

## ***The Eagle's Nest*** *By Philip J. Lawson, J.D.*



### ***The Importance of the "Dash" in Your Life! (... and the Secret of the Maroon Pen)***

**A**s I began thinking of a topic for this month's Liaison, it did not take long for me to remember a maroon pen, which came into my life at the age of 13 and ultimately played a role in my desire to become a lawyer.

In the seventh grade it became abundantly apparent to me, my teacher Dorothy Lazenby, and my parents, that I was hopelessly 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 high IQ's, their academic progress was severely limited.

Temple University had set up a number of small experimental private prep schools to deal with learning disabilities. I went through a series of tests for several days. The conclusion of the testing suggested that I had an IQ high enough to be a successful student.

I asked the Temple testing center and my father not to reveal to me what my IQ was. 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. I do not remember the name given to the second learning disability, but I do remember the name of one was dyslexia. When I looked at printed words, I would see certain letters backward. 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.

At that time, I knew I was failing academically. Each Sunday I would experience extreme anxiety about school on Monday. I shared a bathroom

with my mother and father. I wanted to let them know that I was hopelessly lost in school. I would go into the bathroom and stand behind the door to their bedroom wanting to open the door and confess, so to speak, my fears that I could not succeed in school. I did not have the courage to open the door. Even today, after 42 years in corporate America and a law practice, I sometimes have the same feelings on Sunday afternoon. When this occurs, I stay busy doing anything that will help me get through the afternoon and overcome the anxiety that is still inside of me on Sundays.

The results of the testing at Temple University indicated that I should attend one of the private schools in Philadelphia. I entered the Matthews School that summer and also stayed the following year.

***"...right thinking results in right actions which are inevitably followed by right feelings."***

***Unknown Author***

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 15 students with four instructors. I could escape the prison of my fears with new confidence.

There is something I must confess in retrospect. In my late 20s, I drove to Philadelphia

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and visited with Helen Matthews, the head of the Matthews School. The purpose of my visit was to ask Ms. Matthews whether or not she felt I had the ability to get through law school. I told Ms. Matthews that I did not want to know what my IQ was. She left me alone in her office and returned in approximately ten minutes with a big smile on her face. She said, "Philip, you can be a lawyer if you want to. You are already aware that you must spend more time studying than other students who do not have learning disabilities." I thanked her for her time and drove out of the driveway with the full confidence that I could be a lawyer.

***My father planted a seed that never stopped growing.***

I applied to the law school at the University of Tennessee. I asked the dean of admissions what score I would need to make on the LSAT (Law School Aptitude Test) to be eligible for law school admission. I was told I needed to score at least 500 on that exam.

That same day, I posted an index card in my office with the numerals 500 in great bold quotes. Each day I entered my office, I would see the numerals 500 on the back of my door. I did take the LSAT and scored, as I recall, something over the 500 mark.

I was excited, and rushed to the law school admissions office. I learned there was a new admissions director. I told him my story and that I had successfully passed the 500 score. He informed me that the entrance requirements had been raised and that my score was not high enough to qualify for admission. I was crushed, and that "old" feeling came back – that I did not have "what it takes" to be accepted and to succeed in law school.

The new dean was extremely kind to me as I told him my "story." Thereafter, the dean said he would put my name down as number three on the waiting list and would call me if an opening occurred. I knew the dates of the fall orientation week at the law school – dates which came and went with no word. The next week after orientation started, the dean called and said two students who had been accepted had not registered; I could enter law school the first of the next week. That's exactly

what I did. I commuted 90 miles round trip each day and worked and finally graduated from the law school at 33 years of age.

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. He 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.

I now understand why my father wanted me to clean the windows on the courthouse square. He wanted to plant in my mind the desire to be a lawyer.

While attending Matthews School, I returned home for the Christmas holidays. During the holidays, my mother sent me to the cellar to get something from the food storage area. As I walked into the room, I noticed a small piece of paper with my name "Philip" on it. I unfolded the paper and read the wording "Philip Jean Lawson, Attorney At Law." I was surprised and returned to the kitchen and asked my mother what the paper was all about.

She just smiled and said, "Phil, it's Christmastime and you shouldn't be asking questions about that."

***"It's not what you take when you leave this world; it's what you leave behind when you go."***

***Randy Travis***

On Christmas morning, I opened up one of my gifts – a beautiful maroon pen. On the pen in gold letters was Philip Jean Lawson. The "Attorney At

Law” was missing. I now have concluded that the Philip Jean Lawson, Attorney At Law, was a dream my father had for me.

Looking back, I can’t imagine how, even after the testing at Temple University, my father could ever think I could become a lawyer. Not only did I have two learning disabilities; I also had developed a severe stuttering problem and I wore a polio brace on my left leg.

My father planted a seed that never stopped growing.

As I look back on the wonderful experience 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 surrounded myself with very hard-working, competent attorneys, paralegals, and professional staff who embraced growth for themselves and the firm. I often mentioned that we could not take the firm to new levels unless we took everyone to new levels.

Someone wrote that “right thinking results in right actions which are inevitably followed by right feelings.” You must talk to yourself rather than listen to yourself. This last Christmas, I received a gift from my sister, Susie, that has proven to be monumental to me. The gift included a book, a CD, and the poem called *The Dash*, which reflected my thoughts on leadership and personal growth. I would like to share the poem with you; it is simple yet profound.

Linda Ellis wrote her poem, *The Dash*, in one afternoon ten years ago, and it changed her life forever. In 239 words, she captured the “simple truths” of why we were put on this earth. Since then, *The Dash* has been published hundreds of times in books, newspapers, magazines and company newsletters. It has also been read countless times at company meetings, graduations, and funerals. Simple Truths proudly presents this classic poem in a beautifully designated book along with nine inspirational chapters from Mac Anderson about what we can do to make a difference in the lives of others.

What a pleasure it is to share this poem with you.

## **THE DASH**

By Linda Ellis

*I read of a man who stood to speak  
At the funeral of a friend.  
He referred to the dates on her tombstone  
From the beginning to the end.*

*He noted that first came her date of birth  
And spoke the following date with tears,  
But he said what mattered most of all  
Was the **dash** between those years.*

*For that **dash** represents all the time  
That she spent alive on earth.  
And now only those who loved her  
Know what that little line is worth.*

*For it matters not how much we own;  
The cars, the house, the cash,  
What matters is how we live and love  
And how we spend our **dash**.*

*So think about this long and hard.  
Are there things you’d like to change?  
For you never know how much time is left,  
That can still be rearranged.*

*If we could just slow down enough  
To consider what’s true and real  
And always try to understand  
The way other people feel.*

*And be less quick to anger,  
And show appreciation more,  
And love the people in our lives  
Like we’ve never loved before.*

*If we treat each other with respect,  
And more often wear a smile  
Remembering that this special **dash**  
Might only last a little while.*

*So, when your eulogy’s being read  
With your life’s actions to rehash  
Would you be proud of the things they say  
About how you spent your **dash**?*

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The poem carries a remarkable message. I would like to thank simple truths®, [www.simpletruths.com](http://www.simpletruths.com), toll-free (800)900-3427 for their gracious permission to share this poem with you. I have purchased numerous sets of **The Dash** materials for a number of friends and acquaintances. No question about it, it is “truly a gift that keeps on giving.”

Looking back, I want to honor my father for having the vision and for taking the time to try to maximize the gifts of each of his six children. He was continually buying us books that contained motivational principles and biographies of successful people.

We can all be more and do more than we think we can. How do you want to spend your **Dash** for the betterment of your loved ones, associates, and our country? It is a choice we have that can change those we love; those we leave behind; and those special people who come unexpectedly into our lives from nowhere.

I want to thank the Smoky Mountain Paralegal Association for permitting me to share with you my thoughts on personal growth and leadership.

I would be remiss if I did not thank my partners, associates, paralegals and professional staff for a ride that I'll never forget! You have been most kind. I will never forget you!

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.”

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.)

