

The Eagle's Nest

By Philip J. Lawson, J.D.

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DARE TO SOAR



On June 17, 1999, I gave my son, Kelly, a book entitled ***Dare to Soar***, by Byrd Baggett. I highly recommend this small pamphlet-type book for anyone who feels they have much to offer but are struggling to become who they want to be and can be... with the help of others.

My note inside the cover stated "To Kelly, with love -- Dad ☺ -- You are an Eagle!" The inside front cover had a message of its own:

**We must have the
Courage to bet on our
Dreams, to take the calculated risk and
Leave behind forever
"The internal forces that hold us down."**

I'll never forget how I felt when my father looked at me and encouraged me to dream what I could be like. He reminded me, "Dreams come with wings!"

One of the finest writings I have ever come across was a poem that **reminded me of me** at the age of 13. I was hopelessly lost in school and in the world in general. The poem touched me tremendously. It brought tears to my eyes and an ache to my heart.

I know there are many students who today feel the same way I did. I put the poem in my treasure drawer. I could not bear to read it a second time.

I have just reread the poem for the first time in many years and will share it with you:



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 everyday.**

**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 you 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.**

I should point out that my mother and father never entertained a thought that I was an average child...NEVER. They were always encouraging me to learn and to express my true identity. When they learned I was struggling to just survive in school, they researched where I needed to go for help with what we now call "learning disabilities." The place was Temple University in Philadelphia, a college that was attempting to identify something called "learning disabilities" and teaching methods that could make a difference in the lives of students with such difficulties.

One of the things I remembered from my experiences at Temple University is that I had to be persistent when it came to learning. I simply had to put more effort in to learning than those who did not have learning disabilities. At that time, I was also a stutterer, and I believe I did so from a sense of insecurity about my learning disabilities.

The author Baggett writes:



"Failure is only absolute when you give up. Everyone gets knocked down; the question is, will you get back up?"

One of the best examples of **PERSISTENCE** was the example of someone we've all learned about, and I share it with you now:

He **failed** in business in '31.

He was **defeated** for state legislator in '32.

He tried another business in '33. It **failed**.

His fiancée died in '35.

He had a nervous **breakdown** in '36.

In '43 he ran for Congress and was **defeated**.

He tried again in '48 and was **defeated** again.

He tried running for the Senate in '55. He **lost**.

The next year he ran for Vice President and **lost**.

In '58 he ran for the Senate again and was **defeated** again.

Finally in 1860, Abraham Lincoln was elected the 16th president of the United States.

On one occasion, while speaking to the entire inmate population of the state penitentiary in Southwest Virginia, it occurred to me that many in the audience possessed a great sense of "failure." I thought for a moment about what to say and how to say it. I remembered reading a comment about failure where the author pointed out that in this life, all of us fail from time to time; we all fall and... it's just going to happen. I also remembered the author pointing out that a person is not a failure; a person just goes through failure events. When I shared this with the group, I saw many smiles and heads moving in agreement. It was as though they gave a sigh of relief.

There are four such prisons in the state of Virginia. When judges are convinced that an individual has potential for rehabilitation, they have the ability to send them to one of these four prisons. The sentence at the prison is for 20 weeks. If the individual finishes all of the requirements during the 20 weeks, their prison sentence is reduced to probation. There is an actual graduation exercise they go through (probably the first of their life) with some having family members and children attending. This experimental program has proven successful. Those who don't graduate are either given another opportunity for a limited period of time or are transferred to the state penitentiary to serve the remainder of their sentence.

Before beginning my presentation, the guards passed out an outline of my talk before I opened the program. The outline provided blanks which could be filled in during the presentation. It was interesting to see how attentive the inmates were during the presentation "Be All You Can Be." They filled in the blanks of the outlines during the presentation.

One touching point ...It was apparent that some had difficulty writing or spelling and would ask someone around them for help in spelling or filling in the blanks in the outline.

I reiterated my statement that failure was an "event" and **NOT** a person. I pointed out that the experience they were now going through could be the best experience they could have in their entire

life. I expressed my opinion that the lesson they had learned during their prison experience could be shared with those in their communities from which they came. They could go back to those communities and carry a message of hope that I could personally never do.

Before my talk began, I had a discussion with the warden of the prison to express my desire to let prisoners marching out of the auditorium to be able to stop by my platform and ask me brief questions or make a comment to me. He agreed since guards would be on the floor with me at all times.



The comments were interesting. One asked why, as a busy attorney, I would drive from

Tennessee to Southwest Virginia to talk to them. My response was, "**Because you matter.**" I was touched by the look I received from several of them standing in front of me. I'm not sure anyone in their lives had shared with them the fact that **they mattered**. Some smiled and others would make comments like... "I've always wanted to be an accountant. What do you think about that?" My response would be something like, "I think that would be a great profession." Others wanted to be a mechanic, a big rig driver on the interstate, a construction worker, etcetera. My response was always one of encouragement and I was sincere in those responses.

As an aside, during my first presentation at the prison, I decided to drive to Bristol, Tennessee so that I would be sure to locate the prison on time the next morning, having never been there before.

During the night, I was restless and thought about the speech problem I had with stuttering for several years when I was young. The more I entertained the thought of my presentation, I

became fearful of the possibility of beginning to stutter during the presentation. It gave me great concern.

I reminded myself that I was serving a worthy purpose and that I would be given the ability to be more concerned about the men in the prison than in my stuttering. As I walked into the gymnasium, the fear of stuttering left me completely. I felt comforted because I wanted them to know that they could again overcome obstacles in their lives as I had been able to do in mine. Before completing this particular visit, I reminded them once again that failure was an event; it was not a person. And it's not something they had to drag around for the rest of their lives. I emphasized again that they could go back into their communities and carry the same message of hope to their loved ones and others -- A message that confirmed that failure was an event, not a person.

You can also have a tremendous influence with young people in your lives by sharing the same message. Please remember...



**FAILURE IS AN EVENT;
IT IS NOT A PERSON.**

Think on these things!

Sincerely,
Philip J. Lawson