

## **“He has shown you, O man, what is good”**

Larry Plenert

I am a lawyer. My colleagues and I are regularly tarred with a brush that depicts us stereotypically as the scum of the earth. Lawyers are greedy. Lawyers are sharks. Oft quoted is Shakespeare’s “The first thing we do, let’s kill all lawyers.” To many, the phrase *Christian lawyer* is an oxymoron. Lawyers are not perfect people, and I am no exception. Yet these depictions, though durable, are generally silly and shallow. I believe I am serving God through my work, and that my practice of law is founded on biblical principles. I profess to being a lawyer and a Christian.

Recently, I met an elderly client, and after an exchange of pleasantries, she stated, “You know, I trust you. I knew your parents, and they were like that, too!” I value this unsolicited

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comment as a compliment of the highest order. It speaks to my desire to be a lawyer of integrity and my commitment to a high ethical standard. It implies a lawyer-client relationship that transcends giving and receiving legal assistance. The mention of my parents points to a legacy of trustworthiness. In Luke 16:11, Jesus asked his disciples, “If you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true

riches?” (NIV). Like Jesus, my parents modeled trustworthiness, and it was a trait they expected me to emulate.

My parents influenced and shaped my life in many ways, but when it came to occupational choices, I was determined to be independent. For ten glorious years I devoted myself to a pursuit of athletic dreams, and it took a serious ankle injury to force me to hang up my volleyball kneepads and write my law school entrance exams. I did not seek the advice of my parents, or anyone other than my older brother (a lawyer), about my decision

to go to law school. To my surprise, my dad—who clearly disapproved of my pursuits on the volleyball court—supported my choice to enter a different court. “Perhaps you’ll become a magistrate,” he said on the day of my call to the bar.

These words were somewhat prophetic, given my present adjudicative work. But I understood them at the time to perpetuate unspoken but often demonstrated life lessons from my dad: the importance of setting ongoing goals, working hard to achieve success, and aspiring to improve yourself and the world. For my mother, my actual vocation was not as important as the underlying values I brought to my work. On the day of my call to the bar, my parents presented me with a marble pen stand and a small card of congratulations. In a tradition from days gone by, Mom “gave” me a Bible verse on that occasion, handwritten into the card: “He has showed you, O man, what is good: and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mic. 6:8).

For twenty-six years that card has remained one of my most valued treasures, and I consider my mother to have been an agent of God in assigning to me these specific words, of all the verses she could have chosen. I have indeed been shown what is good. All the members of my extended family have been caring, moral, and righteous people, reflecting the spirit of God. My church (Langley Mennonite Fellowship) and my mentors illuminate God’s goodness. I try to be alert to continued revelations of God’s goodness, and ways to apply that goodness in my profession.

The message to do justice is proclaimed throughout the Bible, and it is endorsed by the Mennonite church. Ironically, a close reading of Shakespeare’s line about killing lawyers indicates that it was said by someone who wanted anarchy, and was therefore meant as a compliment to attorneys and judges who instill justice in society. The law of the Old Testament spoke for all who were treated unjustly: those who are poor, widows, orphans, strangers, criminals. In the New Testament, Jesus took special note of people society rejects and treats unjustly. Anabaptist traditions have long connected faith with justice and peace. The vision of a just society is no more beautifully expressed than in Psalm 85:10: “Love and faithfulness have come together; justice and peace have kissed.”

I currently balance time between my law office and my work as an adjudicator of claims by survivors of serious abuse at Indian Residential Schools. It is in this latter context that I have most deeply discerned a union of my work and my faith, and in particular the requirements to love kindness and do justice. I have learned of terrible evil, including deplorable mistreatment of Aboriginal children throughout most of the history of Canada, the very country I was so proud to represent as an Olympic athlete. It deepens my shame and complicity to know that these schools that devastated the lives of generations of Native children were run by Christian churches.

This adjudicative work involves listening to the stories of the survivors of residential school abuse, and ultimately deciding the

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compensation they are entitled to. I aim to convert the hearing room, be it in a hotel room, a prison, or a living room, into a place of safety where healing and reconciliation have the potential to develop. I seek opportunities to promote restorative justice, a model that God has shown me is good.

My chosen career builds on convictions instilled in me by my parents and extended family. It is shaped by my mentors and my church. It is closely connected to God requiring of us that we do justice and love kindness. My law practice has always been stimulating

and seems to have provided value to my community. And just at this time, I am able to see a deep connection between practicing law and my faith, through the opportunity to create healthy processes and offer fair outcomes to those so badly hurt. For me, this opportunity has shifted what I do from profession to a calling.

## About the author

Larry Plenert played on the Canadian national volleyball team for six years, and represented Canada in many competitions, including the 1976 Olympic Games. He became a lawyer in 1987, and has practised law in Abbotsford, BC, ever since. He lives with his wife, Sheryl, in Fort Langley, BC. They have two adult daughters. He particularly enjoys going to the lake, and playing piano.