

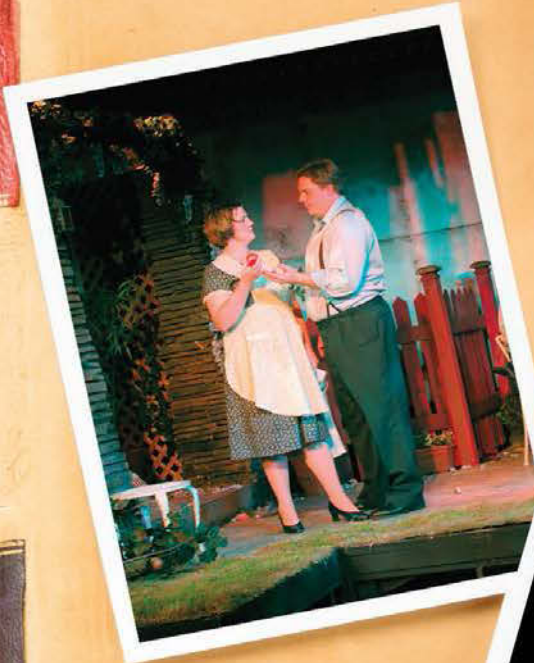


Be Not
Afraid of
Greatness

The Blessings and Responsibilities of a Law Degree

We owe a responsibility to each other and to future generations of women to join the discussion, to contribute our unique experiences and our distinctive perspectives, and to create a fuller and richer society by gaining an understanding of the laws that govern almost all of our day-to-day interactions.

Title from William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, act 2, scene 5, line 159



 ALLISON G. BELNAP

BYU Law School Assistant Dean

Good morning. It is a privilege to stand here and address this group of exceptionally capable, dedicated, and assiduous women. Though I don't know you personally, each of you here today has earned my admiration for resolutely developing your God-given talents and abilities and for accomplishing all that you have.

AN UNLIKELY CANDIDATE

Unlike each of you, I was, apparently, a very unlikely candidate for law school. In fact, I recently had a young man request to connect with me on LinkedIn, and he said, "I am hoping to follow your exact career path."

At which point I thought to myself, "This poor chap has not done his homework. There is no way anyone in their right mind would look at my 'career path' and think to themselves, 'Now *that* is exactly what I want to do!'"

I married very young. I was exactly 19 years and two months old on my wedding day. Fortunately my husband has consistently encouraged me to find the space and time to explore and discover who I am and who I have the potential to become.

Not long after we were married we decided to start a family, as many LDS couples do, and I found myself pregnant with our first child. The timing was excellent. I would finish my last semester of school and graduate with my (exceptionally useful and practical) degree in acting, and then our baby would be born at the end of the summer.

Recounting this story brings to mind a rather famous poem by Robbie Burns called *To a Mouse on Turning Her Up in Her Nest with the Plough*, one stanza of which reads:

*But, Mousie, thou art no thy lane,
In proving foresight may be vain;
The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men
Gang aft agley,
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,
For promis'd joy!*¹

In American English, we translate that most familiar phrase as, "The best-laid schemes of mice and men often go awry."

It was a troubled pregnancy. I was put on bed rest, missed weeks of classes, withdrew from everything that was not absolutely necessary to graduate, and hoped and prayed for the best. We lost that baby on April 1, 20 years ago. April 1 didn't leave much time for me to finish my requirements for graduation. And despite my most valiant efforts, I fell two musical theatre scenes short of graduating that spring. I had to take an incomplete in the class and wait for it to be offered again a year later before I could get my diploma.

After our first rather traumatic experience with pregnancy, it took me some time and some soul-searching to endeavor to venture down that road again. But eventually we embarked again on the adventure of bearing and raising children only to be frustrated by health issues leading to temporary infertility. Finally our eldest daughter was born, and I thought, "Hooray! We've done it! We are now a family." And I somehow supposed in my naïve, hopeful mind that our lives would go perfectly from that point forward.

Like all of you here today, I had been successful at most of the things I tried—except athletics. I was a miserable failure at anything athletic, except perhaps skiing and tackle football (which my high school principal staunchly refused to let me play). Despite being successful in many areas of my life, I was unprepared to face the challenges that parenthood brought. I fell into the trap of comparing myself with some "ideal" that was created in my mind—either by choice or through cultural influence or both—and I fell miserably short of what I imagined a mother should be.

After our second daughter was born, I suffered from a serious episode of undiagnosed postpartum depression. It was incredibly difficult for me to understand why, when

I was doing everything I thought I was supposed to do, I was not happy.

In time my husband and I decided that I would apply for graduate school, and I left the life of a full-time, stay-at-home parent to pursue my education. Two years later I graduated with a master's degree in theatre for young audiences, and I began teaching for the BYU Theatre and Media Arts Department. Just as I completed my thesis, my third daughter was born. I had two more children in the following five years and was very happy with my life. Because I taught in the afternoons and evenings, I homeschooled my girls when they reached school age so that we would still have time together.

Looking back, I am confident that I put a golden hue on everything, but it seemed like an idyllic existence. I had my teaching, directing, performing, and research, which helped me stay grounded and feel I was still nourishing my own soul, and my children spent about half their time with me during the day and the other half with their father. My children and I chose our own school curriculum and projects, took long walks, and went on bike rides, and I actually (really and truly) played a guitar and sang songs with them every single morning.

WHY LAW SCHOOL?

So why law school? Let me state up front that the reasons I came to law school are very different from the reasons I am grateful every day for my legal education. I will not detail what ultimately moved me to embark on a legal education except to say that I firmly believe I was inspired to take that path and that I had that choice confirmed as right for me at multiple times and in multiple ways as I made my way into, through, and out of that great white building just east of us. I imagine that the decision process for each of you will be much the same—you will pray, you will study it out, you will weigh your options, and you will move forward with faith, noting the confirming assurances and evidences as you go along. In attempting to assist in that process, I think the reasons I am grateful every day for my legal education are perhaps much more valuable than the very unique and personal experiences I had while making this life-altering decision.

Gratitude for the Quality, Versatility, and Advantages of a Legal Education

I am grateful every day for the quality of my legal education. Studying law is a unique experience. I appreciate my other postgraduate studies a great deal. But in pursuing a JD, I was not only afforded the opportunity to delve into rigorous academic training but also challenged to expand and cultivate my reasoning, analysis, research, and communication skills. I was given ample opportunity to extemporaneously assert and defend an opinion—*my* opinion—about legal decisions covering a myriad of time periods, fact patterns, and topics. I was trained to think in a completely new way—a way that broadened my perspective, opened doors of possibilities, and over time enveloped me in an eiderdown of aplomb I had not previously



Belnap after the birth of her third daughter, Mandy, with daughters Hollis and Maren, February 4, 2002.

known. And while I was busy receiving the gift of this legal education, I was fortunate to do so in the warmth of burgeoning relationships forged while working through school with my classmates. When you enter law school you quickly recognize that you are in the midst of exceptional peers, who are every bit as gifted, motivated, and accomplished as you are. And those classmates become your friends and colleagues for life. Already that network of exceptional friends has blessed my life in ways I could not foresee when embarking on this step in my formal education.

I am grateful every day for the versatility of a legal education. We have alumni who work across many disciplines—business, media, arts, education, science, government, and of course the more traditional practice of law. Even within more traditional legal positions, there are multiple career paths. You can be a private attorney, government attorney, in-house counsel, judge, clerk, academic, politician, or Supreme Court Justice. A legal education creates options and opens doors you may not now even be aware of. Because your training is not in a single discipline but in learning how to think carefully and critically, problem solve efficiently, and communicate effectively, the skills you learn in law school are transferable to any number of applications post-graduation.

I am grateful every day for the advantages of a legal education. My experience in law school was empowering. We sometimes overuse that word, but I use it carefully and consciously here. Learning the workings of the rule of law and understanding the legal system that undergirds all of our society has made me a better mother, a better member of my communities—both religious and secular—and a stronger, more powerful woman as I navigate this mortal experience. When people find out I am an attorney, it changes how they see me. I immediately have the advantage of being part of a profession that, though regularly joked about, is nevertheless highly respected.

Now, if you'll indulge me—and I guess you don't have much choice on that—I would like to address two reasons I believe women specifically should come to law school: one that looks forward and one that looks back.

Looking Forward

Within my first month of school I had already had multiple experiences sitting in a classroom, wishing that my female friends especially could be there—learning the things I was

learning; getting the training I was receiving; gaining the experience and ability to understand the law and to speak up in mat-

ters that affect women, children, and families. In a society in which we live under the rule of law, women's voices are necessary in the making, interpreting, and enforcing of those laws. As women in the LDS faith, we believe that we are responsible for half of our Father's plan.² To me that means we have a responsibility to contribute to and foster the settings in which our mortal experiences are played out. We owe a responsibility to each other and to future generations of women to join the discus-

sion, to contribute our unique experiences and our distinctive perspectives, and to create a fuller and richer society by gaining an understanding of the laws that govern almost all of our day-to-day interactions and by honing our abilities to contribute to the conversations within our homes, our communities, our nation, and our world.

Looking Back

The second reason I believe women specifically should come to law school looks backward rather than forward, and again I ask your indulgence while I share a couple of demonstrative examples.

Lena Brown Ware. One of my great-great-grandmothers, Orlena Brown Ware—or

This address was given at the annual Women in the Law recruitment lunch at BYU Law School on April 3, 2014.

Belnap (left) as Sue Bayliss in *All My Sons*, produced by the Provo Theatre Company, 2003.



Lena, as she was called—was born in Kentucky in 1876. Her husband, John Thomas Adams, was reportedly a womanizer and a drunk. He rode around town in a white suit and hat on a large chestnut mount.

At the time of this story, Lena and John Thomas had seven children and Lena was pregnant with the eighth. John Thomas's sister had taken a young woman into her home, and the young woman had caught my great-great-grandfather's wandering eye. One night, after being out drinking, John Thomas rode over to his sister's home, called out, dismounted, and started to stumble his way toward her front door.

His sister appeared from within the house, shotgun in hand. She warned him off, but he kept coming. She warned him again, saying that if he took one more step she would shoot him. He looked at her, laughed, and trudged forward. She shot.

The story goes that as he bled out there in that dirt lot of a front yard that night in Kentucky, his last words were, "Dear Lord, what about Lena and the children?"

Lena was told of her husband's demise and spent the night walking their arbor with at least the oldest of their seven children there with her. Lena had no education, and where she lived, women were not allowed to work. She had no means by which to provide for herself, let alone her soon-to-be eight children. Eventually she made her way to Oklahoma and became a sharecropper. Two of the younger girls—my great-grandmother and her sister—were sent away to work as domestic help at the tender ages of five and six. Both girls were abused in their respective employers' homes and eventually concocted a plan to escape, buy train tickets, and rejoin the rest of their family in the tiny shack they now called home. The older children worked in the fields to provide what they could while Lena raised the babies still at home. It was a difficult existence.

Susan B. Anthony. In 1872, four years before Lena was born, Susan B. Anthony, a woman, voted in a presidential election. For this challenge to women's disenfranchisement, she was arrested, tried, and convicted

of voting without a legal right to vote. After arguments were presented, the court invited comment from Ms. Anthony—a move that the judge apparently regretted, since he constantly interrupted her response, asking her to take a seat.

May it please the Court . . . this is the first time that either myself or any person of my disfranchised class has been allowed a word of defense before judge or jury—All my prosecutors, from the 8th Ward corner grocery politician, who entered the complaint, to the United States Marshal, Commissioner, District Attorney, District Judge, your honor on the bench,



The Belnap family horseback riding in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, 2012.

not one is my peer, but each and all are my political sovereigns; and had your honor submitted my case to the jury, as was clearly your duty, even then I should have had just cause of protest, for not one of those men was my peer; but, native or foreign, white or black, rich or poor, educated or ignorant, awake or asleep, sober or drunk, each and every man of them was my political superior; hence, in no sense, my peer. . . . Precisely as no disfranchised person is entitled to sit upon a jury, and no woman is entitled to the franchise, so, none but a regularly admitted lawyer is allowed to practice in the courts, and no woman can gain admission to the bar—hence, jury, judge, counsel, must

*all be of the superior class. [Thus, I have] been tried according to the established forms of law all made by men, interpreted by men, administered by men, in favor of men, and against women; and hence, your honor's ordered verdict of guilty, against a United States citizen for the exercise of "that citizen's right to vote," simply because that citizen was a woman and not a man.*³

The Seneca Falls Convention—the traditional mark of the beginning of the suffrage movement in the United States—had been held almost a quarter of a century earlier. And still women in the United

States were denied a basic right of citizens under the constitution: the right to vote. Though several states gave women the right to vote toward the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, prohibiting states from denying U.S. citizens the right to vote based on sex, was not ratified until 1920—less than a century ago, 14 years after Susan B. Anthony passed away and 18 years after the death of her friend and confidante Elizabeth Cady Stanton. In 1920 my paternal grandmother was already 13 years old.

For millennia, with the exception of a few matriarchal societies, women's voices have been effectively silenced by disenfranchisement, limited educational opportunities, and societal restrictions on employment choices. We live at an exceptionally rare period of time in history. We are not just presented with the opportunity to become educated and to engage in the civil discourse, we are encouraged to gain *all* the education we can.⁴ And if I can do law school with five children in tow and a husband working full-time, then any one of you can do it. There is no question of if it is possible for you to obtain a legal degree; it is only a question of if you will reach out and take the opportunity in front of you—an opportunity that millions of women over the history of the world never dreamed would be an option for their granddaughters, or great-granddaughters, or great-great-granddaughters. Our

foremothers suffered, worked, toiled, and paved the way for us to be able to do remarkable things.

I hope we will each individually take advantage of the sacrifices and struggles born for our benefit by those women in generations past—whether that means coming to law school or something else for you personally.

WHY BYU LAW?

I think there is one more question to ask in this setting, and that is, Why BYU Law? A woman close to me is a PhD candidate at one of the top schools in the country for her academic specialty. She is divorced and is raising a son on her own. Recently one of her PhD committee members warned her to keep her priorities straight. He essentially told her that if she ever decided to put her son ahead of her work, she would effectively end her career.

That is not something you will ever hear here. We understand the values and priorities that men and women of faith—and I am inclusive of multiple faiths here—have in terms of families. We have people and systems in place to support women going through life experiences that will come whether you are in law school or not—deaths, births, illnesses, marriages, divorces. We “get it.” We provide a safe place to question priorities, to set priorities, and to examine, try, and nurture your faith and spirituality just as you increase your wisdom and intellect.

Fortunately, that safety net—that support—does not come at the expense of a superior-quality legal education. We are often quick to tout the benefits of our low tuition, but I would have paid top dollar for the education I gained, the experiences I had, and the relationships I built at J. Reuben Clark Law School. I would hold up the experience and education available here against other top law schools all across the country.

Additionally, when you join BYU Law, you are automatically a part of an amazing and diverse network of women—some who choose to be stay-at-home parents, some who are employed full- or part-time outside

of their home, some who are strong in their faith, and others who struggle through doubts—who will understand your journey and challenges in unique ways. Regardless of our different paths, we are all part of a great amalgamation of diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. We are a remarkable group of women who support one another and who have the skills and courage to contribute in meaningful ways to the civil discourse in a multitude of settings.

In conclusion, as I prepared to speak with you today, someone mentioned the idea of “never regretting” their legal education. I want to build on that idea just a bit. In all honesty, I have never regretted a single



The Belnap family, 2009: (standing, left to right) Hollis, Dean, Allison, and Maren; (seated, left to right) Mandy, Hattie, and Maeve.

educational experience I have had. My acting degree may not have been particularly practical, but it was my passion; it gave me an education in humanity for which I will be eternally grateful, and it informed a very large measure of who I am today. I don't regret one second or one penny spent gaining that education. I don't think it is enough to merely say that I don't regret the decision to attend law school. I want to leave you with the message that I, and almost all of the women I know who are also legally educated, don't just “not regret” the choice to attend law school but that I see it as a life-altering blessing of the highest order. I believe it could be that kind of blessing for each of you as well. And to the extent that you agree, you will find an army of us here to assist you and cheer you on.

NOTES

- 1 ROBERT BURNS, *To a Mouse*, POEMS AND SONGS, 6 THE HARVARD CLASSICS (Charles William Elliot ed.), available at <http://www.bartleby.com/6/76.html>.
- 2 Julie B. Beck, quoted in Visiting Teaching Message, *Understand the Divine Roles of Women*, ENSIGN, Feb. 2009, at 67.
- 3 *Against an Aristocracy of Sex, 1866 to 1873*, reprinted in 2 SELECTED PAPERS OF ELIZABETH CADY STANTON AND SUSAN B. ANTHONY 613–616 (Ann D. Gordon ed., 2000).
- 4 Gordon B. Hinckley, *In the Arms of His Love*, ENSIGN, Oct. 2006, at 116.



ART NOTES

- Page 18 : Hand-lettering by Shayne Eliason.
Page 18–19, 23: Still-life photography by Bradley Slade.
Page 23: Belnap family photo by Bryant Livingston.
All other photos courtesy of Allison Belnap.