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Foreword

I got married in the local Register Office: a drab room in a drab part of London with the service – if you could call it that – conducted in a rather perfunctory manner. After it was all over, in what felt like a matter of seconds, I remember thinking, ‘Is that it? Is that what represents the major commitment I have made to someone today?’

The wedding had been organized in something of a rush, and, no, it wasn’t because I was pregnant, but because my work schedule kept getting in the way of longer-term planning. With much to do in a short space of time, we didn’t think to extend the ritual and give it more weight by having readings. I have always regretted not planning the service more carefully and making it more personal. At the time I was struck by how passive the roles of bride and bridegroom are within the ceremony; by adding readings, and perhaps music, we would have been able to claim it as more our own.

From time to time I have been asked to read at friends’ weddings or to suggest an appropriate reading. Inevitably, the same poems and texts come to mind; and it was in searching for something less common that the idea for this collection came about. I have tried to include as many different ‘voices’ as possible; there are no rules as to who should read or how many readings there should be. The bride or groom might decide they want to say something apart from ‘I do’. Their choice would, of course, be different from a reading given by an old friend of the family or a bridesmaid. Nowadays people get married at different stages of their lives and perhaps more than once, so this collection is as broad as possible. Some of the very short pieces are also suggestions for inclusion on a printed order of service.

If you are the person giving the reading, my advice, as a professional actress, is to make sure you know it very well. If it's a poem, that means checking the rhythm of the verse as well as being very clear about its sense. Pick something you are comfortable with. I was once at a wedding where a young girl, with a very simple but beautiful singing voice, had been asked to sing the bride's favourite aria. Her voice was completely unsuited to the scale and range of the piece and the result was . . . well . . . less than successful.

And – crucially – don't forget to speak up. It might seem obvious but I have attended many weddings where I've strained to hear the reading. If it's to be a church ceremony, there might well be a practice before the event – if possible, go to that and test out the acoustics of the space. Otherwise, as a rough rule of thumb, speak to the people at the back. If they can hear you, everyone can. After all, the reading has been chosen by the bride and groom to say something about how they view their commitment to each other. It needs to be heard.

Julia Watson

Love is enough . . .

May your hands be for ever clasped in friendship
And your hearts joined for ever in love

Anon.

