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Lessons from the Ranch

**By Matthew A. Passen
YLS Chair**

In July, I had the privilege of spending 23 days in Dubois, Wyoming at the Trial Lawyers College, a program dedicated to training and educating lawyers and judges who are committed to the jury system and to representing and obtaining justice for individuals. The College was founded and led by legendary trial lawyer Gerry Spence and took place on his ranch.

I went to the Trial Lawyers College not knowing what to expect, but hoping to leave a better trial lawyer. I think I accomplished that goal. I also learned some unexpected lessons that made me a better person and that apply to lawyers of all practice areas:

Power of role reversal. Atticus Finch said it best in *To Kill a Mockingbird*: “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.” This exercise—of actually trying to see and feel the world from someone else’s point of view—is incredibly powerful in understanding the “story” of one’s case and preparing for trial. It can be

equally beneficial in our interactions with family members, colleagues and others in everyday life.

Feelings create connection. As a trial lawyer, credibility is everything. To develop and maintain credibility, we have to be honest and be ourselves. The less obvious takeaway from the ranch is that being ourselves often involves exposing our true feelings—even feelings we are afraid or ashamed of. Having the courage to express our feelings and vulnerability makes us more relatable to others. This is how I will approach every jury selection from now on, and how I hope to act in my everyday life.

Awaken the Right Brain. Most lawyers (including me) are logical, analytic “left-brain” thinkers. They have never written a poem, painted abstract art or stood before an audience and sung a song. Having (skeptically) done all three at the ranch, I experienced an awakening of creativity and freedom of expression that I hadn’t felt since I was a child. Given that most people make decisions based on feelings, not logic, we might consider exploring activities that awaken the “right brain” to see life through a new, more human (less lawyerly) lens.

It all begins with you. This is one of Gerry Spence’s favorite sayings, and one I will always remember. How can I ask a juror to trust me if I don’t trust the juror or show that I can be trusted? How can I expect my wife to show me love and affection if I don’t show it to her? Most of life’s problems can be answered by this simple response: It all begins with me. ■