What I've learned is that kindness is the cardinal virtue and life is endlessly diverting. The second point I learned a long time ago. The first I learned after I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. When I run into a kind stranger, it is a gift. Somewhere kindness is wrapped up in philanthropy and giving back. Giving where it's needed is the best feeling, and even better when you can do it anonymously.

It's important to give back to your community however you identify it. We are all parts of more than one community. Don't be afraid to give—of yourself, your time, your talent, your purse. Every gift counts. It doesn't have to be a check. It can be volunteering or giving someone a cup of cool water. I hope our students leave this campus broadly educated with a sense of connection to and a willingness to give back and support the University.

After graduating from the University of Nevada, Reno in 1971 with a bachelor’s in theatre, I moved to San Francisco to attend graduate school at San Francisco State and studied more theatre. I tired of being a poor student and accepted an opportunity to go through executive management training at the Emporium department store. I returned to Reno in 1977 to be closer to my family and went to work in middle management for Mervyn’s. On Nov. 1 that year, my brother Guy ’77 (philosophy) was killed by a drunk driver and everything changed.

I began to evaluate what I was doing with my life. The loss of my brother reconnected me with the church. Gradually, a series of “holy nudges” led me to consider going to seminary. I began studies at San Francisco Theological Seminary in September 1984, graduating in 1988 with a master’s in divinity. In November 1984, my father, Paul Leonard ’36 (journalism), was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. In spite of it being a difficult time of my life because my dad was ill and my mother, Gwen Leonard ’37 (history), was caring for him by herself; my seminary education was an extraordinary experience. We were a close-knit community and we lived in an idealized, almost utopian Christian environment. I met some remarkable people, who to this day are good friends and colleagues. I now serve on the seminary’s board of trustees, and I am on their presidential search committee.

I’ve had the remarkable good fortune of having everything that’s happened to me in my life prepare me for the moment I’m in. If Guy hadn’t died, I might not have gone to seminary when I did, served in the parish, worked in disaster recovery, and become a police chaplain.

I’ve done disaster recovery work for Church World Service Emergency Response and Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. My most fulfilling ministry was the 10 years I spent as a police chaplain serving the Reno Police Department, Washoe County Sheriff’s Office and the Nevada Highway Patrol. Generally, their needs were focused around trauma and death. I worked with officers and people in the community. That ministry gave me a tremendous respect, appreciation and affection for law enforcement.

The next important stage in my life was living with multiple sclerosis (MS). I was diagnosed in 2002. MS is manageable today, and you can lead a normal life once you adapt to the changes the disease makes. One of the issues with MS is that, when you wake up in the morning, you don’t know which body part is not going to work quite right; I have had to learn to listen to what my body can and cannot do.

So what have I learned? Regardless of when your formal education ends, learning should never stop. I find that students and teachers need to be learners. Good teachers always learn from their students.

The road of life is bumpy and living a life grounded in faith helps get you through it. (When I speak of faith, I speak of it in an all-inclusive way.)

When I was interviewing for church positions as a senior in seminary, one church asked what life motto I would have printed on a T-shirt. I came up with “Life is endlessly diverting.” I have found it to be true ever since.

From a conversation with Kristin Burgarello, director of development for the Reynolds School of Journalism, and Crystal Parrish, director of foundation operations. The Rev. Jackie Leonard graduated from Nevada in 1971 with a degree in speech communication and theatre. She has served as a minister at St. John’s Presbyterian Church in Reno for nearly 15 years. She and her family have supported numerous colleges and programs on campus through scholarships in English, journalism, history, philosophy, physics, music and theatre, as well as an endowed chair in journalism.

LOOK ONLINE
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Philanthropist Feminist