

Vows at a humanist wedding

Humanist wedding ceremonies focus on a personalisation of content. Humanist celebrants work with their couples, often for up to a year, to find out exactly what getting married means to them both. Each marriage script is created around a couple to express specifically their hopes and intentions and to understand how they arrived at the point of getting married in the first place. As such, every word in a humanist wedding ceremony counts and is specific to the couple involved.

When a couple aren't holding themselves accountable to a deity, what they find themselves doing instead is holding themselves accountable to the people they are making their public declaration in front of: their friends and family, their support network, their community – in short, people whose opinions matter to them and who have their backs. So, throughout the process, celebrants often find out a lot about who the couple's guests will be. Guests are important too.

With this in mind, personal vows within a humanist wedding ceremony carry an added weight. They belong uniquely to the couple, specific to their marriage alone and thus not as easy to prescribe as traditional pre-scripted wedding vows.

Developing personal vows can prove to be an invaluable exercise. It requires two people to sit down and consider how to identify and distil what is most important to them. It is vital to carefully think about what promises and statements will stand the test of time, and will be able to bend and shape-shift according to life's inevitable twists and turns. They need to be statements that will still have meaning in five, ten, or fifty years' time as perhaps careers change, locations alter, children come and go, passions and interests emerge or disappear, and trauma or loss alter a dynamic.

So it is important for a couple to think about what it is that they really mean to each other: What are their strengths and weaknesses? How do they support one another? What do they need from each other? What do they delight in? What words do they hope to stand by? What can they realistically promise another human being?

When they make vows like this to one another, they are also creating a safe place for them to return to when the going gets tough – words that can help hold them steady and can be remembered when all else fails, what promises

they started out with. A strong foundation can help a couple to cast all else aside and find where to start again from should they need to. They should also be the words they are delighted to celebrate every single year as they acknowledge themselves standing by them. In some respects they are the gift they can give their future selves.

As such vows are so personal, it can be quite difficult to share examples. However, here are some vows that I think represent intent and realistic expectation: 'I choose to take you as you are, loving who you are now and who you are yet to become'; 'I promise to listen to you and learn from you, to support you and accept your support'; 'I will celebrate your triumphs and mourn your losses as though they are my own'; 'I will love you and have faith in your love for me, through all our years and all that life may bring us'; 'When you ask me for advice, I will counsel you as best I can, and support you in whatever decision you make.'

Couples are also free to add in some statements that they know add to or create the twinkle in their eye for one another. This should be celebrated just as much. I have heard vows that include 'I love you because of the way your name looks when it's written down and how great it sounds when I say it aloud' and 'I promise to never ever interfere with the BBQ, and to never put cream on your crumble, because I know you hate it so'. These aren't flippant; they are a celebration of the individual, the brilliant oddness of love, and the ways in which we really learn to know a person – all of which should be embraced.

In conclusion, when a humanist wedding ceremony states that the content is important, it really does mean *all* of the content. There should be no echoey, hollow phrases repeated simply for tradition's sake. Words should mean something to the people who are saying them, and never more so than in the vows used to declare a couple's marriage. It shouldn't be a frightening experience to write personal vows, but rather a nourishing, helpful, and enlightening experience, which can be delighted in for all the years that follow.

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