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THE MASTER OF CEREMONIES

Traditional vows are beautiful, but who wants to repeat what millions of couples have already said? A celebrant can help distinguish yours from all the rest.

Cindy Matchett never imagined that her career as a project manager for a Web design firm would ultimately prepare her to help the affianced of New England experience their nuptials in a personal way. But Matchett's insightful nature and ability to help others get to the core of their vision has moved her beyond launching websites to a much higher calling—officiating at marriages. Now in her seventh year as a licensed celebrant, Matchett offers customized ceremony planning through her company, Meaningful Weddings, and guides couples, both straight and same-sex, through “I do”s that are every bit as tailored as their wedding-day wardrobes. A.E.M.

What does a licensed celebrant do?

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FOR DETAILS, SEE WHERE TO BUY, PAGE 187.

of the different faiths, but we don't represent any one faith in particular. It's really important to us to be very neutral. We call ourselves "ceremony experts" because we know a great deal about the psychology of ceremony, the logistics of ritual, and traditions from all over the world. We can create completely secular ceremonies, very spiritual ceremonies, interfaith ceremonies, same-sex-marriage ceremonies—you name it. It's very important for us to marry people from all walks of life.

What do you offer that a justice of the peace or a minister may not be able to provide?

A lot of the couples that find me say they feel spiritual but not particularly religious. I hear that exact phrase over and over again. Oftentimes they may have grown up in a particular faith but don't feel at home there anymore; or they haven't found a church or temple to join yet, but want more than a simple civil ceremony. So we can incorporate a lot of things that are important to them in a way that's more personal.

The celebrant motto is "Your choice, your voice, your ceremony." What does that mean in practice?

It might sound a little overwhelming at first, because people don't really know what's possible, but it's very empowering. I really work as a friend and an ally to mirror back to couples >>

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what I hear from them. I write custom rituals based on things they want incorporated into the ceremony; then I write a script, send it to them, and they edit it together and send it back. We're creating a work of art together, so they really feel ownership of their ceremony. At the end, guests always say, "That was so *them*," and that's the best compliment.

What advice do you have for the brave souls who are determined to write their own vows?

It takes balance to be humorous and sweet and honest and also keep it reverent. It's still a sacred moment, so you don't want to get too jokey with it. I have a whole worksheet about writing vows, but I often tell people to start like they're writing a love letter to each other.

Is it ever a good idea to do your vows off the cuff?

I would say no, but with a caveat. Sometimes couples approach a ceremony without planning, because they want it to feel authentic and relaxed and genuine. But what we know as professionals is that it takes a lot of planning to create something that looks natural—not difficult planning, just thoughtful planning. So I'd suggest having something [ahead of time], and if you want to go off script, that's fine. It's a shame to just wing it in hopes that it will be sort of quaint, because sometimes that doesn't work.

What's the most nontraditional wedding you've done?

I had a couple who loved to fish and wanted to get married in their canoe. My husband and I actually have a canoe, so we were in one, the couple was in another, and their parents were in two other canoes. We had a ceremony onshore for their guests, and then we went out just a little bit offshore, latched our canoes together, and did the ceremony there.

What should couples look for when selecting an officiant?

They should find someone they're really excited about, whom they trust, who understands them and their values, and who will also be able to make their vision a reality. You should feel really good in your heart about the person marrying you.

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