

Reverend Dr. Susan Kennedy of Greensboro, NC has personally developed several wedding traditions (except for The Unity Candle) over the past years, based on a broad knowledge of worldwide traditions, so that each couple has a choice of selecting a truly unique tradition (s). Below she shares their history and significance.

The Unity Candle is a lovely tradition in which the mothers of the couple each light a taper before they are seated. These two flames represent the fact that the mothers gave the gift of life to the bride and groom. Each member of the couple takes the flame that his/her mother lit and uses it to light (at the same time as the spouse-to-be) the center, Unity Candle--which is usually a pillar. This represents the fact that each has left the family of origin and joined together with the new spouse.

Many ministers, after the Unity Candle has been lit, blow out the individual tapers. However, I leave them lit because it is essential that each of them *remain* an individual, as well as being part of "us," this married couple--one must never lose one's unique identity! That's what attracted you to each other in the first place!

For me, as lovely as the meaning is of the Unity Candle ceremony, the downside is that, afterward, the couple is left with a half-melted candle. And I like to give them something more permanent than that as a reminder of the bond and commitment they've made.

Unity Marbles Bowl is a version I developed about ten years ago as an alternative that will give the couple something to keep forever, but also as a tradition that can easily be modified to include parents, grandparents and children. I have many ceremonies designed to include children of either or both the couple, so they will feel *part* of the marriage and new family, and not a victim of it. Starting with the eldest there (grandparents or parents), each is given a small bowl of the flat, colored marbles used in flower arranging. Each person receives different colored marbles from everyone else, because that color represents that individual.

If there are eight grandparents, they are asked to come and pour their eight different colors into the Unity Bowl. I tell them this is because they are literally the foundation of this ceremony; that, without them, we literally would not be performing a wedding! I explain that the color they've added to the Bowl is not what is significant; what is significant is the fact that every one of them is different and unique--because, no matter how long you're married or how long you're alive, your individuality is the spark of God in you, or reinforcement that you are different from everyone else in the world.

Then the (four to eight) parents/stepparents come up, each of whom is given yet a different color of marbles. I explain that, as with their parents, their individuality is essential, but that their marbles also represent that fact that each of them has, in their own unique way, *colored* the life of their daughter or son. As a result, their child has become a unique individual, with specific tastes, ideals, ethics...and that is why their daughter/son knows that the person they are about to marry is the most perfect mate for them in the entire world.

I then mix all these marbles together, and explain that part of the beauty of marriage is that it's not just two people joining; it's the joining of families--and that this bowl full of marbles is now a mosaic, a work of art, which they have created with their very lives.

Then the couples add their different marbles, with the reminder that the most certain quality in everyone's life is change. When change comes and it's good, it's easy to be grateful. But if change seems to be not so good, you can complain about it--or you can ask "what can I learn from this?" and turn it into something positive. And so, every time there is any kind of change in their lives, they are to put their hands into the Unity Bowl and change the design of the marbles. They'll like some designs better than others--and that's the whole idea--we are always given the opportunity to correct mistakes or change our course.

If there are children (or siblings) involved, they are then asked to add their marbles, again noting that this shows they are part of this grand design, part of this family, and that the piece of art literally would not be the same without them.

Also, as years go by and loved ones pass away, the couple will always know that the blue marbles they see throughout their design will always remind them of, say, beloved MeeMaw Phillips, or of Dad... and the longer time goes by, the more precious it is to have a physical reminder of the people you love so much, and who love you so much, who physically added these colors to your Bowl at your wedding.

Some couples who have not had parents there (because they were deceased or some other reason) had every single guest choose a marble or, often, a flat stone of some kind from a tray in the foyer, and have someone assigned to tell them to choose the stone they like best and to place it in the big bowl up at the altar--but we don't tell them why. Then when the wedding gets going, they learn that *they* are the couple's foundation! It's really lovely, especially for second marriages.

Sand While some couples, especially for beach weddings, like to combine colored sand, I try to explain the following. First, the right way to do this is for each person to pour about 1/8 of their sand (let's say one is blue and one is yellow) into the glass jar. This represents their past. Then they again should pour in about 1/8 because that represents their present. But the vast majority of the colored sand that each pours in should be at the end, because that represents the enormity of the future ahead of them.

However, (1) most ministers do not know that the symbolism of why and how they are to have the couples pour in their different colors in those proportions (2) if that bottle ever tips, the whole meaning can be destroyed and (3) most sand, after about 5 years, turns gray anyway. That is why I will perform the Unity Sand if a couple really wants it but I often encourage using Unity Marbles instead. And the large bowl of colored marbles looks gorgeous with light shining through it, or with water and flowers in it or, as one bride did, let her son use it for his Beta fish!

Cambodian Cord. The color red, in Asia, is a sacred color of great joy. There is an ancient Cambodian fable that says, when a couple is born who are fated to be together, they are joined at birth by an *invisible* red cord. As time goes by, as the two get older, the invisible red cord shrinks and shrinks until, at the moment the two are FATED to meet....the cord has shrunk so much that they are standing face to face!

I have some red silk cord given to me in Seminary by three monks who work in the same monastery as the Dalai Lama. I take a length of this red cord and tie a knot in the middle, making a wish for the couple's married happiness out loud. Then I pass the cord to my left and ask each person to tie a knot and make a silent wish for the couple, then pass it to the person next to them. When the last one has tied a knot, that person brings the multi-knotted cord back to me and I drape it over the bride's neck. Thus the couple has a tangible reminder of the loving wishes made for them by everyone who attended, and blessed, their wedding.

Blessing of the Seven Spices. This tradition uses spices to demonstrate the qualities that make for a healthy & well-balanced marriage and has its roots in the Middle East. It is called The Wisdom of the Seven Spices.

I have seven small bowls, each containing a spice. In the Middle East, each spice represents a specific meaning. I ask the bride & groom to hold their drawstring bag so that I may spoon quantities of each spice into it as we go along. I say:

This is Rosemary it stands for prosperity. May it always be part of your spiritual, as well as your material, existence.

Crystals of brown sugar remind you that life at its most basic is always sweet—even if, for a short time, we lose sight of that which is most basic.

Garlic! It will, for the duration of your marriage, keep you safe from vampires. A couple of hundred years ago, this was apparently a more essential aspect of the marriage ceremony than it is today, but tradition is tradition.

This is Savory, which serves to help all aspects of your lives blend together. Savory keeps you on an even keel, even which some individual ingredients in your lives might seem overpowering.

Nutmeg is an aphrodisiac—in reasonable quantities. Just don't overdo it because, if you take too much, nutmeg becomes a narcotic!

The Bay Leaf stands for always having that little extra ingredient that's like a spark between you—even if everything around you is just meat and potatoes.

And, of course, Paprika. Paprika is for passion, and belongs in pretty much every dish. Doing so keeps passion alive, always. And that is, by all means, an essential ingredient!

And now that everyone knows what they all mean, I ask the couple to draw the string to close each bag and each to shake the bag he/she holds. This will create the balance of those qualities that is perfect for each one and each will have a different balance, because both are individuals. According to this tradition, the couple is to place these bags of "personality qualities" under their pillows on their wedding night to join them in their subconscious.

In addition to placing the bags of chosen spices under their pillows on their wedding night, they are also to shake the contents and place them there on each anniversary symbolic of the renewal of their vows. They are to always shake the bag first, because each of us keep changing and the balance in the bag should reflect that. That's why they are to regularly shake the bags, so they reflect the balance each person has as they continue to grow and change.

If business or other events happen to keep them apart on any given night, they should each have their bag of spices with them, shake the contents, and let the spices unite them in their dreams, wherever their bodies may be. Also, if the couple ever has a disagreement and is tempted to go to bed angry—get these spice bags out, shake them, and put them under their pillows that very night! They will remind both of them of the perfect blend for which they must always strive.

And, in between all those events, these two sachets will make their underwear drawers smell really great!

I then ask the groom to place his bag in the breast pocket of his suit. And I ask the bride to place hers in her bodice... within ten minutes, body heat will have her smelling like Thanksgiving dinner, and everyone will want a slow dance with the bride!

Blending of the Waters: The Blending of the Waters has its roots in Buddhism and is inspired by Siddhartha who became the Buddha. Siddhartha grew in wisdom through years of watching the river; he learned that there is unity in all things.

The bride and groom each bring a small jar of water from a place that has had great meaning to that person as an individual, brought great joy, and symbolizes each as an individual growing up to become the unique soul he/she is today.

I bless both these jars of water and then hold a funnel so each can pour his/her jar into a beautiful bottle they've chosen to decorate their home. I then bless the blended waters for several reasons:

1) Since the most constant factor in everybody's life is change, it is essential to a couple's happiness that their attitudes remain fluid. Looking at this bottle will remind them to react that way—to always remain fluid.

2) The lake or river each is made up of millions of separate drops of water, all of which come together to form the one thing that is the Lake or the River. So it is with the bride and groom. Each is made up of countless different influences and factors, and together they create the one thing that is that marriage. Once those drops of water are

blended, they can never again be made separate. So it is with the bride and groom as individuals and as part of a couple married for the rest of their lives.

Als, and certainly as important, picture two branches of water coming together to form one larger one, like the many tributaries of the Nile or the Mississippi. If a small stream encounters an obstacle, it might not be able to get past it and may get dammed up. However, when two join their separate waters, they become like the separate tributaries that feed the mightiest rivers in the world. Something far more powerful than either of them could be alone. The bottle of joined waters is designed to remind the couple that, together, the mighty river made up of separate tributaries can conquer any obstacle in its path. A strong flow of water can flow to the right of an obstacle, to the left, it can flow over it, under it, or even just wear it down.

And the bottle of their combined waters—their tributaries—is designed to remind them that, any time they encounter an obstacle as a couple, they can always find a solution and overcome any obstacle at all.

That is what water is and what water does.

That is what marriage is and what marriage does.

*Reverend Dr. Susan Kennedy spends half of her time custom-writing and performing weddings & other ceremonies, and the other time as a psychotherapist. In other words--& with no disrespect intended--half of her time is spent with people who are crazy in love, and the other half with people who are just crazy!*

*Susan was Ordained as an Interfaith Minister by The New Seminary, at The Cathedral of St John the Divine in NYC, a real brick & mortar seminary w/intensive training in how to minister--not a piece of paper internet ordination. The New Seminary is an affiliate of the United Nations and of the World Health Organization. They teach about virtually all religions and belief systems around the world, focusing on & celebrating the 97% we all have in common. Differences are studied w/the idea of understanding them so they don't become causes for hatred or anger.*

*Part of her training also included learning worldwide wedding traditions. That's why Susan is uniquely trained to custom-write & perform one-of-a-kind weddings--@ 900 so far, every single one different from every other--just like the love each couple shares. With a doctorate in counseling, she's also uniquely qualified to help couples of the same faith, different faiths, cross-cultural and interracial...for Susan, it's all about making couples aware of all they DO have in common & how they can learn, or re-learn, to celebrate their love.*

*Susan has 2 Masters degrees: Spiritual Counseling and Divinity. She has 2 PhDs: Therapeutic Counseling and Noetic Sciences--(which is the science of how people solve problems by thinking "outside the box"). She also has Advanced Training in Hakomi Psychotherapy. For undergrad, she double majored in English and Fine Arts at Colgate University and has had her prose and poetry published nationally and internationally since age thirteen.*

*She and her husband Paul have married almost 34 years. They have identical twin sons who graduated from NC State this past spring and are, thank God, both gainfully employed!*

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