedding or partnership. The tools presented here have been forged, tested and tempered with couples and professional wedding celebrants of diverse cultural backgrounds and language groups.

Although it was not originally my intention, I was delighted to learn that the guides can also be of service to institutions in the renewal of traditional religious rites. While I no longer practise formal religion, I admire vital spirituality in all its forms and have great respect for those who dedicate themselves to a specific practice.

This guide may also serve as an aide-mémoire for professional celebrants, but it is not a substitute for celebrant training. If you are searching for a training course, select one that offers personal attention from a skilled instructor, a mentoring system and the stimulation and support of peers. Online instruction is popular now and useful for studying facts. Learning about accompaniment, how to deal with complex situations and preside at real ceremonies, like making love, requires face-to-face interaction.