

12-15-2009

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Recommended Citation

Wise, Jane H., "Law School: A Sacred Experience" (2009). *Vol. 2: Service & Integrity*. Paper 15.
http://digitalcommons.law.byu.edu/life_law_vol2/15

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Law School: A Sacred Experience

Jane H. Wise

I have heard many law students describe their decision to come to law school as a “calling” and—because when you choose to follow a path, you also choose its destination—a calling to the law as well. Students’ stories of this “call” illustrate a spiritual impetus that moved them here with a hunger to acquire legal skills. I think all of us were called to law school. I wonder how many law school graduates remember that initial call and still feel a spiritual impetus in their professional lives?

“Many Are Called”¹

Heeding this call isn’t for the fainthearted. Law school’s reputation is one of hard work, endless preparation, the Socratic method, and razor-sharp competition. Why would anyone choose to do this? Because law school prepares lawyers. Everyone who graduates from law school can practice in a profession of power.

I spent the weekend reading essays on the reasons why 27 first-year law students decided to become lawyers. Some of them knew from early on that they wanted law as a profession. The events of September 11, 2001, figured prominently in others’ decisions. Some were kindly or unkindly nudged by a parent, teacher, or friend. All stated that once planted, the idea of coming to law school gained a life of its own.

It brought back memories of how I was “called” to the law. My college graduation was looming with undergraduate degrees in English and theatre performance. I had not acquired many practical or employable skills and was wondering what on earth I was going to do: Graduate school? Find a “real” job? In one of my last literature classes I recognized a woman who had been in elementary school with me. I asked her what she was going to do after graduation. “I’m going to law school,” she said. She spoke

in a nonchalant and even blasé way about this plan, but as I heard what she was saying, I felt the earth move under my feet.

It was 1972. I knew many attorneys—my father was an attorney—but I knew no women who were going to law school. My women friends were either married, planning for marriage, still in school, teaching, nursing, or pounding typewriters.

The idea of going to law school swirled around in my mind making me dizzy. Here was a possibility I had never considered. The more I thought about it, the more possible it seemed for me, too. The seed was planted, and just as Alma described, it was a good seed because it began to swell in my heart.² I could do that—go to law school. I loved school. I loved reading. The idea began to “enlarge my soul and be delicious to me.”³

I met my closest friend for lunch soon after and announced, “I’m going to take the LSAT next week. I think I’ll go to law school.” She, too, was floored by such an announcement. Let me set the stage for those who don’t remember more than 30 years ago. In 1973 when I started law school at the University of Utah, there were less than half a dozen women who would graduate that year in a class of one hundred. There were 15 women graduates in 1976, the year I graduated. I took the bar and became the 100th woman admitted to the Utah State Bar. The first woman had been admitted in 1873 before the Territorial Bar, and 103 intervening years passed before another 99 women joined her in the ranks. In 1972 for a woman to casually announce she was going to law school was out of the ordinary.

“I think I’ll go, too,” said my friend. It didn’t take long for her to plant the seed and for it to grow and become delicious to her. There was also the fact that she would have a friend there—me.

It was not a blinding flash of light or an audible voice that issued my call to the law. It was planting a seed of an idea, feeling it swell and enlarge, believing it was good, and having it become delicious to me. The beginnings of transforming events may happen simply and quietly in the planting of a good idea. That doesn’t mean that the repercussions of that good idea won’t mean thunder and lightning later on, but the start can begin in a quiet thought, the remark of a trusted friend, a new and sweet inspiration that brings light.

I’d like to share some of the stories from the entering class of 2003 first-year law students and their calls to law school. The stories are embedded in circumstances from the quiet to the dramatic, but all of them involve planting an idea that brought good feelings that law school was the right thing to do.

For some students the idea of law school grew up with them. “I always knew that I wanted to go to law school, but from a young age people told me I should think about something else. I welcome a challenge, however, and realize that without it we cannot grow.” Another student wrote, “I can’t

remember when I first formulated the idea of going to law school. I grew up knowing it and living it as if it was the most natural thing in the world.”

Some students thought they'd go to law school because a parent was a lawyer. One student remembers a second-grade back-to-school night when he unveiled an art project to his mother and attorney father: “It was a stiff sheet of white paper that began, ‘When I grow up I want to be a lawyer.’” The word *lawyer* was spelled out in pennies.

Other students had experiences that showed them the importance of legal skills, like drafting laws to protect people. They wanted those skills to help right wrongs. One student wrote of surveying migrant workers:

The surveys were designed to see if the farmers were following safety regulations. We asked about things like notification of pesticide treatments, the availability of proper equipment, sanitary living conditions, and other safety-related issues. While spending time with these workers and hearing some of their stories, I became extremely grateful for the laws that were designed to protect them. I began to see that being a lawyer would fit into the life I wanted to live.

Another student wrote:

I began to think about my dreams growing up. I remembered an experience I had in high school where I interned at the Utah State Capitol and had the chance to read over bills that were being proposed. I fell in love with the atmosphere of many men and women working together to create laws for the good of the citizens of the country, realizing that the law could be used to bring to pass good purposes and protect good people and programs. I realized that good lawyers were needed to promote these causes.

There were stories of frustration with systems where rules were not obeyed that made the idea of acquiring legal skills attractive. Work in China was the seminal event that led one student to law school, seeing what she saw as a lack of adherence to rules and regulations there:

Cars did not yield the right-of-way to ambulances. Bicyclists, mopeds, and pedestrians fought to be on the sidewalk. I was pushed, shoved, and stepped on as others moved in front of me to get on a bus, to get into the subway, to pay for groceries, or to conduct banking transactions. My students at the university were casual in sharing work on exams and in papers and disregarded the ground rules I had tried to establish and reiterated throughout the semester.

Another student wrote of his experience as a collection agent for a rent-to-own company and determining there must be a better way to earn a living:

I was looking at going into management soon, but the merits of the rent-to-own industry were wearing thin. The majority of our customers were people who could not manage money. Many lived in trailers rented by the week

with no required deposit; however, the cumulative monthly payment was more than the rent on a nice apartment or house payment. Many individuals were in a constant cycle of addiction, eviction, and then temporary cleanup. Or, if a customer did stay with us, he or she would end up paying triple the cost for a houseful of basic furniture. I asked myself, “What do I really want to do? What is important to me?” As I pondered on this, the word *justice* came to mind. I made up my mind to go to law school and become a lawyer.

Two years after the events of September 11, the memory of that day figured in some of the essays as a call to self-examination and reevaluation of future plans:

September 11, 2001, was a bad day for me. I would in no way wish to make light of how devastating that day was for others in saying that for me it was particularly bad. It hit close to home. It jarred the sense of civility that I held for my life, specifically and for my country at large, and it prompted me to scrutinize my purpose on the earth. That disastrous Tuesday was the beginning of a serious self-reflection period.

Another student wrote:

The morning of September 11, 2001, I was on my way to another sales call in Crystal City, Virginia—just across an interstate highway from the Pentagon. My appointment was for 10:00 a.m., but I never made it close to the area. I was able to get turned around and make it home several hours later, where I watched the rest of the day’s events unfold on television. After that, my wife and I sat down and asked ourselves what we really wanted to do with the rest of our lives, like living where we wanted to live and working in something we wanted to work in.

Many students expressed the notion that a law school education would further a life of service. One wrote, “I’ve always wanted to help others, and through my public education experience, I met many people who felt trapped and taken advantage of. Regardless of the type of law I eventually practice, I want to assist those who feel helpless.” Another student expressed her love for children and a desire to help them: “At an early age I decided that I wanted to enter into a field where I could help protect children from the harshness sometimes found in the world.” One student came to law school because of “a desire to help people find justice, equality, and a better life” and because “the desire to be of service to others is at the core of my life.”

Finally, several students wrote about the connection between spiritual promptings and pursuing an education in law. One student summed it up by saying, “I am in law school because of the teachings of the Church regarding personal revelation and regarding my relationship with a loving Father who gives direction to His children concerning His will for them. Such teachings have given me the knowledge, the opportunity, and the faith to know that law school is the place where I should be.”

Some calls to law school seemed the most natural thing in the world, while other calls were born from frustration with systems as they were and wanting justice and protection for others. Others were inspired with knowing law school was the place they should be. For many, the call to law school began with students imagining the end of that education culminating in justice, service, and protection.

Students who come to law school are called to a special preparation, but that is a different thing from being spiritually chosen for the profession of law. To be spiritually chosen for the work means first we choose God and His kingdom; He then chooses us for the work.

“Why Are They Not Chosen?”⁴

Section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants explains why those who are called, who receive promptings of the spirit to proceed in a certain direction, may not later be chosen and approved by God for that work.

Behold, there are many called, but few are chosen. And why are they not chosen?

Because their hearts are set so much upon the things of this world, and aspire to the honors of men.⁵

It comes down to this: If we are called to law school and the law, and in that journey we choose God and his kingdom and righteousness over the things of the world, we will be chosen by Him for the work. We choose obedience to His laws and enter willingly into His ordinances. But if instead we set our hearts on achieving honors, power, and money or choose to exercise dominion over others, we are choosing the world.⁶ Ultimately, those who don't choose God will be left spiritually alone.⁷

Interestingly, this choosing usually happens through the everyday, routine, small and simple choices in life⁸ involving how our time and resources are spent. You have decided to use some of those resources on a legal education because you have felt called to law school. After law school you will be faced with the same kind of choices involving your time, which is your most important resource as an attorney. Most of these defining choices will be cumulative. Don't lose your perspective of the importance of everyday choices. “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.”⁹

It isn't just the importance of day-to-day work, school, and service choices that will tip the balance on whether we will be chosen by God. Our most sacred experiences are bound to us in quiet ways. We choose to be baptized and make a covenant of obedience. We choose to enter temples to make covenants of obedience. We receive promises that God will reveal Himself to us in the sanctifying of our *ordinary* lives in our education and

in our work. What does that look like? How do we make our schooling and our work sacred?

“In the Name of the Lord”¹⁰

There was much that had to be set in motion for you to enter the doors of this school. In reading these essays I see that the motivation to attend law school came out of desires to serve, desires to live life more fully, desires for justice, and desires to make a difference in the world. These are all ideas of great things that will swell and grow from learning and working.¹¹ Merely seeking for these things, however, won’t make the study and practice of law sacred—and for disciples of Christ, the work we engage in should be sacred and sanctifying.

Section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants was designated the “olive leaf” by Joseph Smith, “plucked from the Tree of Paradise, the Lord’s message of peace to us.”¹² From verses 34 to 50, there is a discussion of law, but in verses 119 and 120, there is the suggestion that in establishing a “house of learning,” disciples of Christ will make the experience of learning sacred and holy because it will be done in His holy name. “That your incomings may be in the name of the Lord; that your outgoings may be in the name of the Lord; that all your salutations may be in the name of the Lord, with uplifted hands unto the Most High.”¹³

The implications of this shake the heavens and the earth. To make your education and work sacred because it is in the name of the Lord connotes learning to be a *priestly* function. What might at first appear challenging, difficult, and an ordinary, day-to-day grind is in reality sacred work. We make it sacred by doing it in the Lord’s name. It is the same later on as we make our professional work sacred by doing it in the Lord’s name.

When we do our work in His holy name, His mission becomes ours. Christ announced that mission when He read a passage of Isaiah to His fellow Nazarenes in the synagogue at the beginning of His ministry:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised,

To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.

And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him.

And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.¹⁴

His mission was and is to serve all mankind: to heal, to deliver, to set free, and to bring comfort. As I look back at these student essays, I see that J. Reuben Clark law students see their mission is the same—promoting

justice for healing and deliverance, fairness and protection for freedom and comfort.

I pray that this law school experience will become sacred as you go about it in His holy name, choosing Him and His kingdom, and I ask for His blessings to be upon you in that same sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.

This Women's Law Forum address was presented at BYU Law School on September 1, 2002. Reprinted from the Clark Memorandum, spring 2003, 14-19.

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Notes

1. See D&C 121:34.
2. See Alma 32:28.
3. *Id.*
4. D&C 121:34.
5. D&C 121 34-35.
6. D&C 121:37.
7. See D&C 121:35-40, 45-46.
8. See Alma 37:6.
9. Matthew 6:24.
10. D&C 88:120.
11. D&C 64:33.
12. See headnote to D&C 88.
13. D&C 88:120.
14. Luke 4:18-21.