

The Eagle's Nest

By: Philip J. Lawson, J.D.



Roadblocks and Stepping Stones (...and the Secret of the Maroon Pen)



In thinking about the article for this issue of *The Liaison*, I reviewed a number of previous articles after hearing the phrase “Roadblocks and Stepping Stones.” The phrase caught my attention for several reasons. My life experiences seemed to be full of “roadblocks” which eventually turned out to be “stepping stones” in my future.

It is important to teach those who follow you -- children, friends, associates, team members, and partners -- that **roadblocks** can become **stepping stones** to reaching their full potential.

In the seventh grade it became abundantly apparent to me, my teacher Dorothy Lazenby, and my parents that I was lost academically. During the summer between my seventh and eighth-grade year, my father took me to Temple University in Philadelphia to have me evaluated academically. At that time, Temple University was experimenting with what we now call “learning disabilities.” Their research indicated that while some students had average or even higher IQs, their academic progress was severely limited.

I went through a series of tests for several days. I asked the Temple testing center and my father not to reveal to me what my IQ was. I thought I was dumb. The testing center at Temple determined that my IQ was high enough to succeed academically, but I had two learning disabilities I would have to deal with, dysgraphia and dyslexia. When I looked at printed words, I would see certain letters or

phrases backwards. I remember a fellow student of mine in grade school whose father owned an ESSO service station. One day we argued over the name ESSO. I maintained that the name of the service station was “3”SSO. The letter “E” appeared to me to be the numeral three.

Temple University suggested that I attend a small private school in Philadelphia that was working with students with learning disabilities. After spending one summer and one regular school year at The Matthews School, I learned that I was not dumb – although I had learning disabilities. I could overcome these limitations through dedication and hard work. I became a new person. I felt a sense of freedom I had never known. My secret fears were exposed, and I had nothing to hide anymore. The Matthews School was simply awesome – approximately 20 students with four instructors. I could escape the prison of my fears with new confidence.

My learning disabilities did not go away. The Matthews School taught me how to recognize and work with them. In the “Dash” article I reviewed those difficulties. Some of these “roadblocks” were difficult, filled with sadness, anxiety, and disappointment.

Mary Woodroof, a dear friend of mine, who served many years as the executive secretary of The Board of Professional Responsibility of the Supreme Court of Tennessee, read the “Dash” article and wrote the following:

“THIS IS AN ABSOLUTELY WONDERFUL ARTICLE. It incorporates struggle, doubts, fear, joy, reality, achievement, anxiety... everything about a life well lived!

YOURS!

Thank you for sharing it with me!

(I stayed late at the office to read it!)

I will print it out tomorrow and save it in my stash of

things Treasured!”

Mary

Looking back, I wish that I had developed a better understanding that my roadblocks could become stepping stones to a better future. I wish I had understood Mary’s comments that my struggles really reflected a “life well lived.” It has furthered my belief that what we perceive as “roadblocks” can become stepping stones to growth, maturity, and, in time, more possibilities of success.

My father and mother taught all six children how to dream and planted seeds that never stopped growing.

I would like to share with you the poem titled The Average Child, written by an unknown author, which reminds me of me earlier in my life.

THE AVERAGE CHILD

I don’t cause teachers trouble,
My grades have been okay,
I keep up my chores at home,
I’m in school every day.

My teachers think I’m average.
My parents they think so too,
I wish I didn’t know that,
‘cause there’s lots of things I’d like to do.

I’d like to build a rocket ship,
I’ve got a book that shows you how,
Or I’d like to start a stamp collection,
Well, no use trying now,
‘cause since I know I’m average,
I’m just smart enough to see,
To know there’s nothing special,
That I should ever expect of me.

I'm just part of that majority,
That bump part of the bell,
That live our lives unnoticed,
In an average kind of hell.

As I look back on the wonderful experiences of building a law firm, I am again reminded of a plaque given to me by my youngest daughter Annie. "Success is making a difference in the lives of others. Happiness is... watching them grow because of it. Cherish this gift and know that you can make a difference." I was fortunate in surrounding myself with very hard-working, competent partners, attorneys, paralegals, and professional staff who embraced growth for themselves and the firm. We often mentioned that we could not take the firm to new levels unless we took everyone to new levels.

I have reflected on the reason that I had such a burning desire to go to law school and discovered something that had never occurred to me. I now realize that my father was encouraging me to be a lawyer when he was the mayor of Princeton, West Virginia. He bought me a squeegee and a bucket and wanted me to go to the courthouse square and offer to clean the windows of the various offices. Of course, most of the offices were occupied by lawyers. I did go to the courthouse square and wash the windows and met a number of lawyers that were anecdotally full of fun. I remember one in particular. He was sweating through his suit and looked at me and said, "Lawson, my office is air conditioned but the condition of air is terrible!" We both laughed.

While attending The Matthews School, I returned home for the Christmas holidays. During the holidays, my mother sent me to the cellar to get something needed for dinner. I walked into the room and I noticed a piece of paper on the floor with my name "Philip" on it. I picked up the paper, and to my

surprise, it had my name, Philip Jean Lawson, and underneath my name was "Attorney At Law." I went back upstairs and showed my mother the piece of paper and asked "What's this all about?" She smiled and said, "Phil, it's Christmastime and you shouldn't be asking questions like that."

On Christmas morning, I opened up a small box that contained a *maroon pen* and on the pen etched in gold was Philip J. Lawson. The "Attorney At Law" was not on the pen. My father had been practicing writing my name on a piece of paper, dreaming that, even with my educational difficulties, I could still someday be a lawyer. I would also like to note that when I started my law practice, my father gave me a beautiful burl walnut rolltop desk for my office. Early in my practice, I misplaced my *maroon pen*. I was upset because the pen was a "treasure" to me. I searched everywhere for it.

After 30 years of law practice I left my office in the Bank of America building. My wife Neville and I took her horse trailer to the office to get the rolltop desk. We dismantled the rolltop into numerous sections and loaded it on the horse trailer and returned home. After unloading sections of the desk, Neville asked me to check the trailer one more time to make sure I hadn't left anything behind.

I stepped into the trailer and, to my great surprise, noticed the "*maroon pen*" on the floor. It had fallen out of a portion of the desk. It had been very close to me during all of my years of practicing law. That was the "secret" of the *maroon pen*.

I would like to thank my partners, associates, paralegals, and professional staff for their great and continuing contribution to the firm.

As Randy Travis sings on his CD, **Three Wooden Crosses**, "It's not what you take when you leave this world; it's what you leave behind when you

go.”

In closing I would like to share with you a poem written by my father many years ago. The words in the last sentence are meaningful to me...

Sweet Dreams

In dreams I see a village street,
With maple trees on either side,
Their spreading branches almost meet,
And through them gentle breezes glide.

Beneath these trees I stroll again,
With friends I loved in days gone by,
And hear the village church bells ring,
As slowly falls the ev'ntide.

And the cares that have beset me,
Like shadows fade away,
When in sweet dreams again I see
A long past yesterday.

J.W. Lawson

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Until the next time – **THINK ON THESE THINGS!**

Most sincerely,
Philip J. Lawson, J.D.

(Phil is the founder of the Knoxville law firm of Wimberly Lawson and retired from active practice on December 31, 2004. Phil has lectured and taught widely on a variety of aspects of labor, employment law, leadership, and personal growth. Phil also served as a Hearing Officer for the Board of Professional Responsibility of the Supreme Court of Tennessee and is a Founding member, Speaker Selection and Scheduling for Knoxville Fellowship Ministries.)