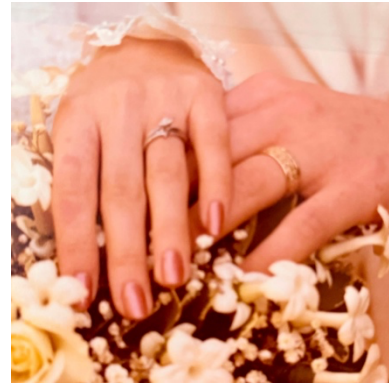


## The Unbroken Circle: Weddings and Symbolism

Bruce H. Campbell

Everything at our wedding was designed to have great meaning and symbolism. Each element was intended to be an icon for our future. We were young, only slightly on the other side of that time in life when magic and reality overlap in curious and astonishing ways. Surprising moments still occur of course but, at 71, I am usually too myopic and oblivious to notice when they do.

As our wedding approached, we sought the perfect rings. The ones we would select would signify to the world and to each other the circular, unending nature of time and our everlasting commitment to one another. Our rings would reflect our unique and wondrous relationship. They would show the unbreakable and outrageous ties binding us until our deaths at some unimaginably distant and misty point in the future, far, far too remote to be recognized or seriously considered.



To explore and solidify our unique relationship, we found a jeweler in the local mall. We selected bands with a woven gold pattern from the stock images in the jewelry catalog. The pattern was symbolic but, in the end, hardly unique.

Kathi's diamond was small. Because our budget limited the size of the stone, the jeweler suggested an unusually elongated marquise cut. The stone was narrow but pretty. For safety and convenience, Kathi intended to wear her gold band to work and wear the diamond the rest of the time.

The wedding day—September 8, 1979—arrived. My groomsmen and I wore tuxedos with a slightly off-white shade we believed was attractive yet still represented the symbolic purity of the day. Kathi carried a bouquet which included a sprig of ivy which we later carried with us as we moved around the country. Floral arrangements and decorations were chosen. Everything had meaning and no opportunity for a symbolic message was overlooked.

Mabel Briggie Campbell Iles, my 85-year-old grandmother, attended our wedding only because my Uncle Ralph drove her the 500 miles from southwestern Missouri to northern Illinois. At that point in her life, she was a shadow of her former self and living in a senior center a few miles from the family farm. She likely heard or understood little that day, given her profound deafness and fading memory. Had she been able to share her experiences, she would have told us about her own simple wedding as a 17-year-old country girl in 1911, wearing a



simple, dark, practical dress. She would have explained that since they had married in the middle of harvest season, everyone immediately went back to work in the fields. Today's wedding-industrial complex—with its high-stakes, consumer-driven, debt-inducing ceremonies—did not exist back then. As far as I remember, nothing—symbolic or otherwise—carried forward from her wedding to ours.

Our rings were blessed and exchanged. They were admired and photographed, representing the first moments in our lifetime together.

The everlasting symbolism conveyed by the various elements of our wedding was maintained—briefly. Kathi, who was working as a nurse in the pediatric intensive care unit at Rush-Presbyterian-St. Luke's Medical Center in Chicago, washed her hands dozens of times each shift. The constant cleansing and drying left a rash underneath the wide, gold wedding band, so it was soon relegated to a dresser drawer. She replaced it with a thin, inexpensive band. The skin of her hand appreciated this practicality, although symbolism suffered.

Happily, I was able to wear my wedding band to work. While in the operating room, I attached it to the string ties of my scrub pants and almost always remember to retrieve it before tossing my scrubs in the hamper. On those few occasions where I forgot, I was able to get it back. I was not so fortunate, however, when I removed it one winter day while exercising at the YMCA. At some point, the ring slipped out of my gym bag. I retraced my steps several times but never found it. Because the band had been ordered out of a catalogue, I was able to procure an exact duplicate. Not the same I guess but, somehow, the same.

Kathi's diamond, because of the unusually elongated cut, eventually cracked in two. A new jeweler replaced it with a more traditionally proportioned stone and was surprised the first diamond had lasted as long as it did.

Over the decades, the forever symbols of our relationship, one-by-one, were lost, broken, or replaced. Our parents and many of their friends who attended and celebrated our wedding died. Our wedding photographs faded badly and our off-white tuxedos became dazzling white. The saved decorations disintegrated. Even the ivy from the wedding bouquet eventually turned yellow, wilted, and died.

Forty-six years after selecting those ephemeral symbols of eternity, we carry on with new rings, a wonderful family, and plenty of living houseplants. Grasping hold of the symbolism turned out to mean less in the long run than the value of the imperfect memories, the perseverance, the love, and the actual day-to-day lived ordinariness of married life. The circle itself, happily, remains gloriously intact.



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