



ELVIS WAS RIGHT

The Unavoidable Intersection Between Personal Values and a Fulfilling Practice of Law

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I've been practicing law for 32 years now, and I've learned a lot about how my personal values, including those based on religious conviction, impact my career. For almost 30 of those years, I have served as in-house counsel for large public and private companies, enjoying increasing levels of responsibility. My career journey has been one of self-imposed disruption and risk-taking as I've moved from one job to the next both to achieve my career goals and to find personal fulfillment. Misalignment of my personal values with institutional corporate values has driven some of my career moves on the path towards that fulfillment. I am fortunate that each move prepared me for what I would describe as my "dream job" today as chief legal officer of Hallmark.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHRIS GASH

Since graduating from BYU Law School in 1990, I have taken two bar exams, been a member of five state bars, and worked for four law firms (if you include three summer clerkships) and six companies. When I say “practice of law,” I am coming at it from the perspective of someone who has not only had a lot of practice but also as someone whose experience has been predominantly in-house, practicing in multiple industries, working under different leaders, and navigating different corporate cultures. That said, I believe my observations are relevant whether you practice in-house or whether you are in private practice, government, business, nonprofit, or education.

Defining and Refining Values

I hope the title for my remarks caught your attention: “Elvis Was Right: The Unavoidable Intersection Between Personal Values and a Fulfilling Practice of Law.” The following quote is attributed to Elvis Presley: “Values are like fingerprints. Nobody’s are the same, but you leave ’em all over everything you do.” I like this analogy for a couple of reasons.

To Elvis’s first point, even if we have shared values with family, members of our faith, or other communities with which we engage, the way our values—even shared values—impact what we think and do is personal to each of us. We each have a unique set of experiences and a unique combination of all the qualities and choices that make us who we are, including our gender, birth order, upbringing, education, faith, social interactions, and the like.

To Elvis’s second point, and where I will focus today, our values are left all over everything we do in that they are revealed, tested, and refined through our work. They can also be a guiding force in making professional choices that optimize career fulfillment and contribute to spiritual well-being and growth.

What are our values? I could spend all morning on this topic alone—and I won’t—but I will share that there are many resources that can help us define and refine our values, including religious practice and study, TED Talks, blogs, books, and assessments. You may think that because you can recite the Scout Law, the Young Women values, or the 13th Article of Faith, you know what your values are. But going beyond these to do some structured thinking around your own personal values is a good idea.

The “Align Your Values for the Right Career as a Lawyer” series offered by Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers, a nonprofit assistance program dedicated to helping with the personal and professional challenges of the legal profession, offers three valuable insights:

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FIRST

“Your values tell your brain what is important, what you care about most, and how you should behave across a variety of situations. Whereas most people would agree that honesty, fairness, and respect for others are important values, there are differences in how people characterize, demonstrate, and prioritize these concepts.” We need to pursue our own personal value system and actively manage its impact on our actions.

SECOND

“Your values inform your identity—who you are, what you do, how you do it, and [what you're passionate about]. When you have a lack of interest in something, you'll want to explore whether it is due to your values and identity, a lack of training and skills, or relying too much on a skill [in your comfort zone that limits] your interest in something new.” Often we don't prioritize learning new things because learning takes time or can make us uncomfortable; resistance to change is very human.

THIRD

“Your values are closely related to sources of motivation and energy. They are [often called] motivators [or] drive. However you label it, when you align your actions with your values, you'll have more energy to act.”

Intelligence, Character, and Relationships

Latter-day Saint scholar, teacher, and lecturer (and some might add comedian) John Bytheway shared advice with teens some 30 years ago in remarks titled “Whose Values Do You Value?” (audiocassette, Deseret Book, 1993). In his comments—still relevant today—Bytheway pointed out that we can say we value something, but if we act in contradiction to those values, it begs the question “Is it really a value?” He explained that there are only three things we can take with us from this earth: our intelligence, our character, and our relationships. I believe these are the same three things we can take from a job (with the caveat that we might not necessarily be able to take client relationships if we've agreed not to). We can't take the office furniture, the IP, the files, and so on.

As we think about these three things that we can take from life and from a job—intelligence, character, and relationships—as filters through which we can assess a career choice and its alignment with our values, we should ask ourselves these questions:

Is my job enhancing my intelligence? Am I growing intellectually?

Is my job enhancing my character? Have I become firmer in my values and stronger in what I stand for? Am I able to live my values at work? Do my values contribute to the effective performance of my work? As Bytheway said in his remarks, “Where does character come from? It comes from living your values.”

Is my job building lasting relationships that are healthy and beneficial, both personally and professionally? Am I respected and supported in living my values?

Whether you are on the precipice of making a career choice or just thinking ahead, questions about how an opportunity shapes your intelligence, character, and relationships are important questions to answer.

Our Fingerprints

To Elvis's point about our fingerprints, I believe there are three things we leave behind as we move on from a job: our legacy, our reputation, and our work product.

Thinking about our legacy, that “mark” we leave behind: Did our accomplishments reflect our values? Did our organizational impact do the same? Would colleagues be able to describe our values when they tell the story of our time and impact there?

Thinking about our reputation: What did we become known for during our time in the assignment or role? If someone were to say, “While she was here, she had a reputation for being . . .,” what would those adjectives be and do those adjectives align with what we would say our values are?

Thinking about our work product: Did the way we communicated, organized, advocated, delivered results, and innovated reflect our values? Were we thorough, thoughtful, professional, and balanced? Did we facilitate business objectives or were we perceived as an obstacle?

My advice is this:

If you value candor, be frank.

If you value honesty, be truthful.

If you value trust, be trustworthy.

If you value respect, be respectful.

If you value praise and recognition, give credit where credit is due and be happy for others when they succeed.

If you value integrity, do the right thing when nobody is looking.

Examples of Misalignment

Against that backdrop, I will offer some practical examples of my own value-driven career choices to help contextualize these thoughts.

In my third year of law school, I had offers from two well-known regional law firms. As I grappled with whether to accept either offer, I felt unsettled; I was having that “stupor of thought” (Doctrine and Covenants 9:9). So I submitted my résumé for third year on-campus interviews. I was selected to interview with a large international law firm, and they had sent a female partner to conduct the interview. This was the first female attorney with whom I had ever had an interview. I liked her and I really liked what she had to say about the firm, particularly how progressive and inclusive it was and how many female partners and associates there were. Now this was before the internet, so I couldn’t just google the firm and get the inside scoop. But I asked lots of questions and read everything that was available.

Ultimately, I accepted a position with that firm. It was everything I’d hoped for. I was surrounded by female associates and partners who mentored and encouraged me. After I had my first child, I knew that my motherhood was valued and respected by the firm, and I returned from leave as a highly productive, committed, and loyal associate. This place aligned with my values, and I thrived there.

When I decided to leave the firm to pursue an in-house career, I was fortunate to land at a business unit of a Fortune 50 company in the Midwest where the general counsel spoke often about “doing the right thing” as an appropriate goal above and beyond complying with the law. One year, the entire legal team (more than 100 lawyers) heard a panel discussion among the company’s most senior business leaders at the corporate headquarters on the East Coast, and a very senior executive was asked about what he valued in an in-house lawyer. I will never forget what he said: “You’re my lawyer, not my priest; I may not care about what’s right—I need to know what’s legal.”

I remember being both shocked at this statement and grateful that in my business unit, under my general counsel’s direction, “the right thing” was a welcome part of the analysis and was openly encouraged as part of the discussion. Because I value the pursuit of legal solutions rooted in doing what’s right, this alignment with my values kept me at this company for a fulfilling 12 years.

To advance my career, I accepted a position with another company, where I reported to a female general counsel who was a role model and mentor to me and who to this day inspires me to ask, “WWBD?” (“What would Becky do?”), because I greatly admired her servant-leadership, judgment, compassion, and wisdom. But after a corporate merger, a new culture took hold. Lawyers were encouraged to monitor and report the work hours and work habits of the other lawyers and staff, and there were longer days, more working weekends, and a relentless push to cut support-staff resources. Recognition programs were curtailed, communication and transparency decreased, and time to gather and celebrate and to nurture camaraderie during the workday were frowned upon. Because I value trust, respect, transparency, and human connection, I found this new environment stressful, unpleasant, and unfulfilling. I would need to make a change.

Coincidentally, I was soon approached with my first general counsel opportunity, and I became laser-focused on landing it. This was both the next professional move I wanted to make and an opportunity to escape cultural misalignment with my values. The final round of interviews should’ve been my first clue that I would face another values misalignment. Several senior company executives and their spouses hosted a dinner interview at an expensive restaurant and the CEO showed up late, in a T-shirt and shorts that were stained with sweat and barbeque sauce, and smelling of beer. He kept interrupting, talking loudly, using profanity, and asking questions that I could not answer without revealing attorney-client confidences. I would later learn that this was a performance to “test” candidates to see if he could rattle them when he didn’t fit the expected mold of CEO and to assess whether the candidate would fit in with the company’s informal, irreverent, and unconventional culture. I honestly don’t know how I passed that test, but because I wanted this job so desperately,



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I didn't listen to the Spirit or my gut telling me I was headed for trouble.

In my new role as general counsel, I was encouraged to tailor my dress, language, and conduct to more closely reflect the culture of the company. I took a few small steps to that end—mostly dressing more casually and behaving less formally—but I knew this was not the point of the guidance. What would have made me fit in better with company culture were things that really didn't align with my values. But this was my “dream job,” so I stuck with it.

It was exhausting. I wore myself out trying to add value and enjoy my work in a corporate culture and value system (regardless of the stated values) that clearly did not align with my own. I learned the hard truth of what John Bytheway meant when he warned, “Happiness comes from being committed to a value system.” Exhaustion comes from trying to be successful working in a value system in conflict with your own. I felt constant pressure to conform while trying to apply my values to legal problems in this environment. My health, my happiness, and my important relationships were all suffering.

Notwithstanding this, I felt good about what I had accomplished in my nearly three years there. I had led some key legal outcomes, rebuilt a legal function that was now in turnkey condition for a successor, and formed lasting and valued relationships that I knew would endure—and have endured—my departure. But I was not happy; it was time to move on.

Refocusing on the Vital

I was fortunate at this point in my career to be able to step away and take a breath. I wish the same for anyone struggling with values misalignment in their career, but I recognize it is not always feasible for all. Although I was being recruited for several other opportunities, I knew they would take some time to mature into offers and commitments. I calculated that I had about six months to reevaluate, and I used this time to really and wholly revisit my values—and start writing them down. I focused on my physical, emotional, and spiritual health; I served in the temple; I volunteered for every

church activity and effort that was presented; and I nurtured my most important relationships—with my Savior, husband, children, and friends. This time was a gift in so many ways.

I had learned much from my previous job about what was crucial for me in my role as a general counsel, especially that it was essential not only to contribute and be effective but also to be fulfilled. I knew that whatever choice I made next, the single most important factor for me would be values alignment. Now at the pinnacle of my career working for two iconic and admired brands, Hallmark and its subsidiary Crayola, I am fortunate to have complete values alignment. Among Hallmark's stated beliefs and values are the following:

- “Our products and services must enrich people’s lives.”
- “Creativity and quality—in our products, services, and all that we do—are essential to our success.”
- “The people of Hallmark are our company’s most valuable resource.”
- “We value excellence in all we do.”
- “We value high standards of ethics and integrity.”
- “We value caring and responsible corporate citizenship . . . for each community in which we operate.”

At Hallmark I serve as counsel to the board of directors and sit on the senior executive leadership team. I am often in the room where it happens, and I am grateful that these values are modeled at the very top and are the lens through which decisions are made. As I’ve helped to lead Hallmark in responding to a worldwide pandemic, social and racial injustice, political turmoil, acts of aggression against our democracy, and economic challenges, I have been incredibly proud of our actions and decisions reflecting these values. I am energized by the care we inject into the world and into our workforces as we demonstrate respect for individual choices on topics that can be divisive, as we encourage flexibility in how and where work is performed where we can, and as we provide resources for emotional and mental well-being.

In my time at Hallmark, I’ve learned that diversity and inclusion have been values at Hallmark since its founding more than 100 years ago. The company’s founder and subsequent leaders hired and appointed women to serve as business leaders and board members before these were expectations of employees or shareholders. The company has supported employee resource groups and offered creative products and solutions for diverse communities for decades, and it has formed, led, and supported external organizations that advance diversity, equity, and inclusion. In recent years, Hallmark has been even more declarative about these long-standing values and has stated expectations that promote these values for all leaders and employees, including elevated intentional learning, advocacy, products, and content to serve all communities. Hallmark has emphasized these values in our approach to recruitment and development. It has been wonderful to have the support I need to advance diversity and inclusion in the legal profession by furthering these goals at Hallmark.

Actions Reveal Values

As I noted at the outset of my remarks, my experience with values alignment and misalignment are from the in-house perspective. I don’t know if particular law firms have published or stated values or not. But they do have values. If you are pursuing a career at a firm or a company, do your homework so you know what the organization’s real values are.

In any event, experience has taught me that stated values are just words. Values are reflected in action. As you ascend in an organization, it is important to examine whether the stated values apply at the top (because they start there) or if there are unspoken values that are steering decisions and strategies despite what’s written down. In order to be real, an organization’s values must start in the boardroom and the C-suite. If they aren’t there, they aren’t real. And what is modeled there is what will guide the organization. We’ve seen infamous examples of business failure and collapse because of the “values” at the top.

In this discussion of where we leave our fingerprints, it’s vital to emphasize that values alignment in our work is not just about personal fulfillment. It’s also about the opportunity to draw from institutional values to become better versions of ourselves in meaningful and impactful ways that help others. Here’s a recent example from my own life.

Just a week ago, my husband and I were returning from a midday funeral we had attended to support a friend, and we had not eaten all day. We were famished. We stopped for a late lunch and were focused on our appetites. I confess that an earlier me might not have noticed the dirty and disheveled young man who was sitting behind a column in the diner to avoid the glare of the manager. I wonder if my earlier self, if I noticed him at all, might have been annoyed and simply ignored him when he quietly said, “Excuse me.” But

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every day at Hallmark—every single day—we talk about our purpose to put more care in the world.

“Can I help you with something?” I asked.

“Do you have some cash?” he replied.

“I’m sorry, but we don’t carry cash,” I answered—an absolutely true statement reflecting our total reliance on plastic money—but I asked him, “Are you hungry?”

He nodded.

What immediately came to my mind was this very simple idea that “this is an opportunity to put more care in the world.” And so I asked my husband to make arrangements with the stern-looking restaurant manager to purchase a meal for this stranger.

For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?

When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee?

Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?

And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

[Matthew 25:35-40]

Key Takeaways

After I listen to someone like me deliver remarks like these, I ask myself, “What’s the ‘so what’? What am I supposed to do with this information?” Here’s what I would like you to take away from my remarks. Working where the values are in alignment with your personal values is energizing and will bring you the most fulfillment. It’s exhausting to work where they are in conflict. Working where you can apply your values to your job will make you more effective, help you build the character and reputation you want (and which hopefully reflect your values), and allow you to leave a legacy you’ll be proud of. Take time to do some structured thinking about your values; at a minimum, write them down and see if you can articulate examples of how they show up in your life.

Remember that all you will take away when it’s all said and done is your intellect, your character, and your relationships. Make choices that nurture those things.

Values might be captured in words, but they are revealed in actions. With the power of all the tools available to you—the internet included—there is much you can learn about what an organization’s values are and if they align with yours. Be selfish, brave, and bold when it comes to your professional happiness and fulfillment by seeking out work environments where your fingerprints are welcome.

And finally, don’t just leave your fingerprints where you work. Leave them all over the place in ways that serve, help, and uplift others. Isn’t that what it’s really all about? 