

# Think About It

THE VALUE OF LAW SCHOOL

by  
**Ruth  
Lybbert  
Renlund**

PHOTOS BY BRADLEY SLADE



Critical

Thinking

I am particularly happy to talk to you today. I want to tell you a little bit about my life in the law and how I came to the law. I am completely biased about the appropriateness of law for a woman and the value of going to law school. It has had such a positive effect on my life that I encourage anybody who has an interest in it to seriously think about going. So, obviously, if you are here and are thinking about law school, it may well be right for you.

#### BEING FOUND

I want to tell you about how I decided to go to law school and about the effect that decision has had on my life—professionally and as a wife, a mother, and a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

I am not sure whether I found the law or the law found me. My father was a lawyer. At dinner we all talked about what we had done during our day, and I was the only one out of six children who was really interested in what my dad had done. I was interested as he talked about his trials, about the hearings, and about his interactions with judges and other lawyers—so much so that I remember when I was 10 having my dad invite me to go with him on a deposition. That sounded pretty exciting. I rode with him all the way to Vernal, Utah, for this deposition. I stood at the back of the courtroom while he questioned the witness—I thought quite intelligently—and I was really fascinated.

I attended the University of Utah as a history major, which is the perfect undergraduate major for anyone. As graduation approached, I was considering the law, so of course I asked my dad about it. Surprisingly,

he discouraged me from pursuing law. He did not have a great opinion of what he called “lady lawyers.”

I was also planning a wedding at the time, and my father convinced me that going into teaching would be a good profession—a very traditional female profession. I certified to teach secondary school, and I taught for three years. It was the hardest job

I have ever had. I decided then that I could not be a schoolteacher. After I taught for those three years, my husband and I moved to Baltimore, Maryland, where he did his medical training.

I went to the University of Maryland for law school, in part because I was geographically confined there.

I went as a young mother; we had a three-year-old daughter. I had

experienced some health problems and had been through a bout of cancer. I really had to decide what I was going to do with my life, and I still felt very strongly that I needed to go to law school—I *wanted* to go to law school. And I did. I couldn’t have done it without a very supportive husband who wanted me to be the best person I could be and who wanted me to be happy with what I was doing.

So I decided to go to law school, but I needed money to go. I asked my dad, that same father who had discouraged me from going, if he could give me a loan so that I could attend. Surprisingly, he encouraged me and said that he would be happy to support me. When I got a real job, I started to pay him back. That repayment became our family’s perpetual education fund. Other family members have used it and then have paid it back too.

My husband and I then moved back to Salt Lake City. My husband had many job offers, and I told him, “Hey, pick a state, any state. But I only want to take the bar exam once.” We moved back to Utah, I took the bar, and I began what would be a very active litigation practice.

During the time I practiced as a trial lawyer, I had, depending on the time, six to seven male partners who were supportive and collaborative. We had great working relationships, and it really didn’t matter that I was the only woman working in the firm.

Our firm worked strictly on contingency fees. If you don’t know what those are yet, you haven’t watched television. That is when you get paid when the case is done. Our law firm had a great emphasis on getting the results and not all the hours it takes

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to get those results. So I am one of the very few privileged lawyers, I think, who have never had to do billable hours.

I mention this to you because there are so many different kinds of jobs in the law. You might have an idea of one or two kinds of jobs that lawyers do, but lawyers have broad opportunities to contribute in many different ways. If you are also interested in science, science intersects with the law. Are you interested in medicine? Medicine intersects with the law. Are you interested in engineering or any other field? It intersects with the law.

I really feel like my legal experience helped me become not only a good lawyer but also a good community member, a good mother, a good wife, and a good Church member.

I abruptly left my practice when my husband was called to be a General Authority. I was mighty happy—working away, minding my own business—when this happened. But

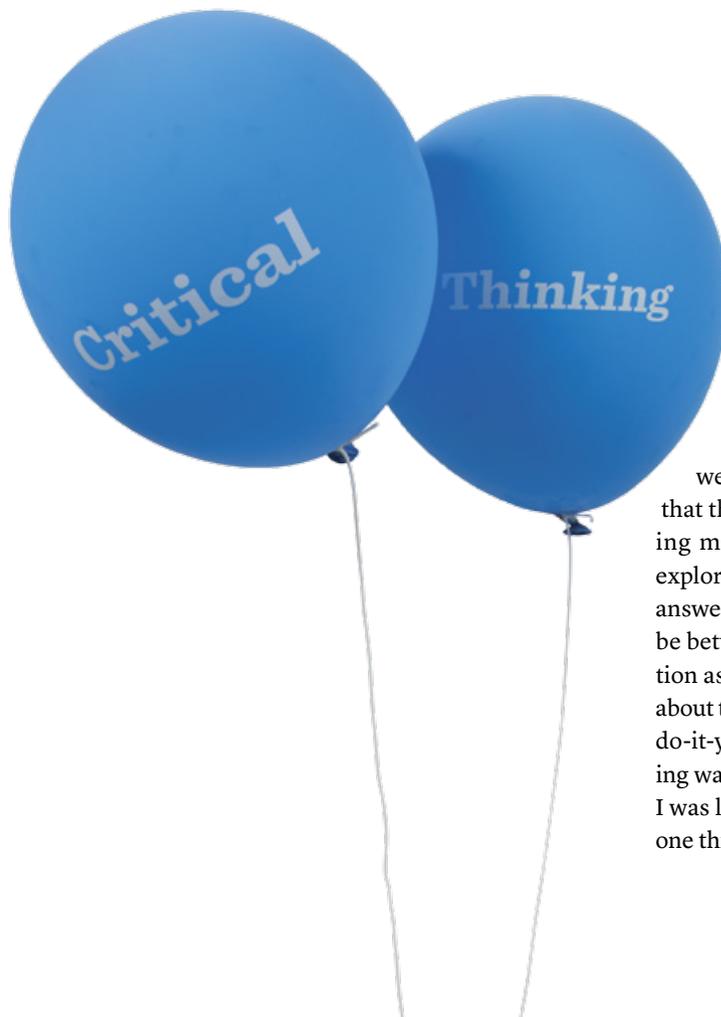
you know, the Church works in an interesting way. When a calling comes, it is truly just that and not something you have earned. It is a calling. And I felt that this was my calling as well. My husband and I have always been partners in whatever we have done, so this was as much a calling for me as it was for him.

His first assignment was in Africa. Living in Africa was a real adventure! We used to pray for just one adventure a day. I really worked to figure out what my role would be and how I could contribute. It was the first time in 23 years that I was not employed. Honestly, I felt like I had entered the witness protection program. Just think about this: People at home didn't really know where I was, people in Africa didn't know that I had a past, and I had a new name, having practiced law under my maiden name, Ruth Lyb- bert. Now I was Sister Renlund. We literally lived behind gates and barbed wire, and a security guard patrolled the premises every

hour. I was literally being protected. Most important, I felt like I was in disguise. I was wearing missionary-like clothing and was sporting a very bad South African haircut. I couldn't think of anything that was closer to the witness protection program than what I was experiencing.

This was also a time that I was challenged. I challenged myself to use my legal skills in a nonlegal setting, and it became apparent that these legal skills were really important life skills.

I want to talk about three skills that are easy crossovers between what you learn and practice in the law and what you live every day. These skills are critical thinking, communication, and problem solving. You might think that law school will teach you a certain set of rules that govern courts, contracts, and property. You're right; law school will do that. But the value of a legal education is so much more and is so much broader than just learning legal skills.



I remember well my first Constitutional law class. It was a required course for all first-year students at the University of Maryland. I was terrified that I would be called on and was very bewildered at the end of the class thinking back to what had been discussed. I hadn't taken any notes; all I had written were questions. Gradually, I could see that the questions I had written were making me think about legal problems and explore multiple options as to how I might answer a problem. Why would one answer be better than another? Why was that question asked? What did that question tell me about the subject matter? It felt sort of like a do-it-yourself education. What I was learning was a lot more than Constitutional law; I was learning to think and to analyze why one thing might be better than another.

# A Reputation for Courtesy

BY RONNELL ANDERSEN JONES

It is my pleasure to be here and to introduce today's keynote speaker. I can only assume that our dean of admissions gave me this opportunity because I quite literally leapt in the air, squealed, and clapped my hands like a giddy child when I was told that Sister Renlund had accepted this speaking invitation. We are truly so fortunate to have her, and I am thrilled to tell you a few reasons why.

Ruth Lybbert Renlund has lived an exemplary professional and personal life. She was born in Salt Lake City, one of six children, to Merlin Lybbert, an insurance defense lawyer, and Nola Lybbert, a registered nurse. She married Dale G. Renlund in 1977, and they are the parents of a daughter, Ashley.

Sister Renlund graduated from the University of Utah in 1976 with a bachelor's degree in history. She graduated from the University of Maryland School of Law with her juris doctorate in 1986. Like all other truly successful, well-rounded professionals, Sister Renlund has worked hard to find balance between home and work life. During her time as a law student, her husband was a medical resident with a demanding on-call schedule and was also the bishop of their inner-city ward. She's described this challenge as the equivalent of being a single mother while in law school. She learned to treat her studies as a nine-to-five job, arranging for childcare and making after-school arrangements for her daughter, studying late at night after her daughter was asleep, and trading off duties with her husband when final exams demanded a different schedule. She has joked about the benefit of him taking their young daughter along with him during his home visits as bishop because no one could refuse to let him in with such a gorgeous toddler.

After graduating from law school, Sister Renlund practiced at the Utah attorney general's office for three years and then joined the firm of Dewsnup, King & Olsen, where she practiced plaintiff civil litigation for 20 years. She has been praised by those who know her personally and professionally as a strong and talented litigator who never lost sight of the need for stability in the profession.

This past Sunday at the live broadcast for the North American Northwest and West Areas of the Church, Elder Renlund made his wife's professional reputation for courtesy a centerpiece of a message that he delivered about listening respectfully to opposing viewpoints. He said that during her 23 years in law practice, "she was always working with others who held strongly different opinions than she. I was impressed that two lawyers who were fierce adversaries in the courtroom could sit down calmly together and eat lunch. She said she had learned early in her career to disagree without being disagreeable. She might say to opposing counsel something like, 'I can see we are not going to agree on this issue. I like you. I respect your reasoned opinion. I hope you can offer me the same courtesy.' Most often, this allowed for mutual respect and friendship."

Sister Renlund was serving as the president of her firm at the time of Elder Renlund's call as a General Authority. She also served on the board of directors for the *Deseret News* and the Workers Compensation Fund of Utah, and she served as chair of the Judicial Conduct Commission for the state of Utah. She was the first female president of the Utah Trial Lawyers Association, and she has been a professional and personal role model for many more LDS women than she could possibly know.

It is a privilege for us to hear from her here at this year's Women in Law Luncheon.

The teacher was using the Socratic method, which focuses on asking questions, not giving answers, and was guiding students through elements of reasoning, logic, and discovery. It is immediately an active learning process that engages the student in her own education. I am sure you can see how a crossover works with this kind of thinking since there is no day in which you don't have to make a decision or help somebody else think critically about a particular situation. It is one of life's truly great skills.

When I was a Relief Society president, my experience with critical thinking really made a difference. In one of our ward councils, we talked about a particular single sister with three children who needed some help. There was a lot of discussion that happened—so much so that we needed to have a second meeting on a week night to continue the talk. It was determined that we would all show up, kind of SWAT-team style, on a Saturday morning and fix her problems.

The Primary president took her three children and gave them an entertaining, educational experience. The elders quorum president showed up and fixed the toilet and

the lights. I was there helping her fold clothing and wash dishes. It was apparent that one morning's work was not going to fix the problem.

As we were talking that morning, I simply asked her a series of questions:

"How many times have you been married?"

"Three."

"How many times have you been divorced?"

"Three."

"How many of your husbands fathered a child?"

"Three."

"Do you get any child support?"

"No."

"Are you legally entitled to get child support?"

"Yes."

"Did you get alimony from any of those husbands as you separated and divorced?"

"I was awarded it, but I didn't get it."

"Are you currently receiving any alimony?"

"No."

"Do you see any solutions to help your situation?"

"Yes," she said. "Get those men to pay me what they owe for the children and get my alimony."

I offered to help her do just that. On Monday morning I made a few phone calls and found out that she was also receiving some state funds. You may not know this, but the attorney general's office will pursue men and women who have financial obligations to families so that the state doesn't have to be responsible to pay for it. That was an easy phone call. I simply reported the situation, told them how much they were paying this woman, and told them that there were three people who should be paying. Well, within 60 days this woman was receiving the financial support that she was legally entitled to, and her welfare issues nearly disappeared.

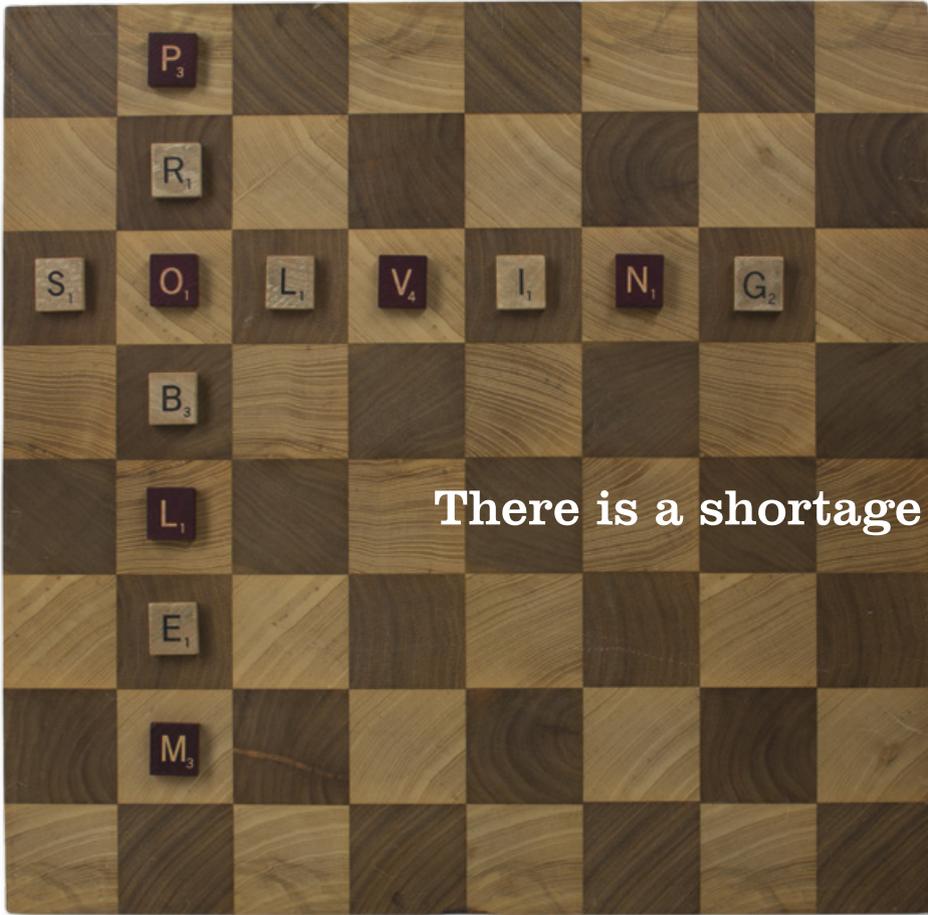
The bishop later told my husband that every bishop in the Church needs a Relief Society president who is a lawyer. That was a situation in which critical thinking—a skill I had developed in law school—became valuable in another area of my life. I did not go to law school to become a better Relief Society president, but for that sister at that time, it was the best way I could help her.

We all know that there are many ways to communicate, but law school focuses on two of the most frequently used forms of communication between people: verbal and written. Law school teaches how to be an effective, persuasive communicator in speaking and writing.

Let's think about verbal communication first. Some people wrongly think that arguing is the same thing as communicating. I have heard people say something like this: "She should go to law school because she argues all the time." A legal education teaches a student how to be a persuasive communicator, not an argumentative one. Although the term *legal argument* is used, it really means to use facts and the law to persuade someone that you're right. Presenting facts, legal precedent, and legislative history in a logical and relevant manner is not only effective communication, it's persuasive.

I find it so interesting that the hours I spent practicing for my oral arguments in moot court continue to be valuable. I learned how to refine an argument, shorten an explanation, and prepare crisp answers to questions. I gained confidence in my ability to express myself while losing some of the nervousness I had while speaking in public, and I learned how to help my family members do the same.





## There is a shortage of problem solvers in our

There is a shortage of problem solvers in our world—not a shortage of problems. We need people who can solve problems in the sandbox as well as on the community council. A legal education brings a perspective to problems and a method for solving them.

The United States has a great heritage of “the common law.” Inherited from England, the common law is a body of solved problems that present a precedent or pattern for solving problems in the future. It is the beginning point of analysis for many legal problems. In addition, we have legislatures that have enacted laws and courts that have interpreted what those laws mean. We call these real-life-situations cases, and they too provide a pattern for solving other problems in the future.

These cases provide a structure for how to look at a problem: What circumstances and mitigating factors need to be considered? What societal concerns come into play? What would be a fair resolution? Weighing all of these factors provides a scaffolding for solving problems today.

At its core, a legal education provides a framework for solving problems. Now please don’t misunderstand what I’m saying. I’m not saying that every problem can be solved by lawyers or that law is the only discipline that will help you learn to solve problems, but it is an excellent model.

Part of being a problem solver is learning how to respond when a problem persists. I learned a lot about this by watching my father. My impressions of being a lawyer were largely shaped by him.

He was from Canada and had never graduated from high school. He came to the United States with the intention of attending BYU, but he couldn’t find a job in Provo, so he settled in Salt Lake City and got admitted, on probation, to the University of Utah. He was put on probation because he had not graduated from high school, and he had not graduated from high school because he had not passed the national departmental French exam. He was from a rural area in Canada and had never seen

# world—not a shortage of problems.

a French-speaking person, let alone known how to pronounce anything in French. So he failed the French exam and didn't get a high school diploma. He didn't get his undergraduate degree either because there were representatives from the law school recruiting bright undergraduate students to come to law school before they even graduated. You can tell that law school admission rules have changed a little bit. He ended up with only one degree, a juris doctorate.

I was interested in how he interacted with people as a lawyer. He was a loving father, a loving husband, a Church member, and a great neighbor, but the thing that I noticed most about him was how he treated people, especially people who didn't agree with him. What was his secret? He had learned to disagree without being disagreeable. My husband talked about that a little at a recent conference because this is a skill that is largely disappearing from our society—to have a discussion in which we don't all agree but still express our opinions and

are able to still be friends. This was probably one of the most important things my father taught me. As I began my legal career, he said, "Look for ways to disagree without being disagreeable."

I have been well served by that fatherly advice. I learned how to view opposing attorneys as friends with differing opinions. I learned to not take an opposing opinion personally. This makes problem solving easier—when emotion and personality fade and reason and clear thinking come to the foreground. This was my experience in the law. Lawyers understand that there will be heated arguments in the courtroom but that everyone can still go out and have lunch afterward.

Clients are suspicious of this: "Are you in cahoots with the other side? Why would you ever sit down with that terrible, nasty person who has an opinion opposing me?"

But that was a great opportunity to explain to my clients, "Look, your case will move more quickly and be resolved more

quickly on more favorable terms if I can be a friend with the opposing attorney. That doesn't mean that I don't represent you or advocate for you fiercely, but in the courtroom it cannot be personal."

Those problem-solving skills are essential to being a good lawyer. But they are also essential to being a good friend, neighbor, wife, Church member, and community member.

## A GREAT CHOICE

Law school is a place for learning critical-thinking, communication, and problem-solving skills. As you learn to think in a particular way, it is always a surprise to discover that others don't see things the same way. Of course there are other ways you can learn to problem solve, communicate, and think, but if you are looking for an education that will broaden your mind, increase your life options, and increase your abilities to improve society, the law is a great choice.

I have talked a lot about myself here, but I would like to now encourage you to think about yourself for a minute. What draws you to the law? What do you think a legal education can do for you? How do you think it will prepare you to be a better person? What might be holding you back?

I would like to tell you that I don't think that there has ever been a better time for a woman to be in the law. Things have changed a great deal since I started. Women are very well accepted in the law now. Legal jobs have become more flexible as the complexity of the world has increased, and the need for skilled problem solvers has increased with it. I would encourage you to think about how you might be able to contribute. If you are naturally drawn to a legal education, then perhaps, like me, the law has found you. Think about it. Pursue it.

It has been a privilege to speak with you about my experience. 