love a birthday party! Yes, I like balloons and cake and presents, but what I really love is commemorating life. Birthdays are important markers—I’m still alive! The years 2019 and 2020 are important markers: they mark 100 years since women were guaranteed the right to vote in the United States. The Nineteenth Amendment was passed in 1919 and ratified in 1920. And every year since that date, it is commemorated and marked whenever a woman casts a vote.
ne of the reasons I am addressing you this evening is that, 43 years ago, when I was admitted to practice law in Utah, my fellow female bar-takers and I were the ones who tipped the numbers from less than 100 female attorneys to 133 female bar members. In 1873 the first woman was admitted to the territorial bar, so it took 103 years to accumulate 100 women—.9708 of a woman per year. Because we were admitted alphabetically, I was exactly the 100th woman to join the Utah State Bar. Today there are 3,500 of us—25 percent of the 13,000 attorneys now in Utah, or an average of 82.3 women admitted a year. At BYU Law, in one of the most recent classes admitted, there are more women than men. Let’s hear it for women lawyers!

So how does anyone get from there to here? There are no road maps, because each journey is so unique. This evening I will tell you what that journey looked like for me.

I don’t feel like a pioneer. I never made many clear-cut professional goals. If you had asked me in junior high or high school what my career plans were, I would never have said law school! Although I wouldn’t have said this out loud, I secretly wanted to be an actress who cooked lovely things. Meanwhile, I was good at school, I loved learning, and I loved reading. And even though my father was an attorney, I had never considered being one.

For women growing up in the late 1950s and early ’60s, career choices seemed confined to secretarial work, teaching, nursing, waitressing, or being a waitress in the sky—a stewardess. By the way, I have done many of these jobs.

And yet my father always encouraged me to think outside the box. He had represented dozens of women in divorce proceedings who were left holding the bag—custody of their children, not enough child support to pay the bills, and few marketable skills. Many of them had quit college to work so their husbands could get that degree. These women had bet the farm on a man to be the sole provider, and they had lost.

My father’s thinking on this was motivated by how much money I could make, whether single, married, widowed, or divorced. He thought of money as a problem-solver. He would say: “Why not be an accountant instead of a secretary? Why not be a principal instead of a teacher? Why not be a doctor instead of a nurse? Why not be a pilot instead of a stewardess?” These suggestions weren’t based on his desire for me to crash through glass ceilings but to attain a much higher earning potential. My father thought I was pretty great, and I knew he would be overjoyed if I became rich. He never changed his ideas about money, believing money insured a degree of safety in life. In fact, years later he failed to convince my son, Elliott, to become an attorney instead of a college professor—which was what my son wanted to do—because attorneys can make a lot more money than college professors. Not admitting defeat, my father speculated: “You know, Elliott, you can marry more money in a minute than you can make in a lifetime.”
But my father knew I could never be a pilot because I had his eyes—brown and myopic. In the words of that great Jewel and Dolly Parton song, “My Father’s Daughter,”

I am my father’s daughter
I have his eyes
I am the product of his sacrifice
I am the accumulation of the dreams of generations
And their stories live in me like holy water

I did end up following my father’s advice by becoming a lawyer. I want to share four lessons I have learned firsthand—not just from the law—and some of the stories that live in me like holy water.

RECOGNIZE AND ACT ON GOOD IDEAS

It was a casual conversation with a friend that led me to law school. I hadn’t seen Merlyn Mays since elementary school, when she wore pink socks and carried a Barbie lunch box. We ran into each other on the University of Utah campus in the spring of our senior year. She looked the same, with pink and lace on her jeans. Quickly we got around to the most pressing subject: “What are you going to do after graduation?” Remember the most popular choices: a teacher, a secretary, a nurse, or a stewardess.

Merlyn said, “I’m going to law school!”
That statement literally stole my breath away.
“You can do that?” I asked.
She told me what that entailed, and in the space of only a few minutes that seed was planted and growing, and it was delicious to me.

The next day I had lunch with my best junior high/high school/college friend, Lisa Cononeles, who was an English major like I was. I told her I was going to law school, after thinking about it for one day.
She looked at me, stunned, and then excited. “I think I’ll go too!” she said. She decided even faster than I had. And now she is a highly successful litigator in Las Vegas and would have made my father proud with the money she has put in the bank.

Lisa and I signed up and then showed up two weeks later for the law school admissions test. Test prep? It wasn’t on my radar. In fact, while standing in line and talking to other test-takers waiting for the doors to open, I found out there was math on the test (and yes, there really was a math section on the test 45 years ago). I hadn’t had math since I was a sophomore in high school. I asked the person next to me what the formula was for finding the circumference of a circle and heard the term pi, which only vaguely rang a bell. I had to ask what pi was out to three places. Thank fortune for that, because finding the circumference of a circle was on the test.

From this experience of deciding to go to law school, I learned to act on good ideas. At the very least, they are motivation to move forward, and at the very most, they are a catalyst to change everything. But they are not a road map. They are a surprising left turn or stop, but they don’t tell you how the journey will go or what is at the end.

My life was invaded by that good idea—law school—and transformed. I took the test, submitted my application, was accepted to the University of Utah, and started law school just a little while later.

Do you think I even had a road map for the next three years? Guess again! I didn’t really like law school—and that had nothing to do with Ted Bundy being in the class just behind me and sitting next to me in federal taxation. I had been a theater performance and English literature undergraduate. I had majored in subjectivity, expecting crimson pinwheels of creativity to inspire me in my classes. That isn’t law school. Do you know what stare decisis means? It means “to stand by that which is decided.” What? That means one is shackled by
precedent, by what went before. I couldn’t believe that what I thought would be a better way of doing things didn’t matter in the least! What was done was done and would stay done.

I am proud of three innovative, subjective things I did in law school.

1. I talked the theater department into staging Peter Weiss’s *The Investigation* in our moot courtroom. It is a drama about the Nazi war crime trials stemming from the atrocities of Auschwitz. Weiss used the actual testimony of Auschwitz survivors testifying as witnesses against those who had abused them. I was the only law student in the production. We advertised it to the community and sold tickets, and for being a very bleak, intense production, people loved it.

2. I talked John Flynn, my jurisprudence professor, into letting me do my final project on Studs Terkel’s book *Working*, a collection of interviews with Americans on what they do all day and how they feel about their work. I put something together about the importance of knowing clients and their experiences to sell Professor Flynn on it. Then I tape-recorded my paper because it took much, much less time than typing would have taken on my Corona typewriter. Surprisingly, I got an A on the project, demonstrating that it can pay to be creative.

3. Finally, Lisa and I won the moot court competition by practicing good theater: costuming ourselves, fixing the lighting, and rehearsing and rehearsing until we were so smooth and positively glib.

I was also that person in the library looking for distractions. I once sidetracked a fellow student by asking how many animals he could write down in 10 minutes. He asked for an extension to 30 minutes. I had one study table go around and tell about their favorite children’s book. I’ll never forget hearing Jan Smith, who had been a fourth-grade teacher, tell the story *The Hundred Dresses*, about a Polish girl in Connecticut, in which the other children see her as different and mock her. By the end of the story we had a crowd gathered around the table to listen.

And then there was the competitive nature of law school. We were told at the outset that up to 25 percent of us would drop out after the first year. I remember classmates copying down social security numbers—our grades were posted on a bulletin board and identified by our social security numbers—to try and figure out who had gotten what grade. All our research was done from books, and on two occasions critical cases had been ripped from the casebooks. Lisa and I would spend time in the women’s restroom on a couch, smoking candy cigarettes and “blowing off steam.”

By my second year, I was done. I left winter semester for Hollywood—remember, I wanted to be that actress who cooked—and went from audition to audition and finally got one nonspeaking role. I was part of a crowd scene for an International House of Pancakes commercial. After three months of that, I decided to bet on law school, came back, took a summer semester, and graduated with the rest of my class.

But I came back with no idea of what would happen after I finished. Good ideas start you down a path. Perspective comes from connecting the dots after things happen.

**HOLD ON TO GAIN PERSPECTIVE**

You need to wait to see how the story will play out, and as the musicians say, it’s not over until the fat lady sings.

I remember taking my son home from the hospital more than 30 years ago. Brand-new babies still default to the fetal position, so putting him in the brand-new car seat meant stretching out his little tucked-in limbs. He looked like a vulnerable little monkey. Right then I wanted to dash for the hills. Who was he? I didn’t know how to keep him safe. How was I going to recognize what he needed? How could I help tease out who he really was? Where was my mother?! I knew he would soon find out what a fraud I was, but it wasn’t
a problem because he was no expert on what a mother was either.

It worked out. I had three more children: Caitlin, Diana, and Rachel. They’ve all grown to adulthood—I have the photographs to prove it. I didn’t poison or maim them. And I’m glad I stuck around to see how things would turn out.

There were only two occasions when I almost left my home like Nora in Henrik Ibsen’s A Doll’s House. The first was when I saw a live performance of Romeo and Juliet at the La Jolla Playhouse, with Amanda Plummer as a riveting and transcendent Juliet. I wanted to stick a flag on that performance. She left me gasping, “Oh, where is my art?!” The second time a Doll’s House moment came was when I ate for the first time at Alice Waters’s restaurant Chez Panisse and had one of the most delicious meals I’ve ever eaten. Oh, where was my art?! But unlike Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz, I didn’t have to travel into a fantasyland to discover you could find your heart’s desire in your own backyard. I found that what you have is plenty if you only have eyes to see it.

Even when there are photographs, we can’t always see what unfolds under our noses, but I have learned to hold on. Perspective will come.

My mother had surgery to repair two bad knees when I was 12. The surgery brought out an autoimmune disease that took her from a walking and driving mother to one tethered to a wheelchair who could do little of what she had done before. She went downhill so rapidly. There were six children in our family. I was the second oldest and the oldest girl, and the youngest were two-year-old twins. Her incapacitation brought me adult responsibility, and I felt put upon.

My father was a bishop at the time, and the ward held a fast for my mother. I thought that after that fast she would stand up and do what she had done before. It didn’t happen. She stayed in the wheelchair. She learned how to do things from the wheelchair, but I still felt burdened, and I was angry. I was angry at God, who wouldn’t heal my mother so I could dither about in the care-free way I saw my friends doing. In my book of life, I consigned God to the appendix. I would nod, but I wouldn’t speak.

Meanwhile, my mother’s prayers were that she would live to see us grow up. Then when my siblings and I grew up, the prayers changed to “let me see my grandchildren.” Those changed to prayers asking to see her great-grandchildren. My mother didn’t die young at 38. She died old at almost 90. Years later, I was talking to a friend over the vegetables in Dan’s grocery store. The friend pointed out something I had never seen: my mother’s precipitous decline in health leveled out after the ward fast. A light turned on.

So act on those good ideas, and hold on for the rest of the story. Perspective will come.

BE CURIOUS ABOUT EVERYONE

Now for two crucial skills I brought with me to law school and the practice of law. Curiosity is the key to humanity. I learned this principle 50 years ago at Highland High School. The lesson came from Ursel Allred, the drama teacher.

Mr. Allred directed one big musical each fall that stuffed the auditorium with an appreciative audience, and it was always well done. But there was so much more. In his quiet corridor
next to the auto shop, students rehearsed scenes from dozens and dozens of plays. Oh, the characters I tried on: romantic leads, witches, little girls, little boys, old women, old men, villains, angels, and murderers. I played beauties, sidekicks, and crones.

As we rehearsed, Mr. Allred gave us these directions: find the person we were acting and make them real. What a gift to a teenager who didn’t yet know who she was but could learn by trying on all those different personas! He told us that the way to find the “realness” in our character was to be curious. Who was this person? What had brought them to this point? “Walk in their shoes,” he instructed.

I learned to be curious about all kinds of people. I learned there is something valuable in everyone. I learned how to walk in their shoes. That advice also came from To Kill a Mockingbird’s Atticus Finch, everyone’s favorite lawyer:

“First of all,” [Atticus] said, “if you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you’ll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view— . . . until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”

I prefer Mr. Allred’s walk around in their shoes to Atticus’s walk around in their skin—which is a little creepy.

Just recently a unique exhibition opened in Denver. It is in the shape of a giant shoebox, and it encourages people to literally walk in someone else’s shoes. It is called A Mile in My Shoes, by the Empathy Museum. It features 30 pairs of shoes along with audio recordings from the shoes’ owners that you can listen to while you try on a pair and go for a walk down the 16th Street Mall.

If I had a shoe museum, Jonathan Fairbanks’s shoes would be in it. When my daughter Caitlin was 16, she played Peter Pan in a high school play. The school rented flying equipment from Las Vegas. Caitlin wore a harness under her costume that was attached to thin wires so she could be hoisted up and down by a series of pulleys. The muscle was provided by Jonathan Fairbanks, a giant of a senior who manipulated the wires for her takeoffs and landings. He wore gloves to protect his hands. His feet controlled the descents, and he wore the same shoes every night. Hauling back on the wire, he would step down on the wire in those shoes,
letting it cut through the soles and take off the shoe’s edge. My daughter’s safety lay in the gloved hands and shoe-clad feet of this 18-year-old boy.

At the conclusion of the run, I said to Jonathan, “When you get rid of those shoes, please let me know. I want them.”

“I’ve ruined them on the wires,” he said. “You can have them.” He took them off, handed them to me, and walked away in his socks. As I said, he was 18 years old.

Let me tell you how curiosity and walking in someone else’s shoes played out for me as an attorney.

In my first few months as a new attorney, I went to the Utah State Prison with one of my male colleagues to interview a potential client. He was in the prison shop when other prisoners threw a flammable liquid on him along with a lighted matchbook. He had skin grafts over most of his body. His hands were permanently clawed because of the damage to his tendons.

We were going to talk to him to evaluate the possibility for a civil rights claim.

As we walked down the long hallway to the interrogation room, we passed cell after cell in which prisoners were pressed up to the bars so they could see who was passing. When they saw me, comments were shouted that were racist, sexist, and utterly menacing. I looked at the two guards who were escorting us to see what they were going to do. They only looked at me impassively. My male colleague looked at the floor.

In law school I learned that all lives are of equal worth—it is inscribed on our nation’s founding documents: we are created equal and afforded dignity and respect. I hate that this expresses something we aspire to but haven’t achieved. Some people get much worse or no support because of their lack of money, connections, darker skin pigment, or additional X chromosome. And what is done? Not enough to make them equal.

I’ve met the “not equals” in courthouses. Courts are one of the very few places left where you encounter the whole span of society. Walking the halls, you begin to understand that the average American is someone who has a high school education and earns $30,000 a year. We incarcerate more people than any other developed country: 30 percent of adults carry criminal records and 7 million people are now in jail, on parole, or on probation, and a troubling proportion of them are mentally ill or black.

Insisting that people are equally worthy of respect is still a challenging idea. In the law, you see people who are troublesome in every way: the complainer, the liar, the bigot, the misogynist, and the guy who, as they say, makes “poor life choices.” I loved criminal law classes and reading those cases, but after meeting criminal clients as an attorney, I decided I wasn’t interested in practicing criminal law because the clients were difficult.

People can be untrustworthy, even scary. When they’re an actual threat—as those prisoners seemed to me—you have to protect yourself.

Here is where curiosity became a saving grace. Regarding people as having lives of equal worth means recognizing that we all have a common core of humanity. To see that humanity, you must, as Mr. Allred and Atticus Finch taught, walk in people’s shoes with a willingness to ask them what it’s like in those shoes. It requires curiosity about the world beyond our experience. We have to care about what it’s like in their shoes.

Was I curious? Not in that prison hallway—I felt too threatened. But later I tried to summon enough curiosity to wonder what it had taken to push those men over the edge. I remembered another lesson from Mr. Allred: when people speak, they aren’t just expressing their ideas; they’re expressing their emotions, and it’s the emotions that they really want heard. So I stopped playing back the prisoners’ words and tried to imagine their emotions. They felt anger. They felt disrespect. And suddenly I found the core of humanity with the simple application of curiosity.

Curiosity is the beginning of humanity. How has curiosity changed me? I told you that for a time I would nod but not speak to God, thinking He was ignoring me and my family. I put Him in the appendix of my life. Then came perspective, with which I could see His hand. I moved Him out of the appendix. Yet even now, God is pretty much in the margins of my life most days. But when He does take over the whole page, it is because I recognize dignity, humanity, and caring in others.
AS THIS STUDENT HANDED ME THE STATUE, HE SAID,

“You heard my call for help.”
ACT CONSISTENTLY WITH COURAGE

Curiosity may give me eyes to see humanity, but it doesn’t fix harm. I learned to use tools from law school to diminish harm, but it is easy to become disillusioned. Sometimes the bad guys get away or a really nice person gets fired or baby seals die or a business loses the patent it needs to survive. I learned how to survive with courage. Courage is the resolve to do well, to be consistent, and to make sacrifices when necessary without the reassurance of a happy ending.

We are all fated to live lives shot through with sadness. Courage is the resolve to continue on despite the sadness, without the reassurance of a happy ending or an ending we would have crafted. Mother Teresa is an example of courage to me with her consistent, sacrificial care without the reassurance of happy endings. Her people died. They were off the street, made clean, and given blankets, but they all died.

I have a wood carving that was given to me by a law student who was born in Haiti and raised on the streets of Boston. His education was hit or miss at best, and he didn’t have much direction until he met Latter-day Saint missionaries. He hadn’t seen God, not even in the appendix of his life, up until then. He came to BYU as an undergraduate. He graduated. He was admitted to BYU Law School, still woefully unprepared as far as language, writing, and analytical skills went. How does a person make up for 12 years of half-hearted or nonexistent schooling? They don’t.

Yo-Yo Ma, the great cellist, is often asked by parents, “When should my child start taking lessons so she can play like you?”

“Three,” he says. “Three years old. After that, it’s too late.”

This student barely squeaked by in my writing class, but he was determined, and he came to me for extra help. We worked for two more years and through the summers. On our last tutoring day, he handed me a statue. It is patterned on Le Marron Inconnu (The Unknown Slave). It represents a runaway slave and commemorates the abolishment of slavery in Haiti. The figure has a broken chain at his left ankle and holds a conch shell to his lips, blasting out a call for help.

As this student handed me the statue, he said, “You heard my call for help.”

I wish I could tell you that his skills improved dramatically and that he is now capable of handling any legal problem that comes his way. Not yet. But he continues to work at improving, at catching up, resolved to do the best he can without the reassurance of a happy ending. He has courage.

Atticus Finch had courage, doing his best for Tom Robinson—a black man accused of raping a white woman—while knowing there would be no happy ending. He worked consistently, sacrificially, taking time from his regular practice and family in spite of a predetermined outcome.

It has been a sobering day for me. One of the best parts of my job is teaching academic writing to international scholars at Oxford for a month in the summer. One of our 2018 scholars, Juan Martin Vives, died of a heart attack early this morning, leaving a wife and two young children. He was 39. He was the dean of a small Seventh-day Adventist school in Argentina, where more than three-fourths of the population identify as Catholic. Juan established a law and religion center at his school to foster more openness and conversation. He had a wide range of colleagues and friends throughout Latin America, mostly Catholic, because he saw the core of humanity in all of them.

In a Twitter post, he recently wrote, “We are truly united not when we think and believe exactly the same but when we can live together with our differences and enrich each other out of them.” Juan walked in others’ shoes. He lived a life of courage as he consistently did his work, despite what the ending might be. God filled the page in his life book.

So here are some ways to let God take over the page in your life:

1. Recognize good ideas that will motivate you to change.
2. Hold on to gain perspective of what really is happening.
3. Be curious about everyone to find the core of humanity.
4. Act consistently with courage, no matter what the ending may be.