

# ORDINARY



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Andrew Morrell

## ANDREW MORRELL CAPTURES SLICES OF EVERYDAY MATRIMONIAL JOY

BY AMANDA ARNOLD

No one was more surprised that Andrew Morrell would enjoy photographing a wedding than Andrew Morrell.

It was 2006 and Morrell had just undergone a huge career shift. He'd worked in public radio for years, climbing the ladder from station to station to what felt like the pinnacle—program director for NPR's new satellite radio service division in Washington, D.C. Within six months of making the move, the division was scrapped, and Morrell was out of a job.

After working at a station in Ann Arbor, Michigan, he accepted a position at a local station in Cleveland, Ohio. As he perused images of Cleveland real estate online, he noticed something: The photography was abysmal. "I was like, Oh, is that the toilet house, or is that the garbage house?" he laughs. "The photos were taken by real estate agents who knew nothing about photography." The radio job



in Cleveland wasn't a good fit and Morrell was burned out. So, he left public radio for something the community clearly needed: good real estate photography.

## TRANSFORMATION

By partnering with agents, Morrell built a successful real estate photography business in Cleveland. In the meantime, the inevitable happened: A couple of former co-workers from the station asked if Morrell would be interested in photographing their wedding. "I was like, 'Not at all, I would not,'" he laughs. "I was trying to get away from people." A self-described introvert with bouts of major depression, Morrell was perfectly content with the solitude of photographing houses and editing the images in the quiet of his own home.

Another friend asked. "She said, 'Listen, you can shoot it like you shoot houses.' I'm like, *What does that mean? How am I going to shoot a wedding like I shoot houses?*" She even offered to rent the appropriate photographic equipment for him to do the wedding. He said he'd consider it.

When yet another former colleague inquired, Morrell finally gave in, telling himself it was practice. When he walked into the family's home in June 2006, he was terrified, he says. So, he just started making photos.

"I started shooting to protect myself," he admits. "I put the camera up to my face and started shooting, I guess because that way I didn't have to interact with that many people." As the event wore on and he reviewed his work on the back of the camera, he realized he liked what was happening.

That's when a transformation began. Morrell, the introvert, took the camera down from his face and began to take on the wedding photographer personality, he says. "We all know that wedding photography is 50% the

work and 50% the personality. And I became the personality"—the gregarious, friendly, part-of-the-family kind of guy. "I don't know where that came from." But it felt like a million bucks. "I thought, *This is where I'm supposed to be.*"

In the past, Morrell had shied away from photographing people because he'd perceived it as intrusive. But as a hired contractor with a job to do, he felt permission to engage. "I think that sort of overarching sense of permission allows me to interact with people even above and beyond how I would normally do it," he says. "It's a bit of an act, a bit of a performance."

People think you have to be an over-the-top extrovert to be a wedding photographer, says Morrell. But as a self-described hermit whose primary goal is to "never leave my house ever," he says he's living proof that introverts can succeed at it. And clients love him: 95% keep in friendly contact long after their wedding day.

## SERIOUS IMPROVISATION

Morrell's ideal wedding client is relaxed, artistic, and values creativity over fads. "I detest trends," he says. "Pop culture, no thank you." If a potential client asks him which wedding colors are currently trending, he knows they may not be a good fit.

What Morrell prizes most is connection. In public radio, broadcasters are trained to read the news as if they're speaking to one specific person. That personal touch is how Morrell communicates with clients via his website as well as during the lead-up to their event. That includes discussions about the investment, which he stresses is important to talk through at the outset. The approach he uses with clients, he says, is: "I will make it work for you."

Morrell's communication style even extends to being open about his depression with clients. Such



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honest rapport before the wedding pays off when the couple trusts him enough to ignore his presence on their big day.

“Ninety-nine percent of what I do has nothing to do with people addressing the camera,” he says. It’s about facilitating a reaction between two people who love each other. A longtime jazz musician, Morrell equates his approach to the concept of spontaneous composition: “That is how I see my role at weddings. I don’t have any go-to. I don’t have any pattern. I don’t have a playbook. I deliberately go to weddings with as little information as I can. ... I take improvisation very seriously.”

The key to capturing a great

wedding image is to identify an interesting background, position himself to photograph that scene, and wait for people to populate it, he says. “If the scene behind them is abstract enough, interesting enough, the people will do their job without them even knowing they are doing a job, which is just to make the human condition present and to be themselves.”

#### SPECTACULARLY ORDINARY

When asked which weddings stand out, Morrell offers a few stories: At one barn wedding, he says, a massive storm knocked out the power as the walls of the structure heaved in the wind. “It was terrifying for a few mo-

ments. I thought we were going to die.” At another wedding in Costa Rica, which took place at the foot of an active volcano, the volcano erupted during the ceremony, releasing a puff of smoke.

And there are bittersweet stories. At one wedding, the groom’s dad was feeling ill before the ceremony and couldn’t make it to the site. To watch the nuptials, he FaceTimed in, and at the end of the ceremony, the bride and groom leaned into the phone to wave hello as a newly married couple. “I caught that photo,” says Morrell, and two hours later, the father unexpectedly passed away. “They didn’t know that was going to happen,” he says. “But Dad be-

ing present at the ceremony was reflected in this one shot. That, for me—that right there—is the value of wedding photography.”

For the most part, the weddings Morrell photographs are filled with the everyday drama of human emotion—“nothing spectacular other than the spectacular shimmer of ordinary people.” The glances between two people who love each other, “you can’t recreate that,” he says. “You can’t fudge that stuff. When two people are looking at each other and they connect, you can’t act that.” It’s what makes wedding photography so rewarding, he says—that there can be so much magic in so much ordinary. •



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