

# Handfasting and Wedding Rituals: Welcoming Hera's Blessing

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Handfasting and Wedding Rituals has everything you need to plan the perfect Pagan wedding. You'll find advice and examples to help you with basic wedding planning, writing vows, and ritual construction, along with practical tips and great ideas about everything from low-cost wedding favors to candle and bonfire safety.

Handfasting and Wedding Rituals also includes sixteen full rites honoring a wide variety of Pagan traditions. Rituals in their full form can be used exactly as printed or modified to fit your needs. Each rite is categorized as level one, two, or three depending on their level of overt Pagan content and degree of participation expected from your guests.

Raven Kaldera is a pagan priest, intersex transgender activist, parent, astrologer, musician, homesteader, and the author of "Hermaphroditic: The Transgender Spirituality Workbook" (XLibris Press). He is the founder and leader of the Pagan Kingdom of Asphodel, and the Asphodel Pagan Choir. He has been a neo-pagan since the age of 14, when he was converted by a "fam-trad" teen on a date. Since then, he's been through half a dozen traditions, including Gardnerian, Dianic, and granola paganism, Umbanda, Heithnir, and the Peasant Tradition. He is currently happily married to artist and eco-experimentalist Bella Kaldera, and they have founded the Institute for Heritage Skills.

...'Tis an ill wind that blows no minds.'

Contrary to popular legend, Tannin was not born in a log cabin in Springfield Illinois. She did, however, spend her entire childhood living on the Jersey Shore. It is in this notably non-New Age environment that her interest in Pagan/Occult matters began. Over the past 15 years, she has dedicated a significant part of her life in pursuit of various spiritual arts privately and professionally. Tannin has studied diverse practices and paths such as Gi Gong, Shamanistic energy techniques, Gnosticism, Afro-Caribbean religions, and even a pinch of Ceremonial Magick. Before she opened Bones and Flowers in the of 1997, she served as "Madame Espiritual" to two different Worcester Botanicas, a spiritual counselor in a New Age shop, as well as making countless house calls. At present, the proprietor of Worcester's only occult specialty store is also a crafter in diverse media, and a legally ordained minister.

~chapter 1  
pagan couples

As Pagan clergy people, one of the great parts of our community service work is marrying people. It has been our pleasure and duty to bear witness to couples' commitment to one another, their faces shining with joy and love, before the gods and their community. However, the days or months leading up to that point had often been fraught with a good deal of trial and tribulation for Neopagan couples who wanted to write their own ceremonies and had very little to choose from. There were certainly a number of handfasting rituals in the books of the Neopagan "old masters," and many of those had some truly beautiful lines, but they generally tended toward the same format. We found that the needs of modern Neopagan couples were too varied to resort to one-size-fits-all wedding ceremonies. Some were deep in the broom closet and wanted a

nondenominational" ritual that had Pagan overtones but could pass in front of intolerant non-Pagan family members. Some wanted it openly Pagan, but light-a ceremony that reasonably tolerant non-Pagan guests would find inoffensive and not uncomfortable. Others wanted it Pagan all the way, but with a theme other than the "traditional" format-combining it with semihistorical aesthetics, Tolkien elves, Native American words, science fiction, fantasy faeries, or any number of other interesting ideas.

In some cases, one partner was Pagan and the other practiced a different religion that they wanted incorporated into the ritual. These couples usually felt that it would be easier to incorporate Jewish or Christian imagery into a ceremony performed by a Pagan clergy person than to attempt to push Pagan ritual into a more conservative church or temple structure, and they needed inspiration.

Then there was the problem of nontraditional marriages. Although queer weddings are certainly not disallowed in our faith, there was little attempt to create ceremonies for nonheterosexual couples (one exception to the former was Z. Budapest's lesbian wedding tryst in *The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries*), and none at all for polyamorous group-weddings.

We've found quite a few books on the market that contained build-your-own wedding materials-pieces of texts and invocations-but they were all geared toward a Judeo-Christian world. It can feel unsatisfying for many couples to simply change "God" to "Goddess" half the time, and go from there. We have had couples turn to us confused and frustrated when they were told they would, in essence, have to choose from a few similarly formatted rituals or create their own from scratch. "I asked the High Priestess who was going to perform our ceremony if there was a reference book we could buy on the subject, and she laughed!" was one dejected groom-to-be's comment.

*Handfasting and Wedding Rituals* is that reference book. Even with all the rituals -whole and in pieces-that you'll find in here, nothing may suit you exactly. That's all right. Feel free to mix and match, pull out a vow here or a circle casting there. Maybe only a few lines may inspire you, but if they spark you to write the words that you really need, then this book has done its job.

You will find all the rituals and ritual segments in this book labeled with level 1, level 2, or level 3. This denotes the level of obvious Pagan content. A level 1 ritual can be performed in front of non-Pagans to whom you do not wish to explain your religion. These rituals are a way to incorporate subtle Pagan aesthetics into your wedding and still be "stealth," if that is what you require. No deity names are invoked in these rituals, and they can be passed off as fantasy or folk tradition. Level 2 rituals are "Pagan Lite"; they may invoke deities, but they do not require the guests to have any knowledge of Paganism, and they don't contain activities that might upset most non-Pagans. Level 3 rituals are for the hardcore Pagan couple who are not concerned with the shockability of their audience. Deities are invoked repeatedly, in all their glory, and no attempt is made to lighten the tone.

getting started

Have your ceremony planned out as far ahead as possible. You, your clergyperson, and the participants may find it much less stressful to have copies of it months ahead of the wedding date so as to be familiar with it when the time comes. When Raven and Bella married, their complex ritual was put on paper literally two days before the wedding date, and poor Tannin, who was marrying them, only got handed the final copy an hour beforehand, and she stumbled through the complicated wording as best she could. Be kind to the people who are helping you make this day special, and give them plenty of time to get familiar with it and not make fools of themselves-or you.

You will also want to think about how long you actually want your rite to be. Once you've decided on the wording and plan of action, do a walk-through with people reading the parts and making the motions (this doesn't have to be the actual people who are in the ceremony; you can find friends for stand-ins) and see how long it takes. Take note of how your vows sound. The vows that seemed perfect on the page may be wrong or awkward when read aloud. Remember that juggling props like chalices and knives and scrolls and cords takes more time than you might think, and candles can suddenly refuse to light. Don't keep people standing in a circle for longer than half an hour, and provide chairs for the elderly or disabled and those with small children. Don't rush through it, either; slow is better. People are actually going to want to hear what's going on. With this in mind, if it reads as an hour in a simple rehearsal, it's going to be an hour and a half in real time, and you might want to shorten it.

We've found, by trial and error as Neopagan clergypeople, that anything under twenty minutes feels too short for people who may have come a long way to watch a ritual happen, and anything over an hour and a half can be too long for an audience to remain focused. Also, the more people present, the shorter the ceremony should be. (We've found that the more people in a crowd, the shorter the attention span of everyone in it.) Use the above time guideline for a crowd of fifty onlookers, and subtract a minute for each additional person until you get down to an hour, and then subtract a minute for each two additional people. If you have a really big crowd, keep it at about half an hour. If it's an elaborate ceremony, practice with props and restrictive costumes in advance. Don't overschedule things to do; for instance, one couple wanted to plant a tree as part of their ceremony, but someone pointed out to them that they would both be clad in flowing silks and probably didn't want to go digging holes and shoveling dirt in their expensive and fragile outfits.

Rehearsal also helps with estimating space. Sitting people take up more room than standing people but are less comfortable. Any kind of dancing, musicians, or even ritual walking about or gesticulating requires room. If you are going to use friends to call the quarters, make sure that they have four clear spaces to move to without pushing people aside. Also, make sure the props are appropriate for their users. We know of one very small priestess who was asked by the groom to cast a circle with his five-foot claymore, which she found in midritual was too heavy for her to lift and dangerously sharp, as well. She had to draft a helper to hold the tip up and walk around her in a circle while she staggered under the weight of the hilt.

You may also want to think about the problem of volume. If there will be two hundred people present in an outdoor area, will everyone be able to hear you? If they can all hear you, will it be so loud that it disturbs the neighbors? In this day and age of portable sound equipment, it's easy to miscalculate the noise level, and, onversely, unamplified voices are not as loud and distinct in the open air as you think.

The religions of relatives are often a touchy subject in Pagan handfastings, especially legal ones. We strongly warn against using your wedding as your coming-out-of-the-broom-closet statement. It's akin to inviting your parents to a drag show you are starring in as your way of telling them that you're gay. It's far more respectful, and safer, to talk to them about it beforehand. One bride, the daughter of fundamentalist parents, sent them a very Pagan-oriented invitation, and then explained the situation over the phone. She said, "If you're not comfortable with this, I respect that, and I'll understand if you can't make it. If there's something that I can do to make you more comfortable, tell me, and I'll decide if it's workable."

Respect aside, you should never assume that the public nature of a wedding will keep people on their best behavior. We've seen terrible outbursts at weddings from disgruntled relatives. It's better to make sure that everyone knows everything beforehand and that there are no surprises. This also goes for relations who are currently feuding. If you just can't bring yourself to talk to your family about your religion (or any potentially explosive family situation), then maybe you should either talk to a therapist about it or else not invite them. Some people actually hold two weddings, a secular one and a spiritual one, or they hold weddings with different guests, in order to make everyone comfortable.

For that matter, if any of your guests may be uncomfortable with any part of your ceremony, let them know about any unusual activities on the invitation. If you're expecting people to participate in something (more actively than watching, anyway), let them know this as well. It's best not to surprise anyone with a ritual role on the day of the wedding; let them know well beforehand. And even if you have designed your ceremony for the maximum number of active participants, please make room for guests who are shy, uncomfortable, or don't feel well and only want to watch.

And speaking of respect, it's important also to respect the venue. Don't hold your handfasting on a site where you don't have permission to be. Even if it's a "deserted" space such as a quarry or overgrown lot, someone may own it. Public areas usually require permits of some sort; this includes cemeteries, parks, and the town green. It's a bad omen to have the police break up your handfasting. On the other hand, forewarned police officers (or forest rangers, etc.) can be allies in keeping interlopers out of your space, or reassuring neighbors that this is "only a wedding."

If you do get permission, make sure you understand the regulations set by the owners, and be prepared to follow them to the letter. Do not bring items to the ceremony that are illegal in certain public areas. Things like fire (including tobacco and incense), weapons (edged or otherwise), animals, video or flash cameras, alcohol, bloodletting, and food and beverages can all be illegal in public places. Certain types of entertainment may also be questionable.

such as "fortunetellers," which includes any kind of diviner, since in some towns these activities are illegal under panhandling laws. When in doubt, check with the local authorities. If you must have these things at your ceremony, make arrangements with the owner of a private site. It's better to pay a little extra money than to be publicly humiliated.

Plan to bring a cleanup crew, and leave your site clean. In times of ecstatic celebration, it's easy to forget the rules of common courtesy. Plan for that cleanup period, even if it only consists of a site check. You might try designating one friend (preferably someone willing to stay sober) who will do a litter and lost-and-found patrol after the guests have left.

The "wonderful wedding experience" usually doesn't come about without a whole lot of careful planning. There are books available on general wedding etiquette, catering, reception issues, and so forth; we've touched on only those problems that are particular to Pagan handfastings. However, despite all the complexities of preparation and arrangements, the united efforts of the couple, the clergyperson, and assorted friends and family can result in the most wondrous and inspiring memory of a couple's lifetogether. That's why we keep on performing them, time after time.

#### Other Books

SORGA BAGI SI BUTA [Paradise of the Blind].

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