

Personal Religious Conviction

and the Practice of Law



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How do my personal religious convictions influence the way I practice law? This question is somewhat difficult to assess because these convictions are so intertwined with who I am. They are integral to the decisions I make, the way I live my life, and how I approach my profession. However, in thinking this through, I have concluded that my religious convictions directly improve how I practice law, and they are essential to both my success and my personal fulfillment.

MY FAITH REQUIRES HIGH STANDARDS

The 13th article of faith declares, “We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all men.”¹ These beliefs are bedrock ethical rules for Latter-day Saints. Lawyers are bound by additional ethical rules that are essential to the integrity of our judicial system. I view all of these rules as fences that prevent Latter-day Saint lawyers from straying onto unethical ground. By striving to live according to the 13th article of faith, we can avoid getting close to these ethical fences.

On a few occasions, clients have asked me to do something that I did not believe was right. Even if the request was within the bounds of legal ethical rules but outside the bounds of my own sense of right and wrong, I have politely declined to do what was asked. In each instance, I have explained to these clients that my reputation is my own, not theirs, and if they want an attorney to do what they’ve asked, they should find another attorney. In each case, the client has backed off and acceded to my sense of right and wrong.

In selecting clients, we do not have to represent clients who we do not believe are acting in good faith. The very first law partner I worked for taught me that I should trust my gut feeling when taking clients and that large retainers and the potential of making a lot of money should never compromise my ethics and reputation.

Years ago I had a memorable conversation about ethics with my son, who has a PhD in philosophy. We discussed the idea of situational ethics, which bases moral decision-making on context or circumstance. My ethics are not dependent on circumstance but are rather founded on deep-seated religious beliefs about right and wrong. “But what about those without foundational beliefs?” I asked him. “Do you think people can maintain ethical behavior in the face of dire negative consequences or delayed gratification?” As we discussed this, we agreed that having a fundamental belief system is an essential part of maintaining ethical behavior in the face of tempting rewards or negative consequences. Our religious beliefs give us an independent basis for honesty and virtue and a high fence for ethical behavior.

I was recently involved in a case in which an attorney was sanctioned quite severely for violating a protective order entered by the court. A judge who got involved in the case as a mediator instructed all of the lawyers involved that, as officers of the court, we owe allegiance to the court and have a duty to abide by its orders, whether we agree with them or not. He reminded us that a process for disagreeing with orders is built into our legal system—that of the appeal or request for rehearing—and if we expect clients and opposing parties to abide by the fundamental decisions of our courts, we must do the same. These foundational rules underlying our legal system are easier to abide by when they are accompanied by our personal religious convictions regarding honesty and accountability.

MY FAITH ELEVATES MY PROFESSIONALISM

Professionalism in a legal practice is really a principle of respect for everyone. This is sometimes easier said than done. We are hired to solve disputes that our clients cannot solve themselves. We offer expertise and add objectivity in situations that are sometimes highly emotional. When I started my commercial bankruptcy practice, I thought I was getting into an area of law that was relatively low stress and, unlike family law for instance, was neither personal nor emotional. I was dealing with businesses—either companies in financial distress or their commercial creditors. What I didn’t appreciate was that commercial bankruptcy is very stressful because bankruptcy lawyers deal with businesses on the edge of disaster. It is personal because people own these businesses and are responsible for employees, customers, and investors. It is highly emotional.

This article is adapted from remarks delivered at the annual Women in Law luncheon in Salt Lake City, Utah, on March 29, 2023.

Commercial bankruptcy cases sometimes involve fraud, intentional torts, or crimes. These legal problems must be worked out in a truncated process because businesses in financial distress have limited time to find solutions. Ultimately, lawyers are problem-solvers, and staying professional and civil as we deal with difficult circumstances and difficult people is an important part of getting our job done. This can be challenging, particularly when cases drag on, attorneys or clients push back, or uncivil behavior creeps in. This is when the bedrock ethics of our faith help us.

Our profession teaches us to be civil towards others. Our faith teaches us to love others. When we love others, we will have civility and respect for others, even the “unlovable” in our profession. In his April 2022 general conference address, Elder Gary E. Stevenson reminded us that our faith teaches us to love and respect others, even when it is not returned:

Whenever we show Christlike love toward our neighbor, we preach the gospel—even if we do not voice a single word. . . .

We do this expecting nothing in return.

Our hope, of course, is they will accept our love and our message, though how they react is not within our control.

What we do and who we are certainly are.²

In an October 2018 address, Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf explained the practical meaning of loving others:

It is this endless compassion that allows us to more clearly see others for who they are. Through the lens of pure love, we see immortal beings of infinite potential and worth and beloved sons and daughters of Almighty God.

Once we see through that lens, we cannot discount, disregard, or discriminate against anyone.³

While I have surely been imperfect in my efforts, I try to remember these teachings. I rely on the reputation I have built out of good, honest work. In contentious cases, I try to ignore others’ slights, focusing instead on what needs to be accomplished for my clients. I try to always be respectful to other attorneys, even when that respect is not reciprocated.



Sylvan George Wanlass

One of my recent cases involved a mediation where prolonged litigation and difficult damage claims heightened emotions on all sides. Both the mediator and the client thanked me for my calm demeanor, my willingness to ignore insults, and my dedication to finding a solution. In another contentious case, my opposing counsel began denigrating me in court. I reminded myself that the judge knew me and that my actions would speak louder than these unfounded criticisms. I ignored the slights and stuck to the substance of my argument, ultimately prevailing on a key motion.

Maintaining professionalism, however, does not mean you have to take abuse from opposing counsel. When I started practicing law, there were few women lawyers here in Salt Lake City, and I suffered through a lot of intimidation from opposing male counsel. I eventually grew accustomed to speaking calmly to a screaming attorney on the other end of a phone call. Recently, I had a similar experience with a young female partner. Two opposing counsel called us to discuss some difficult issues and then began to scream at us. My partner was surprised and unable to respond. When my efforts to redirect the conversation to a more civil dialogue failed, I politely told them that while we appreciated the call, it was not productive and we were hanging up. My colleague was both relieved and empowered. She learned that we should engage in dialogue with opposing counsel to try to work out problems but do not need to endure disrespect or abuse.

I recently heard a lecture by Arthur Brooks, a devout Catholic social scientist and a columnist for *The Atlantic*. His book *Love Your Enemies* addresses how to find common ground and engage in dialogue with those with whom we are diametrically opposed.⁴ In it he gives these suggestions:

- ① “Stand up to people on your own side who trash people on the other side. . . . Contempt is destructive no matter who expresses it.”⁵
- ② “Make sure you offer five positive comments for every criticism. . . . Respond with kindness. Want to say something insulting about people who disagree with you? Take a breath, and show love instead. . . . Though we may not ultimately agree on every issue, we can still come to understand one another.”⁶
- ③ “The key to being nicer and happier is gratitude. . . . [I]t’s hard to feel gratitude, especially when we face people who treat us with hostility or contempt. This is exactly when we need gratitude the most.”⁷

On this point, I would like to add that we should follow our Christian teachings to be kind, to be humble, to be generous with our time and talents, to be empathetic, to avoid jealousy, and to give due credit.

MY FAITH HEIGHTENS MY WORK ETHIC

Latter-day Saints have a reputation for being hard workers. I like that reputation. It was exemplified by my grandfather, who did not finish high school because he was needed on the farm after his older brother died in the 1918 flu epidemic. He worked as a sugar boiler at a sugar beet plant before he moved from Utah to California to work as an assembly line worker in a car manufacturing plant. These were not glamorous jobs, but they taught him the importance of doing his best and always giving a fair day’s work for his pay. He shared these



Annette Wanless Jarvis and her grandfather, Sylvan George Wanlass.

lessons with me. As we worked together in the yard—whether painting a fence or planting a garden—he insisted on my best work. He was a perfectionist, and shoddy work was never acceptable. His high standards grew out of his faith in God, his dedication to gospel principles, and his belief that work ethic yields honesty and integrity.

J. Richard Clarke, former counselor in the Presiding Bishopric, stated, “Work is a blessing from God. It is a fundamental principle of salvation, both spiritual and temporal. . . . [T]he Lord knew that from the crucible of work emerges the hard core of character.”⁸ He further explained:

This intense commitment to the work ethic is our tradition. Mormon industry has left its mark upon every piece of land we have occupied. Missouri, Nauvoo, the Salt Lake Basin, and all the valleys of the mountains where the Saints have settled are famous monuments to Mormon toil.

Of this period, President J. Reuben Clark observed: “We moved under our own power, without subsidy, without loan, wished on our way only by the maledictions of those who drove us out from our own homes and then appropriated, without paying for it, the property they forced us to leave behind. . . .

“So we struggled on against want and misery; toil and hardship were with us daily. . . .

“But the Church survived; the people prospered. Character endured intact.”⁹

During my career, I have watched attorneys get in trouble for overbilling clients. Bankruptcy law has strict rules, and attorneys

have been sanctioned, disbarred, or even imprisoned for breaking them. Again, my faith helps me remember that I represent a client who is entitled to fair and honest treatment. This means billing only the hours needed to get the job done and only the hours worked, foregoing fees from a litigated solution when a negotiated solution is a better option for a client, and advising a client based on their best interest and not necessarily mine. I didn’t expect to succeed in my career except through hard work. Nor have I ever expected to get a good result for a client without carefully preparing for hearings, educating myself, strategizing, and even forgoing sleep if necessary. That is a legacy of my religious beliefs.

MY FAITH MAKES ME A BETTER LEADER

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, much has been written about the importance of empathy and compassion as leadership qualities. These Christlike qualities were manifest in Christ’s leadership during His sojourn on earth. I learned the importance of empathy and compassion from my father, who often wept openly with those who were suffering, like Jesus did before raising Lazarus from the dead. In the scriptural account, Lazarus’s grieving sisters, Mary and Martha, lament that Jesus has arrived too late to save Lazarus from death. While Jesus knows He can and will raise Lazarus from the dead, He first expresses His love and empathy for Mary and Martha by weeping with them. Only after demonstrating His understanding of their pain does Christ act on the faith of Mary and Martha by restoring their brother to life.¹⁰

Christ’s example has had a profound influence on how I lead. I have had to do some hard things in leadership positions, and I always try to remember Christ’s empathy and compassion. In mentoring young attorneys—particularly young female lawyers looking for someone who can relate to their experience—I have found that compassionate leadership, including being generous with my time, returns to me far more than I give.

I currently serve on the executive committee for the American College of Bankruptcy. In a panel presentation on mentoring organized by college members, participants were asked to think about their experiences both as mentors and as mentees. I was blessed with an extraordinary mentor—a former corporate partner in New York who saw my potential and provided me with incredible career opportunities. His example has helped fuel my drive to give back and do for others what he did for me.

As I listened to this mentoring panel, I couldn’t help but think that among my professional accomplishments, the one that means the very most to me is giving of my time to younger lawyers. Mentorship has given me the chance to empathize with others in their disappointments and then help them rise up and find the success and appreciation they deserve. Christlike mentorship is a legacy of my personal religious convictions.

MY FAITH PROPELS ME TO SERVE OTHERS

As lawyers, we have an obligation to provide pro bono service. For those of us with religious convictions, our love of God and our fellow men motivates us to view this service not as an obligation but as a blessing.

Years ago, we were living in Reno, Nevada, with a new baby and three children under the age of 10. I was working part-time from home for a New York law firm at a time predating the rise of the internet. I did much of my work after my children went to bed and frequently skipped sleep to keep up with my responsibilities as a mother and a lawyer. My husband was the state health officer and traveled a lot. As you can imagine, it was a busy and stressful time for me. If that wasn’t already enough, my husband came home from work one day and told me he had volunteered me to work with a nonprofit providing support for patients suffering with lupus. He told me I would be helping them to qualify for national funding by rewriting their bylaws and addressing other corporate governance issues. I remember looking at him in disbelief and telling him there was no way I could add this work to my already overburdened shoulders.

He explained there was no one else he knew who could help and begged me to do this pro bono work. I didn’t even know what lupus was but soon learned a lot about this difficult



disease. I ended up helping them to get national funding. The organization was patient with my time constraints and incredibly grateful for what I did for them. In the process, my burden became a blessing. I gave my time and expertise, but what I received in return was so much more valuable—the satisfaction of really helping people. I also gained expertise in helping nonprofit organizations, which has enriched my subsequent decades of pro bono work. I have become my community’s go-to pro bono attorney for the arts, including for the Utah Symphony | Utah Opera and the Utah Museum of Contemporary Art—organizations that bring joy to so many people.

I recently had the pleasure of attending a performance of Mendelssohn’s *Elijah* by the Tabernacle Choir at Temple Square and the Utah Symphony. One of the most famous arias in this oratorio quotes Psalm 55: “Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and he shall sustain thee.”¹¹ I invited my vocology professor and his wife to attend the performance with me and my husband. This vocology professor has done me an incredible service in helping me to learn to sing again after superior laryngeal nerve damage caused in the aftermath of thyroid cancer. I was unable to sing for two years after surgery and was told it was not medically possible for me to regain my voice. Despite that prognosis, my professor did not give up on me but worked with me to remove this burden and restore my voice. Part of what he did for me was to coach me to give up on my lifelong perfectionism and learn to, as he would say, “give yourself grace.” His work with me, and the incredibly difficult effort required on my part over years of lessons, fulfilled the promise Heavenly Father gave me in a blessing by my husband—that I would sing again.

As I listened to the words of this beautiful song, sitting next to the two people who understood the removal of my own burden, it occurred to me that the Lord allows us to cast our burdens on Him so that we can take on others’ burdens. By so doing, we yoke ourselves with Christ.¹² My religious belief in the importance of service to others is at the core of why I spend so much time on pro bono work. It is also why I have spoken so passionately about this to the J. Reuben Clark Law Society. It is not the requirements of our profession to do pro bono legal work that drives me but rather my faith that motivates me to serve.

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MY FAITH HELPS ME BALANCE MY LIFE

People who meet me at this stage of my career may only see me for my professional success. But there is truth in Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story’s famous 1829 observation that the law “is a jealous mistress, and requires a long and constant courtship.”¹³ During the first 16 years of my career, I struggled to maintain my law practice while raising young children.

I had been practicing law for eight years when my husband finished medical residency. The firm I was working for in DC had informed me that because I was working part-time, I could not become a partner. Career-wise, it was a very discouraging time for me. Despite my excellent legal work and growing relationships with clients, I was falling behind my peers. At this time, I was pregnant with our fourth child and had three other young children. I honestly thought this was the end of my career, but my faith led me to put my family first and risk failure. I made the decision at that time that I would leave the practice of law, let my husband take the job he wanted in Nevada, and focus on my family. I did not anticipate how badly my firm wanted to keep me! They offered to let me work from home, send me a computer and other necessary equipment, and provide me support from afar. Because we were still paying off my husband’s medical school loans, I agreed to give this unheard-of working arrangement a try.

While working part-time at home (and pulling all-nighters), my reputation soared. It wasn't easy, but it was worth it. Throughout my career, I have made sacrifices for my family because my religious convictions steer me to prioritize eternal relationships. I have been fortunate that, while my initial career success lagged behind that of my peers—it took me 16 years to be made a partner—I eventually found the same professional success my peers had earned. But had I never achieved that degree of professional success, I knew I had already succeeded in the balance I had set between work and family. Work-life balance is not achieved overnight but rather over time as a “balance of imbalances.” Prioritizing your children’s needs and events and working around them lets them know that their interests are preeminent in your life.

MY FAITH ENCOURAGES FRIENDSHIP

My faith has enabled me to make wonderful friends of other faiths. In our increasingly secular society, there are few lawyers of faith. I feel an immediate bond when I meet another lawyer with strong religious beliefs. I have particularly enjoyed friendships with people whose specific beliefs are different from mine but whose faith is rooted in a belief in God. I have shared Passover and Yom Kippur prayers with Jewish friends, fought for respect for religious beliefs with Presbyterian friends, benefitted from discussions with and the prayers of Lutheran friends, discussed shared family values with Methodist friends, and served the community with Catholic friends. All these friendships have come from living my religion in my professional life.

I have been reading *The Good Life: Lessons from the World’s Longest Scientific Study of Happiness*, which explores an 80-year-long study conducted at Harvard University. It was no surprise to me that the study concluded that the most important component of happiness is enduring relationships.¹⁴ The study also noted the importance of being curious about the interests and experiences of others. The authors quote Ralph Waldo Emerson’s observation: “Every man I meet is my master in some point, and in that I learn of him.”¹⁵

I try to make a good friend in almost every case I work on. I find someone I can admire. I see each person as someone I can learn something from. I have learned to love opera from a client in Germany; I have learned about beekeeping and the many flavors of honey from a client in St. Louis; I have been enticed into reading modern literature (as opposed to the 19th-century literature I love) by a professional women’s reading group spanning the country; I have learned something about what it was like to grow up as a Black woman in my home county of Orange County, California, from a judge friend there; and I have been taught to enjoy Celtic, Americana, jazz, and blues music from the many lawyer-musicians I have befriended. If we look at each person as a person we can learn from (as Emerson said), and if we love each person as our neighbor (as Christ taught¹⁶), the blessings we receive from friendships in our

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profession are endless. My children joke that I have a friend in every city in the United States—an exaggeration, but with a kernel of truth.

MY FAITH IMPROVES MY WELL-BEING

Lately, there has been a lot of focus on wellness in our profession. The legal profession is stressful and rife with mental illness and addiction. Each day, we must juggle the many expectations from family, clients, colleagues, and community. My religious convictions have been at the core of my wellness in this profession. When we try our hardest to live a life of faith, we can find peace in our lives—a peace that will sustain us through stressful and hard times, a peace that will give meaning to our lives.

In his 2018 address, Elder Uchtdorf pointed out that King Solomon, who had every type of worldly success and advantage, ended up “disillusioned, pessimistic, and unhappy,”¹⁷ concluding that “all is vanity.”¹⁸ Elder Uchtdorf compared this feeling to the German word *Weltschmerz*, which he defined as “a sadness that comes from brooding about how the world is inferior to how we think it ought to be.” He points out that each of us feels *Weltschmerz* at times, particularly when we struggle on “our own personal and lonely path of misfortune.”¹⁹ He offers as the solution to *Weltschmerz* the promise given each of us by Christ: “I have come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”²⁰ Thus, he reminds us that if we focus on following Christ and engaging in His work, we will achieve the “abundant life” and find healing for what he calls “soul-sickness.”²¹

Christ promises us, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.”²² The peace we receive from our faith is critical to our well-being. This is a connection I have come to appreciate more the older I get. In the last five years, I have had some surprising and complicated health challenges. After reviewing my medical records, one of my doctors at the Mayo Clinic told me that he could not understand how I was able to come through all the issues I had faced with equanimity. My response to him was simple: faith.

MY FAITH PROMOTES GRATITUDE

Gratitude is also essential to my happiness and well-being. I learned the importance of gratitude concretely when I was diagnosed six years ago with a very rare disease—a “one-in-a-million disease,” the diagnosing doctor told me. Bringing the disease under control required life-threatening surgery. I was right in the middle of a critical case for an agricultural cooperative, so I gave directions to colleagues who covered hearings for me. My recovery required nearly two weeks in the ICU and three months’ rest in bed, and I kept my health problems to myself. I had a difficult time. While I had felt peace going into the surgery, the recovery was incredibly difficult and isolating. I couldn’t help but wonder why I was the one randomly struck with this rare disease and left to suffer with secondary diseases for more than 15 years. It is a question I am sure we all ask ourselves at some time in our lives: “Why me?”

I had never kept a journal before, but this time in my life was so difficult that I began to keep a “happiness journal.” I simply wrote down one thing each day that made me feel happy. These were small things, such as a conversation with a friend, an uplifting encounter with a stranger, or a loving embrace from a family member.

As I recorded these experiences, I discovered emotionally what I already knew intellectually: my happiest days were the days that I demonstrated gratitude by forgetting my own struggles and serving someone else. As Elder Uchtdorf put it, in giving service and thinking of the needs of others, I felt “[t]he healing hands of Jesus Christ . . . [which acted] to soften [my] pain, and fill [my] soul[] with ‘exceedingly great joy.’”²³ I could not have delivered remarks like this three years ago when I was working on recovering my voice after thyroid cancer. I don’t forget that. Thanking my Heavenly Father, my speech therapists, my vocology professor, and my husband are daily thoughts for me.

My religious convictions remind me of the importance of gratitude. As lawyers, we are truly lucky due to the education and opportunities we have. We need to always remember that and show gratitude to our Heavenly Father and to others who bless our lives. The

scriptures promise, “And he who receiveth all things with thankfulness shall be made glorious; and the things of this earth shall be added unto him, even an hundred fold, yea, more.”²⁴ When we express gratitude as part of our work as lawyers, we remind ourselves of the importance of humility and keep ourselves grounded in our profession.

I challenge you to make your own list of how your personal religious convictions have influenced your practice of law. I am the lawyer I am not in spite of my religious convictions but because of them. [cm](#)

NOTES

- 1 Articles of Faith 1:13.
- 2 Gary E. Stevenson, “Love, Share, Invite,” *Liahona*, May 2022, 85.
- 3 Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Believe, Love, Do,” *Liahona*, November 2018, 48.
- 4 Arthur C. Brooks, *Love Your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America from the Culture of Contempt* (New York: Broadside Books 2019).
- 5 Brooks, *Love Your Enemies*, 204.
- 6 Brooks, *Love Your Enemies*, 40, 43, 148.
- 7 Brooks, *Love Your Enemies*, 60–61.
- 8 J. Richard Clarke, “The Value of Work,” *Ensign*, May 1982, 77.
- 9 Clarke, “The Value of Work,” 77, emphasis in original.
- 10 See John 11:20–44.
- 11 Psalm 55:22.
- 12 See Matthew 11:28–30.
- 13 Joseph Story, “Value and Importance of Legal Studies: A Discourse Pronounced at the Inauguration of the Author, as Dane Professor of Law in Harvard University, August 25, 1829,” in *The Miscellaneous Writings of Joseph Story*, ed. William W. Story (Boston: C. C. Little and J. Brown, 1852), 523.
- 14 Robert Waldinger and Marc Schulz, *The Good Life: Lessons from the World’s Longest Scientific Study of Happiness* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2023).
- 15 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Greatness,” in *Letters and Social Aims*, vol. 4 of *Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson in Five Volumes* (Boston: Houghton, Osgood, and Company, 1876), 254.
- 16 See Luke 10:27–37.
- 17 Uchtdorf, “Believe, Love, Do,” 46.
- 18 Ecclesiastes 1:2.
- 19 Uchtdorf, “Believe, Love, Do,” 46.
- 20 John 10:10.
- 21 Uchtdorf, “Believe, Love, Do,” 47.
- 22 John 14:27.
- 23 Uchtdorf, “Believe, Love, Do,” 47.
- 24 Doctrine and Covenants 78:19.