

# Navigating Life's Uncertainties

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**I love BYU Law School.**

Going to this law school is the most important decision I have ever made. Like my classmates, I received a world-class education, made lifelong friends, and had more freedom and flexibility than my peers who graduated from pricier schools with heavy student loan burdens.

But this law school benefited me in unique ways. My husband, Todd, and I met in a first-year study group. We married in our second year and welcomed our first of four children shortly after graduation. Each job I have had since graduating stems from my BYU degree: then dean Jim Rasband connected me with Judge J. Clifford Wallace for my clerkship, a BYU alum opened the door for me at Cooley, and the recruiter at Qualtrics sourcing my position was looking for people with Utah ties who would be willing to relocate to Provo on short notice.

Illustrations by Guy Billout





Attending this school gave me my family, job, and home. I hope my experience doesn't increase your anxiety about choosing wisely—it shouldn't, and I'll explain why later. I do, however, need to give credit where credit is due.

If you do choose to attend law school, wherever you go, your first day of class will likely introduce you to a foundational legal concept: precedent. In the legal system, precedent means that a principle or rule established in a legal case will be binding on or persuasive to future cases addressing similar issues or facts. Precedent facilitates stability and predictability in our legal, political, and economic systems. In the corporate world where I practice, businesses rely on precedent to know whether their transactions will be enforceable or whether their conduct might be penalized. In other civil and criminal contexts, precedent encourages fairness by aiming to treat similarly situated individuals equally.

In our personal lives, we also look to precedent for guidance. When facing an unfamiliar situation, we may study what others in similar circumstances have done and what their outcomes were to inform and optimize our own response. Maybe that is part of why you are here today. I have been to countless events like this one looking for an example of how to be a woman of faith with a successful career and a thriving family. Growing up in Utah County in the 1980s and 1990s, I did not know any women who worked outside the home other than schoolteachers. By the time I started law school, I knew a few—but most were my professors. I still did not know any women lawyers I could talk to about being a woman in the law, much less balancing that with family and other commitments.

Fortunately, women—including women of faith—are now entering the legal profession in droves. Technology also helps us connect with a wider range of women than ever, and over the years I have found many excellent support groups and mentors, male and female, both online and in person.

But I can tell you this: after years of searching, attending events like this, and meeting hundreds of other lawyers, mothers, and professionals, I have never found that elusive person whose life could serve

as a precedent for my own—not one person with my same background, interests, skills, family situation, and job. She is not out there. She is *me*. I have learned, as Glennon Doyle wrote in her book *Untamed*, that “[e]very life is an unprecedented experiment. This life is mine alone. So I have stopped asking people for directions to places they’ve never been. There is no map. We are all pioneers.”<sup>1</sup>

Realizing that our life is unmapped and unprecedented is daunting, but even courts have to move beyond precedent to create progress. If courts always followed precedent, Linda Brown could not have successfully challenged racially segregated schools. And if women’s lives always followed precedent, 2021 wouldn’t see us celebrating our first madame vice president or this law school’s first predominantly female graduating class. So today I won’t give you any directions for your own life—I have never lived it—but I will share three navigational instruments that might help you on your own unmapped path.

#### GUIDING PRINCIPLE 1

### Identify Your North Star

Thousands of years before your journey began, explorers relied on stars to navigate new territory. In 800 BC, Homer’s archetypal traveler Odysseus “never closed his eyes, but kept them fixed on the Pleiads”<sup>2</sup> as he sailed across the Mediterranean. Around the same time, Polynesian seafarers used celestial navigation to spread across the South Pacific.

Identifying your personal guiding stars can orient you to your path and enlighten you during difficult decisions. Your star may be a particular job or position you want to have someday or something you want to accomplish. It may be a general principle or value that you want to adhere to or a vision of the kind of person you want to become.

One of my guiding stars is my commitment to God and to following divine direction. I am not perfect at this, but in most of my big decisions, I have tried to do as Nephi counseled: to “pray unto the Father in the name of Christ, that he will consecrate [my] performance . . . , that [my] performance may be for the welfare of [my] soul.”<sup>3</sup>

Inviting divinity into my decision-making prompted me to consider applying to law school even though I had spent most of my college years preparing for history PhD programs. It also ultimately led me to BYU Law School.

As you have already heard, choosing to attend BYU Law School is the single most important decision I have ever made. But—and I can only confess this here because I *did* end up choosing BYU—it was not the school I had planned on attending. I had been admitted to my dream school on the East Coast, and everyone, including myself, assumed I would enroll there. But because I was committed to discover and carry out God’s will for me, I was open to the unexpected answer I got when praying over my decision. At the time, trusting God and declining my dream school felt like a sacrifice, but that so-called sacrifice has been my greatest blessing. As the apostle Paul wrote, my eye had not seen, my ear had not heard, and my heart could not even imagine what God had prepared for me.<sup>4</sup>

One critical caveat here—especially for those of you who may be concerned that you haven’t received clear direction about whether and where to attend law school: For me, whether and where to attend law school really mattered. And perhaps for that reason I got an unmistakably clear answer. Most of my decisions have not been like that.

I don’t view God as having a detailed divine blueprint that we are capable of spoiling if we step off of some predetermined path but rather as a cocreator we work with to answer the question “[W]hat is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”<sup>5</sup> The story of the brother of Jared from the Book of Mormon illustrates this beautifully. Sometimes God tells us exactly how to build a boat to get from point A to point B. Perhaps more often God leaves us to our own devices and helps us make it work—even if all we can muster seems like a pile of rocks. I will talk a bit more about this later, but I didn’t want to leave anyone in a panic because she didn’t receive an angelic visitation telling her to attend law school!

Another of my guiding stars is commitment to my family. For me, a family and a career is not an

either/or proposition, but when deciding between career options and other activities that take my time, I try to select those that I hope will optimize family happiness.

Sometimes this has meant passing on professional opportunities. As a law student and for the first several years of my career, I dreamed of going into academics. Although I worked toward transitioning to an academic path, the timing and circumstances never seemed right for my family. During the time in my career that I should have been pursuing fellowships or another advanced degree or original research, I had three babies in three years. It just didn’t make sense for me to uproot my family for a fellowship or postgraduate program with no maternity leave, limited benefits, a fraction of my law firm pay, and likely several years of hopping around before landing a tenure-track position.

Instead, I enjoyed my firm’s generous maternity leave, a flexible schedule that—while admittedly stressful and unpredictable—allowed me to juggle work and young children, and a salary that provided a comfortable living in a neighborhood we had grown to love with excellent schools and activities for our kids. Ironically, the large law firm job that many assume will wreck one’s family life was surprisingly supportive as I built mine. While I certainly had my “what might have been” moments as I mourned a career dream that wasn’t to be, my decision to stay at that firm instead of switching career paths led me to the position I have today—an incredibly rewarding job that I never could have predicted or prepared for.

In *How Will You Measure Your Life?*, the late Clayton M. Christensen wrote that “if the decisions you make about where you invest your blood, sweat, and tears are not consistent with the person you aspire to be, you’ll never become that person.”<sup>6</sup> Focusing on guiding stars does not mean that you won’t face personal or professional setbacks, but it will inspire decisions that reflect your deepest values so that you become the kind of person you want to become. As Lin-Manuel Miranda sings about the intrepid seafarers who kept their eyes fixed on the stars, “At night, we name every star; we know where we are. We know who we are.”<sup>7</sup>

*This address was given at a Women in Law event on January 28, 2021.*

## Make Friends with Uncertainty, Your Traveling Companion

Stars are glittering guides, but they won't illuminate our entire path or spare us from the uncertainty we feel while navigating uncharted territory. Even Nephi, on an assignment straight from God, had to proceed step by step, "not knowing beforehand the things which [he] should do."<sup>8</sup> Sometimes uncertainty bubbles up as we set off down an unprecedented path and don't know what is coming next. Other times it erupts when a goal we once had no longer seems right or when we have tried and failed at something and we don't know how to recover or what to do next. All too often, uncertainty erodes our own self-confidence. How can we live with—even make friends with—this traveling companion?

I imagine we have all dealt with the uncertainty and fear we feel when we cannot predict what our path holds. When I feel stuck or confused, I remember an analogy that President Gordon B. Hinckley shared in 2002 that comforted and inspired me when I was upending a lot of my existing life plans. Recounting his days working for a railroad with tracks that threaded the passes through western mountain ranges, he described:

*It was in the days when there were steam locomotives. Those great monsters of the rails were huge and fast and dangerous. I often wondered how the engineer dared the long journey through the night. Then I came to realize that it was not one long journey, but rather a constant continuation of a short journey. The engine had a powerful headlight that made bright the way for a distance of 400 to 500 yards. The engineer saw only that distance, and that was enough, because it was constantly before him all through the night into the dawn of the new day. . . .*

*And so it is with our eternal journey. We take one step at a time. In doing so we reach toward the unknown, but faith lights the way.<sup>9</sup>*

Sometimes, like that engineer, all we can do is "press forward with a . . . perfect brightness of hope"<sup>10</sup> and trust that God will be "a lamp unto [our] feet, and a light unto [our] path."<sup>11</sup> Even if that lamplight

only gets us through a few steps at a time, at least it will help us move beyond the unending analysis paralysis that so often accompanies uncertainty.

But sometimes we aren't just uncertain about what is coming next on the track. Sometimes we feel like the locomotive has gone completely off the rails. What do we do when our plans don't pan out or life brings unanticipated challenges? How can we "be still and still moving"?<sup>12</sup>

My husband and I graduated from law school on the cusp of the 2008 financial crisis. This was a challenging time for many lawyers who found themselves unemployed after law firms froze hiring and conducted layoffs. I was fortunate to land a job at Cooley, but my husband couldn't find full-time work. While we were grateful for my employment, it was never our plan for me to be our family's sole financial support—

I hadn't even wanted to work full-time—and we definitely didn't expect my husband to be a stay-at-home dad. It was isolating and overwhelming for both of us.

While I eventually grew to love my practice at Cooley and our atypical family arrangement has worked well for us, it was a rough few years. I felt like we were totally off track from our plans, impatiently trudging along until my husband could find a job and we could get back to living our "real" life.

I was wrong. As many religious and wisdom traditions teach, our "real" life—even if it isn't our ideal life—is right here, right now. There is no other life, no better life, lying in wait until some past problem resolves or future event materializes. President Thomas S. Monson frequently taught us to "[l]earn from the past, prepare for the future, [and] live in the present."<sup>13</sup> Eckhart Tolle put it most bluntly: "Most people treat



the present moment as if it were an obstacle that they need to overcome. Since the present moment is life itself, it is an insane way to live.”<sup>14</sup>

I finally started to recover from this insane way of living as though the present were an obstacle after my third child was born. I had struggled with returning to work after the birth of my second child, and I wanted things to go better this time. In considering how I could ease the transition, I felt prompted to start a gratitude journal the first day I went back to work.

This daily gratitude practice did not change any challenging circumstances; if anything, my degree of difficulty increased because I now had three young kids instead of two. But my gratitude practice changed the way I experienced those circumstances—and so it changed my life. Gratitude opened my eyes to many wonders and kindnesses I experienced every day and to the hand of a God I had felt a bit abandoned by in the wake of my perceived life derailment. I realized I had not been abandoned at all—God was everywhere in my life if only I looked.

President Dieter F. Uchtdorf taught this principle beautifully, referring to the golden tickets from Roald Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*:

*So many people today are waiting for their own golden ticket—the ticket that they believe holds the key to the happiness they have always dreamed about. For some, the golden ticket may be a perfect marriage; for others, a magazine-cover home or perhaps freedom from stress or worry.*

*There is nothing wrong with righteous yearnings—we hope and seek after things that are “virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy.” The problem comes when we put our happiness on hold as we wait for some future event—our golden ticket—to appear. . .*

*. . . Never stop hoping for all of the righteous desires of your heart. But don’t close your eyes and hearts to the simple and elegant beauties of each day’s ordinary moments that make up a rich, well-lived life.*

*The happiest people I know are not those who find their golden ticket; they are those who, while in pursuit of worthy goals, discover and treasure the beauty and sweetness of the everyday moments. They are the ones who, thread by*

*daily thread, weave a tapestry of gratitude and wonder throughout their lives. These are they who are truly happy.*<sup>15</sup>

Many of you are in a building or planning phase of life. These phases can be exciting but challenging, and sometimes we are tempted to believe that happiness is just around the corner—when we finish this semester, survive the LSAT, get accepted to law school, finally start down a career path, or attain a certain golden ticket position, income or status. But wisdom, experience, and even science teach that happiness is not something we find when we reach our goals or attain some future state. I know people who have had success beyond their wildest imagination and have won multiple golden tickets but who are no happier than they were when that success was a pipe-dream. Those who were happy while working toward their goals were happy once they reached them. Those who were insecure and unsatisfied remained unsatisfied even after achieving long-awaited dreams.

It is our attitude about our circumstances and not our circumstances that defines our happiness. The most powerful way I have found to manage the uncertainty and heartache that we will all face is to stop dwelling on past disappointments or worrying about what the future holds and instead attend to the only real life I have: the one that is unfolding in front of my eyes minute by minute.

#### GUIDING PRINCIPLE 3

### Trust Your Captain—You!

The last source of uncertainty I mentioned is uncertainty in ourselves, which I want to address now in my final navigational guideline: trust your captain—you! Trust your ability to meet the challenges of unfamiliar territory, and trust your judgment and intuition as you make your own navigational decisions.

One major roadblock I have faced in my life and career is a lack of confidence in my abilities, no matter how stellar my previous track record. Women in particular suffer from this “confidence gap.” It is challenging to close, but I want to share one approach that has been particularly impactful to me.

For most of my life I have gravitated toward things that I knew based on previous experience I would be good at and avoided activities in which success was uncertain (or, worse yet, failure was likely). When I first started at a law firm, because I had so much practice and positive feedback about my writing ability in school and my clerkship, I was tapped to do a lot of brief writing as a junior associate. This provided many professional opportunities and an unusually broad exposure to different practice areas and attorneys, and I certainly recommend you learn about and leverage your strengths as I did. But in most careers we reach a point where we have to expand our skill set and learn to do things that might not come naturally to us. At least at Cooley, I couldn’t make partner just by writing briefs, so I needed to develop the full skill set of a litigator.

This was scary. I didn’t know if I would be good at or enjoy doing things such as taking a deposition or managing a complex discovery process. For a while I tried (unsuccessfully) to find a way to only stick to brief writing!

At the same time, something small but significant happened in my personal life. After the birth of my third child, in addition to being prompted to keep a gratitude journal, I also felt prompted to start running, even though I have always been a terrible athlete. Given my inclination to stick to activities that I excelled at, I had never spent much time on physical fitness. But I knew I needed to do this. I needed to get over the embarrassment that observers might think I looked slow and awkward or that several senior citizens would pass me in my first 5K (true story). And while I never became any good at running, running enriched my life. It improved my physical and mental health. It opened doors to meaningful friendships. It gave me a fun way to explore new places. I learned that I didn’t have to be great at something or have innate talent to learn from, enjoy, and improve at it.

That lesson gave me the courage to tackle new challenges in other areas of my life, including at work. I sought out new professional opportunities and learned that I enjoy and am good at aspects of legal practice beyond brief writing. I discovered that

I love working with tech companies, and while an earlier version of me would have shied away from the industry because I have no tech background, I dove in and focused on building skills that matter most in tech, such as intellectual property, privacy, and licensing. That is how I wound up where I am today. Qualtrics wasn't looking for a brief writer; they were looking for a well-rounded technology lawyer. I never would have become that without venturing into new professional territory.

I should add that I did try some things along the way that didn't work out, and I put my heart, soul, and a significant amount of effort into exploring and applying for some jobs I didn't get. So my point is not that taking risks always works out; some of mine did, and some did not. My point is a more fundamental lesson about confidence that I learned along the way: True confidence isn't believing that you will succeed at a task. True confidence is knowing that whether or not you succeed by external measures, you are no more or less valuable as a human soul and you will be okay. That kind of confidence empowers us to try new things without any guarantee of success. Brené Brown has taught that vulnerability "is not about winning. It's not about losing. It's having the courage to show up when you can't control the outcome. No vulnerability, no creativity. No tolerance for failure, no innovation."<sup>16</sup> As I have learned in my undistinguished running career, true confidence is knowing that running the race is worth it even if you lose.

But there is one more fundamental roadblock I have faced: doubt—not just in my ability to achieve a goal but about whether I am allowed to aim for it in the first place. Sometimes cultural and social pressures seem to tell me that my goals aren't goals that people like me should have and that something in me is broken for wanting them.

As I have reflected on my search for other women attorneys at events like these, I have realized that I was looking for more than a guide to show me how to live my life. I was looking for permission to live the life I felt called to live. If I could find a happy, successful lawyer who was still a good mom and contributed to church and community, then I could give myself permission to do the same thing. If I could find enough

quotes from general authorities that said it was okay to pursue an education and work outside the home even if it wasn't a financial necessity, then I could give myself permission to pursue an advanced education and career, whether or not I "needed" to. If I could get clear direction from God telling me to attend law school or pursue a particular professional path, then I didn't need to worry that doing so might be misguided.

What I am trying to remember, and to remind you, is that no other woman, friend, neighbor, teacher, family member, church leader, mentor, advisor—no one—has ever lived your life. You are the foremost authority on your own life. While I treasure wise and inspired counsel from each of those sources, please remember that you don't need anyone's permission to think what you think, feel what you feel, want what you want, or be who you are.

Your Creators made you in our Divine Mother's own image, blessed you, and called you good.<sup>17</sup> Who is to say that you didn't inherit from Her the very spark that inspires your unprecedented aspirations? Sometimes trusting God means taking a step you didn't think you wanted to take. Many times trusting God means trusting the divinity within yourself that is calling you to seek after good things.

I think this is part of what Carol Lynn Pearson conveys in her revelatory poem "Power":

*When she learned that  
she didn't have to plug into  
someone or something  
like a toaster into a wall  
when she learned that she  
was a windmill and had only to  
raise her arms  
to catch the universal whisper  
and turn  
turn  
turn  
she moved  
oh, she moved  
and her dance was a marvel.<sup>18</sup>*

Today I have compared life to a journey; hopefully the navigational instruments I have shared will help you on yours. Perhaps your life will look more like a wild dance than an unbroken journey, but however you choose to move through life, it will be unprecedented. And it will be a marvel. cm

#### NOTES

- 1 Glennon Doyle, *Untamed* (New York: Dial Press, 2020), 60.
- 2 Homer, *The Odyssey*, book 5.
- 3 2 Nephi 32:9.
- 4 See 1 Corinthians 2:9.
- 5 Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day," in *House of Light* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 60.
- 6 Clayton M. Christensen, James Allworth, and Karen Dillon, *How Will You Measure Your Life?* (New York: Harper Business, 2012), 75.
- 7 Opetai Foa'i and Lin-Manuel Miranda, "We Know the Way," from *Moana* (Disney, 2016).
- 8 1 Nephi 4:6.
- 9 Gordon B. Hinckley, "We Walk by Faith," *Ensign*, May 2002.
- 10 2 Nephi 31:20.
- 11 Psalm 119:105.
- 12 T. S. Eliot, "East Coker" (1940); in *Four Quartets*, no. 2, part V (1943).
- 13 Thomas S. Monson, "In Search of Treasure," *Ensign*, May 2003.
- 14 See Eckhart Tolle, *Stillness Speaks* (Vancouver, Canada: Namaste Publishing; Novato, California: New World Library, 2003), 42: "Do you treat *this moment* as if it were an obstacle to be overcome? . . . Almost everyone lives like this most of the time. Since the future never arrives, except *as* the present, it is a dysfunctional way to live" (emphasis in original).
- 15 Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Forget Me Not," *Ensign*, Nov. 2011; quoting Articles of Faith 1:13.
- 16 Brené Brown, in *A Call to Courage*, Netflix documentary (2019).
- 17 See Genesis 1:27–28, 31.
- 18 Carol Lynn Pearson, "Power," in *Finding Mother God: Poems to Heal the World* (Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith, 2020), 135.