

# UNLOCKING POTENTIAL

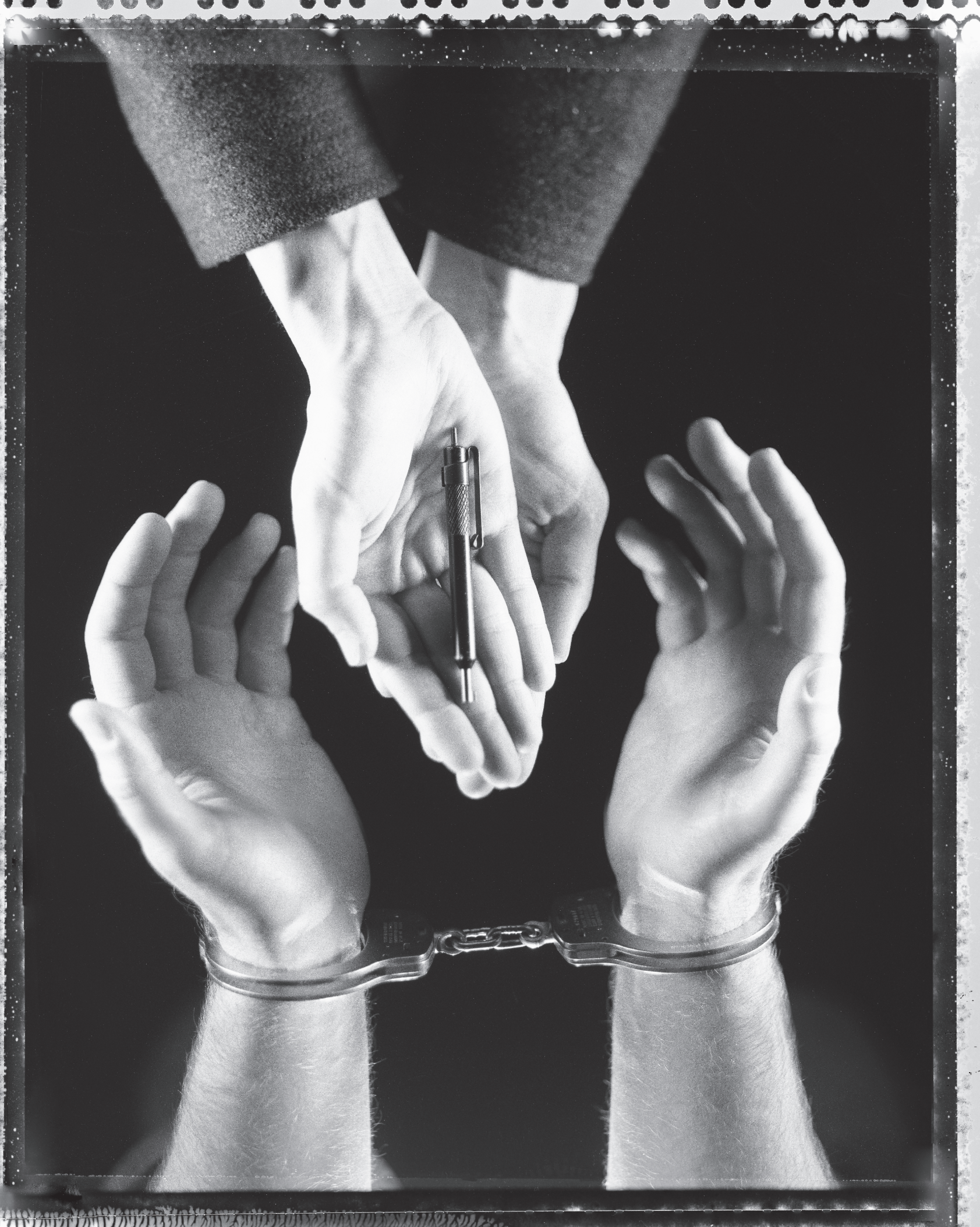
**HOW A LAW  
DEGREE  
AMPLIFIES  
YOUR ABILITY  
TO BLESS  
THE WORLD**

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRADLEY SLADE









Crystal grew up in the foster care system, living in seven different homes by age 17. Her youth had been one of neglect, abuse, abandonment, and instability. Despite the obstacles, she was on track to graduate from high school—the first in her family—and was planning to attend college.

Shortly after her 17th birthday, Crystal discovered that her birth mother had been fraudulently using Crystal's Social Security number to file fake tax returns without Crystal's knowing. Crystal's credit was in tatters and was linked with serious fraud claims. Just steps away from graduating, she had no way of opening a bank account, getting a job, or securing college financial aid.

I met Crystal when I was a 2L at Columbia Law School participating in our school's foster care clinic. I had been assigned to work on her case and spent the next several months calling the IRS, working with government agencies, filling out paperwork to clear her Social Security number, and helping her move forward. It was a sacred opportunity to work with Crystal during what was a very dark time for her.

As I found with Crystal, even simple legal skills can be a benefit to others. Tonight I would like to discuss three ways a law degree can amplify your ability to bless the world. First, the profession itself offers needed services that impact lives. Second, a law degree will change the way you think, which can be a real gift to others. Third, and most important, a law degree will significantly expand your capacity to build the kingdom of God.

## I. YOUR ABILITY TO SERVE

If you were to make a list of service-oriented professionals, chances are you would include doctors, nurses, teachers, and social workers—but *not* attorneys. Why? One reason we don't think of law as a do-good profession is simply because most of us have never desperately needed a lawyer, whereas we all know how it feels to need a doctor or to be influenced by a great teacher. But those of us who have desperately needed legal help (whether as a result of our actions or through no fault of our own) know it to be an incredibly intense, frightening, and uncertain experience.

Many law jobs are service-oriented on their very face—"public-interest" jobs.<sup>1</sup> Other "private-practice" legal careers are not typically considered public service but still make a significant impact in clients' lives and are vital to advancing critical causes.<sup>2</sup> Whether your profession makes the world a better place—having less to do with its label and much more to do with your heart and mind—or you're focused on making life better for others and delivering an excellent work product, both can be part of a law degree.

I would like to share a metaphor I heard in college to illustrate my next point. Imagine walking down a path. You arrive at the base of a cliff. Looking up to the top of the cliff, you see a never-ending line of people walking right up to the edge and then falling off, severely injuring themselves. To your surprise, the line of people walking off the cliff doesn't stop. You are faced with a choice: either go to the bottom of the cliff and help those crying out in agony or go to the top of the cliff and build a fence to prevent more people from walking off the cliff.

*Address  
given at  
the annual  
Women in  
Law luncheon  
on September  
28, 2016.*

This metaphor illustrates the difference between direct-service work (helping the injured who have already fallen) and policy work (fence building). Law school prepares you for both. And while many professions focus on bottom-of-the-cliff work, a law degree is nearly always focused on fence building. And that is why I went to law school.

I had the privilege of attending BYU my junior year as a visiting student. (Most Stanford undergrads spend their junior year abroad; in my case, I came to Provo.) While here at the Y, I taught classes part-time to men and women locked up in the Utah County Jail. My students' stories proved that our country has never-ending lines of people walking off cliffs every day: One man had been in jail 67 times. I had *three sets* of mothers and daughters in my classes—all in jail at the same time for totally unrelated offenses. In one case, the daughter gave birth while incarcerated, making it *three* generations in the same jail at the same time.

Prison may have been intended for “bad people,” but that is not who we are incarcerating in our country today. In reality, we are locking up an entire segment of the population—low-income men of color—for long, repeated periods of time in a counterproductive, dehumanizing environment that actually *encourages* them to re-offend. *One in three* black men in America will spend time in prison—one in two in some urban centers. Two-thirds of those leaving prison will re-offend within three years of being home. We have constructed a veritable “cradle to prison” pipeline, an intergenerational cycle sentencing some from birth based on zip code alone.

It was clear to me that we needed new fences. I applied to law school hoping to find solutions to these systemic, seemingly intractable issues. I wrote my personal statement when applying to law school about wanting to start a charter school model for criminal justice—a crude version of what the Reset Foundation is today. Once in law school I built out Reset's model on paper. The idea was simple: instead of serving time in prison, someone would serve his or her sentence at a 24/7 campus focused entirely on building lives and bettering communities. The government would redirect funding from corrections budgets to support this education-based alternative, holding the program accountable for results while making a 7:1 return on investment.

I had felt impressed by the Holy Ghost to develop and write about the idea in law school, but then I felt equally impressed to take a law firm job after graduating. I ended up loving transactional legal work. To my amazement, the firm supported me in starting Reset a year later. My department head gave me permission to launch the organization while still working at the firm, and several attorneys offered critical support to help Reset get off the ground. When we eventually secured sufficient seed funding, I transitioned from that firm, Kaye Scholer, and moved to the Bay Area to open our pilot campus.

We have now launched our full 24/7 campus in Berkeley. It is an alternative to a prison model designed to dramatically transform the criminal justice system by creating a results-oriented, education-focused approach to justice. We work with judges and attorneys to divert young men ages 18 to 24 to live at our campus instead of being sent to prison. Students live on-site for one to two years, in which their entire time is immersed in a learning environment focused on education, career readiness, leadership, and healthy living. As students finish our program, we carefully transition each one home, providing an additional year of career, mental health, and education support to ensure they succeed in the next phase of life.

Like many legal professions, my work at Reset straddles both policy and direct-service work. Regardless of where on the cliff you find yourself, the legal profession will equip you with concrete skills that bless lives.



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## II. YOUR ABILITY TO THINK



Law school will also change the way you think in a manner that can bless the world. Legal education is based on the Socratic method, a form of dialogue and questioning designed to encourage critical thinking and identify underlying assumptions. This education sharpens thinking and hones reasoning skills: students learn to pick apart faulty logic, break down arguments into component parts, and explore the contours of challenging legal questions.

A legal education also prepares students to accept and work with oppositional truths. Our doctrine teaches that “there is an opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:11), and that applies to truth as well. Examples in the law abound.

Take a classic criminal case, for example: a male defendant has killed a young girl. Imagine the perspective of the victim’s mother: she is shocked, overpowered by grief, likely enraged at the murderer, and filled with the pain of losing her little girl. Now imagine the perspective of the defendant’s mother: she also is overcome with emotion and is aching for her schizophrenic son; she knows of his battle with violent dreams caused by recent medications, his years of being bullied, and his absent father. And while both mothers stand at opposite ends of the spectrum, there is truth in both perspectives.

How do you handle these challenging situations? In the words of President Howard W. Hunter (himself an attorney), “With God our Heavenly Father, all truth, wherever found or however apprehended, is circumscribed into one great whole. Ultimately, there are no contradictions, no quarrels, no inscrutable paradoxes, no mysteries” (“President’s Formal Charge of Responsibility,” *Church News*, November 26, 1994; see also D&C 93:30).

Law school taught me to see truth as a circle, with all truth circumscribed within that circle. The defendant’s mother may be at one endpoint of the circle’s diameter, and the victim’s mother at the opposite endpoint. And though no points in the circle could be farther apart than those two, both contain truth and both fall on the circle of truth.

We see this same pattern in our doctrine, in which true principles are juxtaposed by opposite, complementary principles. We emphasize the importance of work—and the importance of leisure. We preach self-reliance—and our total dependence on God. And so on. Like the color wheel, gospel principles exist in relation to other complementary principles; a fulness of truth encompasses the entire wheel, composed of the full range of colors.

It is a gift to the world to recognize these opposing truths and to let go of the defensiveness, contention, and judgment that arise when opposing principles are at play. Too often we struggle to accept a stance opposite ours, although it too is often based on valid lived experience and true principles. Even in Church settings—or is it just my Sunday School?—we sometimes cling to a single point along the circle, defensively speaking out when an opposing truth is raised.

Christ, of course, experienced each of the infinite points along the circle and possesses a fulness of truth. It is His perspective that enables there to be no contradictions, no inscrutable paradoxes. If you let it, law school will teach you to hold *both* truths at once, to seek out complementary but opposing perspectives, to embrace the yin and the yang—all from a place of acceptance and nonjudgment.







### III. YOUR ABILITY TO BUILD THE KINGDOM OF GOD



law school will also expand your ability to build the kingdom of God—the most powerful way to bless the world.

They say that serving a mission is one of the best ways to prepare for a lifetime of service in the kingdom. Missions are intense skill-building experiences in which missionaries learn to study, teach, serve, work with others, and follow the Spirit.

Law school had a similar effect on me. It proved to be an intense skill-building experience, developing in me abilities that apply to lifelong work in the Church. Here are several examples:

*Law school dramatically improved my scripture study.* I had always been a diligent scripture reader, but I found my studies vastly improved during law school as a result of new intellectual skills: the ability to formulate more precise questions, to search and analyze texts more purposefully, and to look for patterns in new ways. When asked shortly after graduation what the biggest benefit of law school had been for me, I responded that it hugely influenced my daily scripture study.

*Law school strengthened my ability to articulate.* In 1979, President Spencer W. Kimball stated that the *articulateness* of LDS women, combined with righteousness, would greatly grow the kingdom:

*Much of the major growth that is coming to the Church in the last days will come because many of the good women of the world . . . will be drawn to the Church in large numbers. This will happen to the degree that the women of the Church reflect righteousness and articulateness in their lives and to the degree that the women of the Church are seen as distinct and different—in happy ways—from the women of the world. [“The Role of Righteous Women,” *Ensign*, November 1979; emphasis added]*

Several Church leaders have recently reiterated this quote, including President Russell M. Nelson in 2015:

*The day that President Kimball foresaw is today. . . .*

*We . . . need your strength, . . . your conviction, your ability to lead, your wisdom, and your voices. . . .*

*“We need women . . . who can speak out. . . .”*

*. . . We need women . . . who are courageous defenders. . . .*

*. . . We need women who know how to . . . express their beliefs with confidence and charity.*

[“A Plea to My Sisters,” *Ensign*, November 2015; quoting Boyd K. Packer, “The Relief Society,” *Ensign*, November 1978]

The Lord needs an articulate people. He likely won’t have that by simply sending an army of Elder Hollands to earth. More likely, He’ll provide training opportunities for Saints to develop their communication skills. I never considered myself articulate growing up, but I felt much greater confidence in expressing myself after enduring three years of law school. What better way to train a generation of articulate defenders than to send them to law school!

*Law school increased my capacity to understand and defend doctrine.* Church members also need to grapple with and deeply understand their doctrine, not just be articulate. Sister Julie B. Beck stated, “This generation will be called upon to defend the doctrine of the family as never before. If they don’t know it, they can’t defend it” (“Teaching the Doctrine of the Family,” *Ensign*, March 2011).

This past general conference Sister Bonnie L. Oscarson said, “We need to be . . . women who study the essential doctrines . . . [and who are] bold and straightforward” (“Rise Up in Strength, Sisters in Zion,” *Ensign*, November 2016).

Law school explicitly teaches the skill of understanding and defending an argument; this is drilled into students through three years straight of reading cases, wrestling with arguments, spotting holes, and defending positions. All these same skills apply to approaching

LDS doctrine. Furthermore, law school courses touch on all the major culture-war issues of the past 50 years: abortion, gay marriage, family structure, religious liberties. I was so grateful for the space law school afforded to explore, struggle, and pray about these issues.

*Law school prepared me for parenting.* Law school and subsequent practice were great preparation for motherhood. I remember thinking while in law school that I would be a completely different mother as a result of the training I was receiving. I would explain things differently, ask more meaningful questions, and be mindful and deliberate in a way I otherwise wouldn't have been. And I came to realize that those skills are exactly what children growing up in the 21st century need. As the Apostle Paul put it, "[W]e wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Ephesians 6:12). What do children actually need today? They need parents who can prepare them against these things. In my case, I didn't feel equipped to arm my children against those things until after I went to law school and contended with those sophistries myself.

## COMMON CONCERNS

conclude by addressing a frequent concern that many Latter-day Saint women have about law school: it's a time-intensive experience, and how will that impact my availability for Church service, dating, and family life?

I learned quickly that if something is "right" for you professionally, it is also "right" for you personally. If it is God's will for you to be in law school for professional reasons, it will also be the best place for you to be for personal reasons. I also saw this repeatedly while practicing law. I had felt very strongly impressed to take a job at Kaye Scholer, a typical big law firm in Manhattan, but, as a single woman, I was nervous about the unpredictable, atrocious work hours that came with it. When I began working, I watched in awe at how gracefully the Lord balanced my work and personal activities. Of course there were weeks I worked until 2:00 a.m. every day—and yet God graciously provided means for me to keep social commitments. God is in control even in fast-paced mergers and acquisitions departments. When my sister Mariah was in town for five weeks during an important juncture in her life, my workload suddenly and unexpectedly dried up, and I had hours to spend with her each day. Naturally, the day Mariah left, I was immediately put on a demanding new deal. (Now, work didn't always disappear when I wanted it to, and I certainly learned to set limits with school and firm work, but that's a topic for another day.)

I also learned to see my being single as a positive—as God's intention for me. It is unfortunate that much of Church discourse about being single is framed negatively: "Oh, I'm so sorry for you" or "How can you be single?" You've heard them. I don't think the Lord sees it that way at all, though surely there are some people who need reminders to date. But let's not let negative rhetoric obscure the fact that, for many of us, God explicitly wanted us in law school for *His* purposes: this was plan A for our life, not plan B. The Lord wasn't just providing something for us to do with our time because we were single; this was exactly where He needed us to be.

This became clear to me as I served in the Manhattan Stake Young Women organization while in law school. Our stake was grappling with a 75 percent inactivity rate among youth. From my perspective, we were simply unprepared; we hadn't equipped our youth with the tools to handle the social pressures, questions, and challenges they faced. We needed a different generation of parenting and a different generation of teaching.

A reason so many in my peer group were single may have been so that God could raise a generation of parents, teachers, and leaders who knew how to face the rulers of the darkness of this world. We weren't single just to learn patience or because we had failed in some way. It was for a positive reason: the Lord was at work, building His next generation of teachers and leaders so that we wouldn't lose our youth in a decade.

If law school is in your future, I am so excited for you. And, like a mission, if you let it, law school promises to unlock your potential to be a blessing in the world. [cm](#)

## NOTES

- 1 Public-interest jobs include work in foster care, criminal defense, healthcare, prisoner rights, arbitration, education, homelessness, Native American / tribal law, ethnic rights, family law, criminal prosecution, domestic violence, poverty, mediation, special education, environmental law, legal assistance for indigent clients, juvenile defense, disability law, human rights, accountability, election law, religious liberties, refugee issues, and Fifth Amendment issues.
- 2 For example, in the past three years alone, while working at the Reset Foundation, I have worked with a number of attorneys who have made a big difference for us, making our work possible—including attorneys practicing in the fields of tax, finance, government and regulatory affairs, intellectual property, corporate, zoning and land use, property and real estate, human resources, entertainment, labor, and employment.