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A law degree is more than just a degree in law.

A LESSON

IN FLYING

This address was given to prospective, admitted, and current female law students at the annual Women in the Law luncheon on April 3, 2013.

It is a real privilege to be here today, to visit with all of you who are on the cusp of such important and exciting life decisions, and to share with you some thoughts about a life in the law and the excitement of pursuing it. ||

While I appreciate the gracious remarks and kind introduction, if we want to be perfectly clear about my credentials from the outset, it should be publicly noted that my immediate and extended families do not think I am anything much to write home about.

ILLUSTRATION BY MARK SMITH



Indeed, it is fair to say that I am essentially a big, fat disappointment to the whole lot of them. In the four years since I moved back to Utah to begin my job at BYU Law School, I have repeatedly been confronted by them with legal problems they were sure I could solve on the spot, only to fall flat on my face when presented with the question.

“Sorry,” I had to say to the relative who phoned me up. “You’ll have to tell your brother-in-law that I don’t have any idea what the legal blood-alcohol limit is for the operator of a big rig in Utah, although I’ll confess I’m distressed that he needs to know.”

“Sorry,” I had to say again a few months later to another asker, this time at a family reunion. “I just don’t know what the Brigham City Code says about double parking in a school zone *just for a minute* when you run in to get your kindergartner.”

And when the most recent relative wanted to know if I knew, off the cuff, if the judge would let him have an extra holiday with his daughter after his ex-wife kept her from Christmas to New Year’s last year, I had to confess, “I don’t know a thing about Utah family law.” He was especially disappointed when an answer did not rush to mind after he gave the added information that the ex-wife in question was a really, *really* difficult person.

And thus we see that, in all meaningful respects, I am a legal letdown.

Now lest you think that my remarks today will contribute nothing more than a bag of tricks about how you, too, can become a letdown to your family and friends, let me say that—aside from the decisions to marry my husband and give birth to my children—law school remains the single best decision I have made in my entire life. It opened my mind, expanded my horizons, showed me potential I did not even know I had, and gave me the tools to be a helper and a builder in my community, my church, my nation, and my home. It is a blessing beyond measure, and I will be supremely grateful until my dying day that the opportunity was mine and that I somehow, miraculously, took advantage of it.

Here’s the real truth about why law school didn’t prepare me for the relative’s drunken in-law, the double-parking aunt, or the holiday-snatching ex-wife: One does not go to law school to memorize lists of laws. Law school offers very few opportunities to store away nuggets of trivial information about which jurisdictions carry what sorts of requirements or what the specific prohibitions are from city to city or state to state. It isn’t what we do at law school. What we do is bigger than that. I knew almost from the moment I walked in the door as a first-year law student that the process would be life changing and that the degree I was earning was, in many meaningful respects, not a law degree at all.

A LAW DEGREE IS A DEGREE IN THINKING

My first year of law school was the most mind-expanding time of my life. Studying the law teaches you how to think critically, analyze problems, consider issues that are in tension with one another, and articulate your viewpoint. It requires you to exercise your intellect in ways you have never before exercised it and rewards you with mental muscle you never dreamed you would have.

“It is not the cry but the flight of the wild duck that leads the flock to fly and follow.”



As a friend of mine once put it, learning law is a lot like getting to peek at the wizard behind the curtain. It demystifies what is so elusive to so much of the world. It puts you in a position of power—true power—to lift the burdens around you, and it does so by creating within your brain a mind that is different in kind and not just different in degree than the one you had inside your skull when you arrived. I can promise you that this is what you will hate most about law school at your lowest moments and what you will treasure most about law school for every moment thereafter. If, like me, you believe that real happiness and true growth come only from continued learning, law school is the place for you.

A “degree in thinking” sounds awfully lofty and esoteric, and it’s true that some portion of what happens in law school is highly theoretical and blissfully fulfilling for its own sake. But the real task we face—the real reason we are growing these brains—is that our communities, our nation, and our world are buried in problems in need of strong thinkers to tackle them. I firmly believe that no other advanced degree better prepares a person to be a problem solver in a wider array of realms. My law school classmates and former law school students are putting their legal education to work solving problems in government, in business, and at law firms of all sizes and specialties. They are solving problems in public-interest organizations, in their congregations, and in their homes, where they devote full time to their children. A degree in thinking is universally helpful. It is because law school taught me to think and gave me the resources necessary to solve even brand-new problems I have never seen before that I was able to—eventually—find the relevant resources on DUI law, investigate parking regulations, and carefully read the custody agreement to help my family members with problems that were very real to them. I have practiced before the Supreme Court of the United States and can say with complete honesty that my work there was no more fulfilling than this work—and both have been made possible by the thinking tools I gained in law school.

A LAW DEGREE IS A DEGREE IN LEADERSHIP

As our dean has articulated numerous times, a law degree is also undoubtedly a degree in leadership. I am convinced that one reason our board of trustees continues to see fit to so heavily subsidize a legal education at BYU is that it recognizes the need to train up strong leaders—people who can negotiate multiple positions, appreciate the power of a well-considered idea, champion democracy while protecting the minority, and think and talk about solutions.

My daughter, a second-grade Chinese immersion student, taught me this proverb: “It is not the cry but the flight of the wild duck that leads the flock to fly and follow.” Law school will, quite simply, teach you to fly—and to feel comfortable in the leadership roles that

will naturally come your way as a result of your education, experience, and exposure to ideas.

There are numerous traits of good leaders that are honed in law school. Primary among them, perhaps, is an appreciation for the value of hard work. Vince Lombardi—who was perhaps the greatest football coach of all time—was famous for all kinds of cheesy one-liners about winners never quitting and quitters never winning and the dictionary being the only place where success comes before work. But he hit the nail on the head when he said this: “Leaders aren’t born, they are made. And they are made just like anything else, through hard work.”

Truth in advertising: law students work hard. They sacrifice some leisure for the gains of this season of their lives. They come to appreciate the law of the harvest—that you cannot reap what you did not sow. And they emerge on the other end of this sometimes taxing, sometimes frustrating, and

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always invigorating experience with a JD degree that uniformly signals an ability to dive in and get something done, to prioritize the important over the unimportant or less important, to make executive-level decisions about the use of time and resources, and to give as much to a task as excellence requires. (Now would be a good time to mention that the same ought to be true as you prepare for law school. Take the LSAT seriously. Study hard for it. Take your undergraduate courses seriously. Work hard in them. It is a simple truth that things that are worth doing are worth doing well. Exceptional brainpower and pure native intelligence mean almost nothing unless paired with a commitment to hard work.)

Good leaders also emerge from law school because law school is a place where people of incredibly high caliber learn and grow together. I tell my students that the greatest gift we as a faculty are able to give them is their fellow students. The friends you make in law school become lifelong networks of opportunity and, more important, deep and meaningful relationships forged from collective experience and shared devotion to the law. Make an effort to learn from your classmates. When you see them not as competitors but as colleagues, you will be grateful for their wisdom, eager for their insights, and pleased with their successes. Great leaders learn from those around them, exude humility, and care about being good people first and good lawyers second, knowing that the latter very often flows from the former.

I have a story to highlight this point: For a number of years I team taught a class at the University of Arizona's James E. Rogers College of Law with Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, for whom I had the privilege of working as a law clerk. The Justice would come to Tucson for the class during the Supreme Court's February recess, and,

having become close to my family during the time I worked in her chambers, she ordinarily paid a visit to our home when she came.

One day, just before her annual visit, I was driving my young son and his friends home from soccer practice. I reminded my son that he would not be seeing his friends for practice the following week because the Justice was coming to visit.

The little boy in the seat next to him asked him, "What's a justice?"

And without skipping a beat my son responded, "Oh, that's a very fancy word for grandmother."

My feelings at the moment were mixed: There was of course a layer of mortification at not having adequately conveyed to my child what it meant to be a Justice of the United States Supreme Court. But I was also overcome with tender appreciation for the exemplary model of humble leadership that my mentor showed to me. Only months earlier *The New York Times* had declared her the most powerful woman in the world, but her interactions with my children sent the message that *they* were the most important people in the world. That is how good leaders behave, and it is a skill set you are going to gain at BYU Law School, where a culture of giving and a spirit of cooperation exist and where the leaders of tomorrow are learning to fly.

A LAW DEGREE IS A DEGREE IN CHANGING HISTORY

This is true in obvious ways. Twenty-six U.S. presidents were lawyers. Both of the presidential candidates this last election had law degrees, as well as Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and Francis Scott Key. Justice O'Connor used her law degree to make history in a way that quite visibly opened doors for me and other women of my generation.

But in ways that are simultaneously smaller and exponentially more important than this, your decision to go to law school will make its mark and change the course of things for the better. For many of you a law degree will build a bridge to education and leadership in ways that will have lasting impact in your own family and circle of influence. When my grandmother died during my second year of law school, I was the only one of her two dozen grandchildren who had gone to college. I grew up on a rural farm where money was slim but opportunities for hard work were plentiful, and trips into town to the library were cherished. People in my family did not become lawyers—they did not even *know* lawyers. My own children, by contrast, have real educational opportunities—and educational expectations—that show that one generation and one law degree can set a pattern for the future. Indeed, studies consistently indicate that a mother's education level is the single strongest determiner of the literacy, health, and educational success of her children.

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Your life will be defined by self-improvement born of hard work and a drive to succeed, and you will see that many of the most important benefits of those efforts will be enjoyed by people other than yourself. You will undoubtedly want to do everything you can to keep open as many options as possible for bestowing those benefits on others.

Here, I think, is where BYU Law School, in particular, gives its students a decisive edge. It is a true gift to be able to graduate without much debt. It provides a freedom to make choices based on something other than money and to make the conclusion—for a while, or permanently—that the people who will benefit from your law degree will be public-interest organizations, nonprofit groups, your own young children, or some other work that offers its rewards in something other than dollars but is work you are nevertheless sure is the right beneficiary for that season of your life. It cannot be overemphasized how valuable it is to have this kind of flexibility and to enjoy the peace that accompanies it.

A LAW DEGREE IS A DEGREE IN BOLDNESS

I think boldness is probably, for many of us, a very important offering of a law degree. You will learn boldness in many ways in law school. You will learn it from the very nature of our pedagogy, which requires a student to come out of her shell, think on her feet, own her own knowledge, and become an advocate for those who cannot advocate for themselves. You will learn it from the powerful examples you read and study each day—astounding tales of bravery, integrity, courage, and justice. In my own area of study (the First Amendment) the textbook teems with stories of people who defended those whose viewpoints, positions, and religions were unpopular—stories of lawyers and judges and justices who stood hard ground to defend important principles when others would not do so. One cannot leave law school without a renewed sense of awe for those who paved the way for us and a commitment to likewise be bold in defense of what is right.

Beyond this I am convinced that the very act of deciding to come to law school is itself a manifestation of impressive boldness—and for those of us whose family, culture, or other norms make the decision unexpected or unconventional, this may be all the more true. All of us benefit from a courageous willingness to stretch ourselves beyond our comfort zone and can find that a bold willingness to do the unheard of will reap incalculable benefits.

My husband, children, and I spent last summer in England, and among the many lovely things we were exposed to was a striking poem attributed to Elizabethan-era sea admiral Sir Francis Drake, who rose from humble beginnings to ultimately circumnavigate the world. He titled the poem “Disturb Us, Lord.”

*Disturb us, Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves,
When our dreams have come true because we have dreamed too little,
When we arrived safely because we sailed too close to the shore.
Disturb us, Lord, when with the abundance of things we possess,
We have lost our thirst for the waters of life;
Having fallen in love with life, we have ceased to dream of eternity,
And in our efforts to build a new earth,
We have allowed our vision of the new heaven to dim.
Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly, to venture on wider seas,
Where storms will show your mastery;
Where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars.*

What a blessing you and I have to learn and to be educated—to dare to try new things and to make ourselves instruments for good in the world around us. I hope that as women we will seek those opportunities, show gratitude for them, and embrace the challenges that accompany them. As you navigate these decisions, please let those of us who are a step ahead of you in the journey know how we can be helpful. It gives us great satisfaction to do so.

Thank you so much for your time, and best of luck in all your endeavors.

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