

Always the minister, never the bride

By [Beth Merrill Neel](#)

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That was going to be the opening line of my stand-up routine, but I got married and never actually tried doing stand-up comedy, so now this great line is reduced to a blog post title.

When I was in my first year of professional ordained ministry, I was visiting a parishioner in the hospital. He was an irascible guy, and he was dying of lung cancer. Once when I went to see him, he was on his balcony smoking. In those days at that hospital, if your room had a balcony you were allowed to go have a smoke. I was appalled, but because I was still so wet behind the ears ministerially speaking, I pretended like that was normal and I saw it all the time.

Anyway, during one of our visits I mentioned that I was meeting with a couple to do premarital counseling with them. He asked how I could be qualified to do that since I had never been married. I replied, with no paucity of pastoral insensitivity and a general lack of human compassion, that I had never died but I was still qualified to do funerals. He was taken aback, as I should have been.

Truth be told, when I was single, I hated conducting weddings. Hated it. Once in a while I would find the groom attractive and I would convince myself that the bride wasn't nearly good enough for him. Sometimes I was so jealous that these people had found love; why hadn't I? And then there was the huge klieg light that shone on me at rehearsal dinners, where I was usually seated with the grandparents and the weird bachelor uncle, and receptions, when I would excuse myself to the ladies' room when it was time for all the single ladies to fight over the lousy bridal bouquet.

I imagine conducting weddings is also difficult for pastors who have been widowed or divorced. Baptisms are painful for pastors who struggle with fertility issues or who have lost a child. I dread my first funeral after my parents die. The intention of the happy couple, or the joyful parents, or the bereaved family is not to rub salt in a wound they likely know nothing about. Because we are professionals, we set our own feelings aside and appreciate the joy that others are having. Sometimes.

Of course, pastors are not the only ones who are required to do things that rub salt in a wound; I don't mean to imply that we are. But for all of us in whatever walk of life we walk, how do we manage to "put on our big girls pants" (as a friend would say), fall into professional mode, get through it—whatever that 'it' is—without bursting into tears? Can we get through it with grace or aplomb?

Some would say their faith gets them through; others would say it's a strong sense of self. Still others would shrug and say they didn't know. But I do wonder the toll it takes if we're not careful or aware of what's going on in our own broken hearts while we engage with the breaking and healing hearts of others. Did I go home from more than one wedding reception to greet my friends Ben & Jerry? Yes I did. Sugar is my drug of choice, but I know others who cope with their hidden heartbreak with booze, or porn, or really mean behavior to strangers or beloveds.

I never cried "uncle." I always steeled myself through the wedding or the baptism or the Mother's Day litany, for better or worse. Most of my pastor friends do. We do because it's part of our calling. Most of my pastor friends join me in detesting that phrase "God never gives you more than you can handle." We don't steel ourselves through it with neat little memes. While I can't speak for all of my pastor friends, getting through those things almost always gave me a reminder of grace and of hope. Grace to get through that ceremony or that reception to then go home, put on my jammies, and watch *Pride and Prejudice* again. And hope that maybe someday I would be up there facing the pastor and not the congregation; I would be in white and not black; I would be taking a ring instead of handing them out.

There's a great clip out there right now from an episode of *Louie* when Joan Rivers was on:

Joan and Louis C.K. are talking, and she says something along these lines. "Listen. I wish I could tell you it gets better, but it doesn't get better. *You* get better." Maybe that's it. We don't all get married. We don't all have kids. We don't all stay married. The people we love don't live forever. That stuff doesn't get better. But maybe, by the grace of God or by sheer will, we get better. Our hearts heal a little, and the scar tissue is a little bit thicker than what was there before. Maybe that's the hope—we get better.

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