

A freelance wedding that didn't fit my script

The gig seemed fairly routine. Then I saw the parrots.

by [L. Gail Irwin](#) in the [November 22, 2016](#) issue



Thinkstock

It was a freelance wedding, something I usually try to avoid. Weddings are so time-consuming and fraught with anxiety. Why perform more of them than you absolutely have to? But one of the brides was a friend of a friend, and I couldn't say no.

It was planned for a June morning in the spacious backyard of a 100-year-old home. That home was also where we held a series of premarriage counseling sessions, in what had once been the servants' quarters but was now a tiny apartment shared by the couple, attached to the main house where their landlady lived. I would arrive for our meetings after a long day at another job that seemed more pressing, maybe because it paid better. The apartment was an odd arrangement of four rooms accessed through a cluttered mud room and up a few stairs. I always had to wait outside the door at the top of the stairs while two small, barking dogs were corralled. Once inside, I would sit with the couple on barstools at a table covered with piles of

mail and kitchen utensils.

The two women were talkative and had a lot of issues. The meetings always took too long. They were not young and optimistic about marriage. They were not planning to buy a home or raise children or even go on a honeymoon. They were both in their fifties and came to this new arrangement with lots of baggage: one was on disability, the other had so much medical debt she said she never expected to retire. In the background there were problematic adult children, a former spouse, three dead parents, a disapproving brother, a coworker who had sent them a sinister letter, a Methodist pastor who was not allowed to officiate, a covey of people from AA, and one loving mother.

Despite the fact that this was my first wedding involving two brides, it all seemed fairly routine. There were a few anomalies. We had to change the husband/wife language in the liturgy. And once, after they read me the coworker's sinister letter, I had to take both their hands in mine and breathe deeply.

At the rehearsal the night before, I uttered my standard line to the wedding party, "If anyone shows up inebriated tomorrow, I promise I will send you home."

This caused an eruption of laughter. "We're all in recovery," someone said.

The brides worried that I would mix up their names. "I'll be the one in the dress," one of them assured me.

On the day of the wedding, a scorching, humid morning, the brides quarantined themselves so they would not see each other before the ceremony. One was in the attached apartment, the other in the main portion of the house with their landlady. Just before the service was to begin, I was led through the maze of rooms from one bride to the other: from the little kitchen through a short hallway, then through their bedroom and into a bathroom with a second door that led unexpectedly into the living room of the main house.

There, I was surprised to find a spacious, windowed room full of light and comfortable, tidy furnishings. The air was cool. In the middle of the room, the bride stood in a silky white tent dress, curly hair falling around her shoulders. She was surrounded by her attendant, the landlady, and dozens of noisy, caged parrots.

I tried to focus on the bride. She was still orchestrating the last details before the service began. Did she want to say a quick prayer? She did, and we circled up for a blessing. It wasn't easy to tune out the parrots, since they all seemed to be jabbering at once. Their large cages bordered every inch of the place, not only in the living room but in the adjoining den and kitchen, too.

"Do you think we're making them nervous?" I asked of the landlady after the prayer, nodding at the biggest, brightest parrot, which had a large enclosure all to herself.

"Oh no, they love people," she answered. "They're very social." She explained that she took in parrots that had been abandoned by their owners and fostered them until they could find new homes. It was her mission.

Something in me shifted just then. I found myself docked in the harbor of some colorful characters. My usual wedding script was not really adequate for any of this.

But it was time for the ceremony. A crowd had gathered under the tent on the lawn, trying to escape the stifling heat. Somebody sang a Norah Jones tune. I took the marriage certificate with me to the altar and fingered it protectively. The brides entered, one after the other, escorted on the arms of a best friend and a grown son. I read the homily I had written a week before, the same day we learned about the massacre in Orlando.

"Love comes first from God," I said. "It cannot be silenced or threatened or shamed or legislated away." I read from Romans 8: "neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers . . ." The brides listened intently. The sun was burning so fiercely on our faces that we weren't sure if we were sweating or crying or both.

As they said their vows to each other, I noticed for the first time an elaborate tattoo on the arm of one of the brides. A series of little waving banners bore the names of various virtues: courage, compassion, hope, patience. I stared at the words.

The brides beamed at each other. Rings were exchanged; candles were lit. A young woman and her grandmother sang a duet about walking on a broken road. We were all walking on that road—I knew that—but the brides had somehow gotten ahead of me. I was just trying to catch up. It came time for the kiss and then I raised my hand for the benediction. But the congregation refused to stop clapping.

A version of this article appears in the November 23 print edition under the title "Love that can't be shamed."