My husband and I live in a small town in the eastern foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. We enjoy road biking there. Our favorite ride is a loop near our home that is about 22 miles long. We see many more cows than cars when we do that loop—one of the perks of small-town life.

The interesting thing about riding the loop is that the perspective and the experience of the ride vary dramatically depending on whether we’re riding clockwise or counterclockwise—even though it’s the same journey, the same elevation gain and loss, and the same starting and ending place. When starting the loop in a westward direction, the vista includes a river, country farms, barns, and meadows—all with a majestic mountain backdrop. In stark contrast, the view eastward riding that very same stretch of road shows very little vegetation, dilapidated buildings, an oddly edited traffic sign, and several unsightly junk heaps.

Using this bike loop as an analogy for the journey through life and a career, how can a person keep a perspective of the beautiful, the appealing, and the enjoyable? How can a person avoid dwelling on the junk heaps and the unsightly things and thus make the ride a joyful experience? I want to share with you today my best thoughts and some experiences that help answer these questions.
How to Enjoy

Choosing to Love in Life and Career

Ride
M Y S T O R Y

I graduated from BYU Law in 1986 and then took and passed the Nevada Bar in 1987. For the next 20 years I practiced very little law—some years not at all, other years just a few hours a week researching and writing for other attorneys. I completely enjoyed being a mostly stay-at-home mom, but I looked forward to beginning a real legal career when the time was right. In 2009 I began a 12-year stint on the local school board, motivated by my belief in education as a critical foundation for happy, strong individuals and families.

In the summer of 2006, 20 years after I graduated, I felt the time was right. Our youngest child was starting middle school, and I felt I could begin at least a part-time job with minimal impact on our family if I organized everything just right. I would be tight on time, but I could make it work. I was excited for a new venture.

Then I got a phone call from the high councilor in our stake assigned to seminary. In our area, the class is held before school starts—early. The high councilor wanted to meet. In the days leading up to the meeting, I feared, I dreaded, and I agonized. I hoped it wasn’t what I thought it was. But it was. I have to admit I was not gracious to the high councilor. I made him come back a second time. I guess I hoped that the inspiration would change. But it didn’t.

I don’t know everything about what it means to “love God with all your might, mind and strength,” but I’m pretty sure it at least means that when you’re called to teach early-morning seminary and you reasonably can, you do. Conforming my plans to those from a higher source was a painful process. I expected the hours required to teach seminary—and do a good job of it—would eliminate for me any possibility of working in the law. With concerted effort, I worked on my attitude and accepted the calling.

Contrary to my fears, my life did not end when I started teaching seminary. Six months into it I found I had hit my stride. That February, while attending a national school board conference and riding up a huge, two-story escalator, I heard a faint voice calling my name. I turned toward the down escalator and saw a board member from a neighboring school district.

He said, “Wait at the top!” He ran down the down escalator and over to the up. When he caught up to me, he explained that their general legal counsel of many years had just walked out. Their district would be requesting proposals for the position. He urged me to submit a proposal.

I did, and a few months later I found myself with a legal career.

Dean Gordon Smith has encouraged you to cocreate your path with God. I am thankful God waited while I caught up to Him in creating my path. My work allows me to represent a cause I believe in, which is a much more enjoyable ride than just working for a paycheck. I have nearly complete flexibility working as an independent contractor, so I can fit in family, friends, and service. There are many Law School alumni who have more visible and prestigious careers than I have, but success comes in many different packages, and I am very grateful for and happy with mine.

L O V E G O D

The position I have has been perfect for me—vastly superior to any I was considering the previous summer—proving that God will make more of you than you will make of yourself if you turn your life to Him and that sometimes the scripture “seek ye first the kingdom of God . . . ; and all these things shall be added” is literal.

Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf provided a contemporary iteration of that principle: “The two great commandments are the target. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. As we accept this, all other good things will fall into place.”

Of course, these two commandments come from Christ, who was asked by a lawyer:

$\text{Master, which is the great commandment in the law?}$

Jesus said unto him, $\text{Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.}$

$\text{This is the first and great commandment.}$

$\text{And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.}$

You have heavy concerns: 1Ls may be hoping for excellent grades, or maybe even just passing grades; 2Ls, along with being concerned about grades, have a heightened worry about summer placement; and 3Ls are anxious for jobs—the first job out of law school seeming to lay the foundation for careers. Perhaps you worry about how to balance family, school, church, and work. Perhaps you worry that you’ve somehow ended up in the wrong place, that law school was a mistake for you.

I say to all of you: You are in the right place! Skills learned in law school will bless you and others in your life, both in and out of your career. Everything will work out. You will succeed. You will find jobs, whatever your grades might be. Your journey through life and career will have unexpected turns. You can’t see the end or even the middle from the beginning, but every turn will have wonderful views when you love God and your neighbor. With love in your heart, you will have a scenic, beautiful, and enjoyable ride.

L O V E Y O U R N E I G H B O R

The second great commandment requires that we love others, even our enemies and those who are not good to us. This commandment doesn’t require a warm, cute-puppy affection for people in positions adverse to ours, but it does require a feeling of charity for all. The Bible Dictionary defines charity as “the highest, noblest, strongest kind of love, not merely
When we struggle to find love for others, we can borrow some of His. 

Sister Neill F. Marriott explained, “The Savior’s Atonement is a conduit for the constant flow of charity from our Father in Heaven.” Charity requires, as Elder L. Whitney Clayton described, that our actions as attorneys “be drenched with the spirit of genuine Christian goodness.” Charity means we do good to those who hate us and pray for those who despitefully use us.

Before practicing law I used to wonder who would ever despitefully use me, but now I know. Some years ago the school district that I represented had a teacher with a long discipline history of significant mistreatment of students, mostly involving anger management problems and use of racial slurs. The district determined that under the collective bargaining agreement, he had had enough chances, the requirements of progressive discipline had been met, and he would be discharged. The teachers’ association disagreed. The matter went to arbitration.

I had heard that the opposing counsel in this matter was difficult to work with, and I thought I had steeled myself for his shenanigans. But nothing prepared me for what I encountered in the arbitration hearing. arbitrations are not like trials, where the parties, the attorneys, and the judge are several feet apart. At arbitrations everyone sits at the same table.

At this hearing I was very well prepared on the facts, the legal analysis, my arguments, and my advocacy. But I was not prepared for the blatant hostility in the form of personal attacks against me, overstatements, sarcasm, and denigration of my client that spewed from the opposing counsel. He told sexist jokes to the arbitrator during breaks. He muttered under his breath while I presented my case, saying things like, “This is so boring,” “That’s just stupid,” and “I can’t believe she’s saying that.”

I was thrown off my game during the entire two-day arbitration. I was a little nauseated and shaky. And I seriously disliked the opposing counsel. Figuratively, my views during this arbitration were the equivalent of rocky, rusty, weedy junk heaps.

I like to think that I still was able to fully put on my client’s case and that the result would not have been different without the opposing counsel’s bad behavior and my inadequate response. The decision of the arbitrator was that the teacher would be reinstated without the six months’ back pay between the dismissal and the reinstatement. This decision was as close to upholding the dismissal as it could be, but it was still a loss. The teacher would be back in the classroom.

Habits are hard to break, though, and within months there was more misconduct by the same teacher, despite the district’s efforts to support him. There was another dismissal from employment. There was another arbitration. I found myself preparing again. It would be déjà vu: same room, same teacher, same type of misconduct, and same opposing counsel. It’s rare to get a do-over like this. While I dreaded it, I was also happy for the chance to figure out how to do it better.

This time I knew I had to prepare not just for the case but also for the opposing counsel. I conferred with mentors and learned tips for dealing with difficult attorneys. For instance, I could stop the presentation of my case and state, “The record should reflect that opposing counsel is muttering derogatory comments” or “The record should reflect that opposing counsel’s gestures are distracting the witness.” I also talked to a few people who had worked with the opposing counsel. I learned some things about him, including that he had been through a bitter divorce. That divorce and other experiences must have changed his direction of travel in life to very unpleasant views of his own. I began to feel a little compassion.

The week before arbitration round two, my best mentor—my husband—suggested I go see this man, look him in the eye, and tell him my expectations for appropriate behavior. Could I put myself in harm’s way like that? Could I walk voluntarily into the lion’s den? As repulsive as this sounded, the principle involved rang true: “If thy brother shall trespass

Several years before Sharla Smith Hales began law school, her parents were killed in a small plane crash. Shortly after she and her husband, Jim, were married, Sharla and Jim became the primary caregivers for her three youngest siblings, ages 4 to 14. Within a few weeks after the children moved in, Sharla’s sister who was in college suffered a paralyzing accident on a waterslide and lived with Jim and Sharla during rehabilitation. Sharla took a year off from law school to help her siblings adjust, and then she joined Jim to finish law school together in 1986. She graduated summa cum laude.

For many years Sharla was primarily a stay-at-home mom, raising her siblings and her own four children. She provided occasional independent contract research to her husband and other attorneys and served in many callings in the Church. In 2002 she ran for an open seat on the Douglas County Nevada School Board and held that seat for 12 years. During that time Sharla served as board president three times, was heavily involved with the Nevada Association of School Boards (NASB), and received several awards from the NASB. She continues to provide professional training to NASB members.

When Sharla left the school board, she accepted a position with the Douglas County Family Support Council, a nonprofit organization that supports women, including victims of domestic violence. She currently serves as director of public affairs for the Reno Coordinating Council of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. She has also served as general counsel for Churchill County School District since 2007.

In nominating Sharla for this award, fellow BYU Law alum Kirt Naylor wrote, “Sharla may not be one of those alumni who is in the public eye, but her dedicated service and example in the community, BYU, legal field, home, and church qualify her to receive this most deserving recognition.”
against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.”

Dean Smith explained this principle another way:

*As disciples of Jesus Christ we should encourage people to change and improve. If we believe that others have taken a wrong turn, one of the greatest acts of charity that we can perform is to give them room to repent.*

So I went to the office of opposing counsel, sat down with him, and first discussed a few things with him about the exhibits. Then I looked him square in the eye, called him by name, and called him out on his behavior. I was hoping to say something incredibly powerful and profound, but instead I just simply told him the truth: “It’s not okay for you to mutter criticism, make demeaning comments, or tell sexist jokes. If you do, I will call you out on the record.”

His response was a weak denial. And then our talk was over.

A week later I found myself at the arbitration hearing taking the same journey over the same stretch of road I had already traveled, but this time my view was in the other direction. My dislike and fear of this man had turned into compassion and charity. His behavior had improved. The demeaning comments and distracting gestures were gone. He still made overstatements, such as, “She doesn’t have a single shred of evidence.” However, this time I saw them for what they were: bluffing tactics, attempts to show off for his client, and statements he felt he had to make because the facts were not on his side. I had confidence and understanding, and I enjoyed the work. My view was vastly more pleasant and my journey enjoyable regardless of the result, although I am happy the story ends with a decision for the school district: the teacher’s dismissal stood.

Maintaining charity won’t always change the bad behavior of others, but it will allow you to feel good about yourself. Maintaining charity for difficult opposing counsel or others includes giving them the benefit of the doubt, refusing to take offense, and allowing them room to improve.

It does not mean being a pushover or being weak. Good attorneys must be assertive, even aggressive, at times. Good attorneys are clever, creative, and strong. Charitable thoughts and Christian actions require thorough preparation, strong analysis, and concerted self-discipline. Those extra efforts bring greater understanding, which leads to advocacy from positions of strength without resorting to hostilities, hyperbole, or harshness. Interestingly, charitable understanding and Christian goodness often result in more effective representation than stooping to less noble thoughts and actions.

**CHARITABLE GOODNESS IS BETTER ADVOCACY**

In the school district I represent, a group of special education students alleged to a principal that one of their teachers had treated them with impatience, used derogatory words against them, and, of all things, locked them out of the classroom.

An investigation ensued, but the results were inconclusive. There was no misconduct proven. Still the students and their parents wanted a different teacher. The principal and the superintendent both felt that the teacher was ineffective in that classroom. But under the collective bargaining agreement, the district did not have grounds for a forced transfer.

The superintendent and I met with the teacher to go over the results of the investigation. In preparing for the meeting, the superintendent mentioned to me that the school district had a new opening in a one-to-one setting with a severely disabled student—a position generally seen as less desirable than the teacher’s current placement.
By happenstance, I had just attended a J. Reuben Clark Law Society continuing legal education class on relational communication taught by Russell Wood. We learned about listening carefully, not “one-upping,” asking effective questions, making supportive statements, and avoiding relational conflict—all very compatible with charitable thoughts and Christian actions. When we met with this teacher, I determined to listen. I used phrases I had learned, such as:

“‘It sounds like . . .’
“‘So you mean . . .’
“‘Tell us more about . . .’
“‘Mmm . . .’” with a head nod.

The more the teacher talked, the more he became aware that he was not enjoying his class and that his teaching was not effective for these students. The more he talked, the more both he and we understood the challenges in his classroom. I found myself using fewer deliberate listening strategies and more natural feelings of genuine compassion and interest. I came to understand the struggles he had with these students, who had difficult behaviors. Prior to the meeting, I saw him as a teacher who was unable to control the classroom. During the meeting, I saw his strengths: genuine concern for his students, gentleness, and compassion for students with disabilities. My perspective changed. Instead of a problem teacher, I saw a teacher who had strengths the district was not utilizing.

May you have charity for your classmates and for the attorneys you will work with and against, thereby building enjoyable and enriching relationships.

As he talked more and we listened more, we all came to understand that he was in the wrong placement. Still the district did not have the right to force a transfer, and I could not see my way clear to making that happen. Then the solution presented itself: out of the blue he asked for a transfer.

The superintendent and I paused, poker faced. I asked the teacher to excuse us so we could confer about openings. We diplomatically exited into the adjacent room, closed the door, and gave each other high fives. Genuine, compassionate listening took us to a win-win direction that legal provisions under the contract would never have provided.

My view on my metaphorical ride at work that day was breathtaking. Solving problems for my client is incredibly satisfying because, ultimately, I am helping the school district’s children learn, achieve, and prepare for life.

That day reinforced what I have found true many times: When I choose to view others through a lens of charity, I find I am surrounded by people who generally want to do good in the world, who want to be fair and reasonable, and who want to treat me well. When I see them as good people, I treat them that way, and they usually respond in kind. I have a beautiful view of the world when I do this.

A SPECTACULAR VIEW

What is your view right now? What have you set your sights on?

An acquaintance of mine told me about a law school classmate who twice in quick succession was unprepared when called on. The impulse among this classmate’s peers was to avoid him like poison. My acquaintance (who may or may not be my husband) to this day regrets not reaching out to lend support. He realizes that no one comes to class twice unprepared unless there are serious challenges in their life. Fortunately, I am happy to say that the classmate went on to do well in law school.

If you see your classmates as competitors for a limited supply of positions, you will be surrounded by people pushing you out of the way for their own success. You will spend your law school years surrounded by self-centered, greedy people.

On the other hand, if you determine to view your classmates through a lens of charity, you’ll be surrounded by caring, kind, and supportive people with remarkable ideas and insights who can help you be successful. Give your classmates the benefit of the doubt. Refuse to take offense. Attribute negative actions not to hostility or criticism but to other reasonable explanations. Resist the urge to label your classmates. Then your classmates will help you do your best.

Rather than elbowing each other for limited positions, you will share a common goal: mastering an unlimited supply of skill and knowledge important for success, whatever package success comes in for you. You will all be traveling in the same direction, and that direction will have a spectacular view.

May you move forward with a love of God and of your neighbor. May you have charity for your classmates and for the attorneys you will work with and against, thereby building enjoyable and enriching relationships. May you be blessed as you seek and create beautiful panoramas in your personal and professional lives.

NOTES

1. Moroni 10:32.
7. Moroni 7:47.
10. See Matthew 5:44.