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FRIENDS AS CATALYSTS

Anna and I have built a house. With our own hands. All of it: carpentry, plumbing, wiring, roofing, painting, everything.

It has taken three years of Thursdays, plus an occasional Saturday, and all vacations and holidays. Many times we were overtaken with self-doubt. Every time, a friend kept us going.

I am here tonight, not to read you a paper on how to build a house, but to examine, with specific experience, the catalytic effect of friends on human creativity. History is full of examples. George Gershwin needed his brother, Ira. The best of Tchaikovsky would have been lost to us without Madam von Meck. Even Elvis Presley needed his Colonel Parker. Behind every famous achiever in history and contemporary life, in every field, you will usually find someone functioning as catalyst; often unseen and unknown. A catalyst is that which allows things to happen in less than ideal circumstances. A catalyst can provoke change without being significantly changed itself.

Many friends and relatives helped us build our cottage in the woods. Our children co-labored with us on nearly every visit home. Bill Gayle helped me shovel

dirt long before a nail had ever been driven. Burt Linker lifted heavy concrete blocks for me the summer I had pneumonia. John Haskins, a church member, climbed high with me on a parallel ladder to work under the eaves. Wendell Armstrong, another church member turned aside to show us how to shingle a roof. El Pultz, a local farmer, did amazing things with a manure-loader backhoe. My brother, Robert, gave up a day to help me with the nasty job of putting dry wall on the ceiling. Many people stopped by to visit and ended up lending a hand.

But three people stand out, not only as helpers, but as catalysts. If it were not for them, I could not stand here tonight and say, "Anna and I have built a house."

Let me describe the project. Almost twenty years ago, we purchased four acres of "unimproved farmland" in Rockbridge County, five miles northwest of Lexington. There was no water, no paved road, no driveway access, and the nearest electricity was a half mile away. It was nothing but a mature eastern woodland on the crest of Mount Atlas, a minor hill few people notice as they travel route 39 on the way to Goshen Pass.

On that property there now stands, out of sight from the road, a one bedroom cottage, twenty-four by twenty-four--576 square feet of indoor living space. By Easter, 1994, I think I can lay down my tools and call it finished--though the jobs remaining can be counted on my fingers. [Begin to pass around photo albums.]

I.

The first catalytic friend I will mention is Lewis Garbee. In every sense of the term, Lewis is a prime mover. He is in heavy construction with front-end loaders, backhoes, dump trucks, graders and the like. Lewis is my chief assistant in giving public fireworks displays around the state, and an Elder at Quaker Memorial.

Seven years ago I told him about our property in Rockbridge County. His curiosity got the best of him, and he drove me over there in his pickup. The state had put tar and gravel on the road and knocked in the rudiments of a driveway connection. In less than a car length it bumped into a steep hillside.

"Looks impossible, doesn't it?" I asked, a little embarrassed by my youthful choice of a homesite.

Lewis spat a jawful of Redman in the ditch and said, "It's just dirt. Where do you want your house?"

We walked through the woods to the crest of the hill where we would be able to see the Blue Ridge from the bedroom and House Mountain from the kitchen. He tied a strip of orange tape to a twig. Soon he had a connect-the-dots line of tape fluttering down in a graceful curve to the road. "If we go this way," he explained, "we can save most of your trees and you will not have serious erosion when it rains."

The idea evolved that we would save that prime site for a retirement home later, and extend the drive deeper into the woods for a little vacation cottage now. We could use it in the future for an art studio and a guest house. Again, Lewis clearly saw where to put it and how to get there.

Two years later, I was stirred by the beauty of his schoolbus yellow loader on a flatbed trailer against an ocean of valley air. The hillside yielded and we had a driveway. "While I'm here, I'll flatten a place for your cottage. How big do you want it?"

"I don't know."

"How about twenty-four by twenty-four?"

"OK."

And the die was cast. They turned out to be fortunate numbers. I have learned that if you dimension a house in multiples of four there will be far less waste of material.

"Where do you want your well?"

"I don't know."

He grabbed a couple of bent coathangers (or something) he kept in the cab of his truck and began to walk around the area. "You've got a good stream running up this side, and a heavy one coming this way. They cross right here." Placing a little blue flag on a wire to mark the spot, he said, "I'll clear a place for the well-driller to park his rig."

On the way back to Lynchburg was when it happened. I was reflecting on the cost of what I was getting into. I had saved enough to pay Lewis for the grading, and the quarry for the crushed stone, but even a small house was going to be a costly thing. I told Lewis how many thousands a contractor wanted just to pour a concrete slab.

"That's not in line with the material," he said.

"What?"

"There's not that much concrete in it. I mean: concrete costs anywhere from $45 to $57 a yard. Figure

your footers eighteen inches or even twenty-four inches deep and a four inch slab. . ." He began to do construction men's calculations while he shifted through his truck's gears. "They're way out of line. Two-thirds labor."

He worked the calculator on the inside of his eyelids and came up with a manageable number.

I began to see one fact quite plainly. If I were going to have a house over on that hill, I would have to build it myself.

All I needed was an education. I already had a little experience working with wood on small projects. What I needed to know was how to put a house together. As I always do when I want to learn something, I went to the library. The shelves were overflowing with information. Exciting titles screamed at me offering easy answers to all my difficult questions. In a few minutes I was on my way to the circulation desk with my arms full of books I was eager to read. The librarian looked at me in horror and said quietly, "I'm sorry, sir. We have a five book limit."

Lewis had gotten me started.

II.

The most terrifying aspect of the whole project was the masonry. I felt comfortable with wood, but concrete and block was clearly going to be a problem. Learning to work masonry by reading a book is a little like attempting to learn to swim by reading. The few things I had stuck together with mortar in the past looked terrible. This job would come first, and it would be the foundation of everything else. The early enthusiasm Lewis had inspired for the project soon turned into a profoundly grim reality. I couldn't do it.

Enter Nick Pollotta. Nick would be with us tonight but he is on his back in a hospital bed in Northern New Jersey recovering from a second knee replacement. Whatever I say about this man will be inadequate. He is truly what the old-timers used to call "a singular person." There is only one Nick Pollotta. He gave us our house.

I met him while engaged in a Habitat for Humanity project sponsored by local Presbyterian churches. It was immediately evident "he ain't from around here." In fact, he grew up in New York's Little Italy. Most of his professional career was as a union mason. Block, brick, stone--he has worked it all. He is good, and his trade was good to him. Because his wife was from

Lynchburg, they moved here upon his retirement. In a few short years, Nick has left an indelible mark on this part of Virginia. He calls these his "pay back" years, and has given freely of his experience and expertise in so many projects ranging from construction to soup kitchens, he was given the governor's outstanding volunteerism award.

One day I told Nick what I was thinking of doing. His response was immediate and direct. "I have taught six men the trade. I'll make it seven."

"Perhaps I could watch you do a job for Habitat."

"I'll do better than that," he said. "I'll put a trowel in your hand."

A few weeks later Nick called me. We had a job on a new project. The two of us, maybe with one other helper, were going to pour a 28 by 38 monolithic concrete slab and footer for a new house on Hanover Street. The cement truck would arrive at 7:30 a.m. He would provide the tools and the boots.

I went with Nick to the site to check things out. I listened eagerly as he talked, showing me how to check the form for level. I watched the plumbers finishing their rough-in. I tried to absorb every detail of the setup.

When the trucks arrived it was simply a matter of listening to Nick and doing what he told me. Things happened faster than I would have liked, but Nick remained calm and never failed to put my hand on the right tool and to give me lesson after lesson in the correct way to work. He would gently chide me when I would make a mistake, and give a little praise if I got it right. More than once he had to show me a better way to do something. By late morning the job was essentially done.

"My cabin will only be 24 by 24," I said.

Nick shrugged, "Piece of cake!"

Six months later he would say, perhaps with a natural forgetting of the unpleasant, that my little slab was the toughest job he had ever gotten into.

We poured on the Saturday of Memorial Day weekend, 1991, a day I will never forget. I had been unable to sleep the night before. I filled those wakeful hours with thoughts of what Nick and I would be doing. It was easy to think it was the excitement that kept me awake. The truth is, I was sick and didn't know it. On Memorial Day itself, X-rays at Baptist Hospital revealed pneumonia.

But this was Saturday, and I was rarin' to go. My son, David, had come down from Toledo to help. It was

going to be simple--just like the Habitat pour, only smaller. But there were two critical differences I had not thought about.

The Habitat slab had been worked on a cool, almost chilly day. This time the temperature was in the nineties. Not only did that work a hardship on the laborers; concrete sets faster in hot weather.

The practice job had been on a flat lot on a city street. The cement truck could back up to any spot we needed it--a little dab here, a squirt over there. My site is forested and in hilly terrain. The driver could find only one place, nine feet above us, where he could back up and spew his mud down upon us. Because we had not used one on the fist job, I had not thought about the importance of a wheelbarrow. We were suddenly faced with a mound of fast-setting, heavy cement, and no tool for moving it other than a garden rake.

El Pulz, mentioned earlier, had brought his wife to play music on her autoharp as construction began. He quickly saw this was no time for gentle celebration, departed, and returned with a wheelbarrow. By suggesting that one of the drivers was inexperienced, we induced the young man to back down a treacherous hill, spiling wet cement out of the rear of his truck in the process, so that he could pour the farthest corner

without need of scooping and carting. Nick whispered to me, "Give the driver a couple of bucks." I slipped them to David and told him what to do. That was before the driver tried to get his truck back up the hill.

Can you imagine a vehicle the size of a garage, in the middle of the woods on moist earth trying to go up a steep hill. Like just about everything else in this project, it couldn't be done. Huge double wheels dug in spinning. Smoke, roaring engine, failure after failure after failure. About a half-hour into this, David returned my two dollars. "I can't offer him this," he said.

Eventually, the trucks were gone and the slab was poured and finished. Nick was red in the face from the heat and exertion. I was ready for a stretcher. The summer would pass to Labor Day before I would feel like working again.

Nick grew concerned that if he didn't put up a concrete block wall, the summer rains would wash dirt down from the embankment and bury our slab. With Anna mixing mortar, and Bert Linker lifting the block, Nick laid a nine foot high basement wall for a future workshop. On one of those days of labor, I was able to smooth the mortar joints with a little tool Nick had in his pail.

Casually, Nick asked what kind of heat we would be using.

"Oh," I explained, "We won't have any central heat. Probably just a little woodstove."

"Then you are going to need a chimney"

"I figured we would just use a tin pipe."

"A tin pipe!" he shouted. "Look at all these stones!" He began to walk all around the property. "Look at the color in this one. Gorgeous! They're all over the place. God has given them to you."

"I don't know what to do with them," I explained.

"Hey," he said, nudging me in the side with his elbow, "You know a stone mason. All you and Anna will have to do is pick them up and clean them. I'll build your chimney."

"Nick, I can't ask you to do that."

"You're not asking. I'm offering. I'd love to build another stone chimney and these stones are great!"

That fall Anna and I picked up tons of stones and put them in a big pile next to the foundation. When I told Nick about them he said, "Without seeing it I can tell you now. You don't have enough. Gather some more. I need a pile about the size of an automobile."

I will admit this openly. Working for Nick Pollotta was the hardest work I have ever done in my

life. I have been more fatigued after a day with him than following any other activity in memory. Stone work is heavy, dirty, and dangerous. It must also be fun, because he sang all the way up the chimney. Because of his bad knee, our job was to bring the mortar and stones up to him, often rolling them from one ladder rung to another. I can't speak for Anna, but I thought I would die.

"Nick," I said, "if I were a laborer I would be fired."

He returned, "You wouldn't make it past coffee break!"

III.

Completing this trinity of friends is Dean Foster, who can only be characterized as a supercatalyst. I am using the building of a house as my example tonight, but it is literally true that most of the things the public knows and tells about the things I have done for the past twenty years or so have their origin in him. If I have composed music, written books, shot fireworks, or accomplished any number of things, it is because this man, discovering or suspecting my interests, pointed me in the right direction and refused to let me fail. He has done this not only for me, but for dozens, perhaps

hundreds, of others--students, colleagues, riff-raff. And all of us feel as though we are his very best friend. Being with Dean Foster is similar to what a classical Christian mystic said of his religious experience: "When I am with God it is as though I am the only child he has." To spend an hour at his home is to observe a steady stream of telephone calls, drop-in visits, and mail from a widely dispersed group of very interesting people.

Without this supercatalyst, all there would be on that hill in Rockbridge County is Lewis Garbee's driveway and clearing. Not even Nick Pollotta could have gone to work.

Two "for instances":

Lewis pushed down some very large oak, hickory and poplar trees to make room for the foundation. I needed to saw them into fireplace lengths and stack them in a convenient location. If I am not cut out to be a mason, neither am I designed to be a lumberjack. A log is an extraordinarily heavy thing. I taught myself to use a chainsaw, but lifting, rolling, or pushing those logs uphill to stack them was a discouraging task.

Dean, understanding that I ordinarily take Thursdays off, began to show up now and then to watch my progress. Sometimes he would pitch in and help me with

the sawing. One Thursday he disappeared, only to return an hour later driving a battered pick-up truck with "FARM USE" scrawled on the side. He helped me load logs into that truck and drove them up the hill in four-wheel drive over and over again, for days, until the foundation area was clear.

The other example is his way of solving the impossible problem of water. To mix mud you've got to have a supply of water. There was no source of water anywhere nearby. The well would not be dug for another year. Refusing to allow me to be defeated by a lack of water, this man found a giant galvanized tub, the sort of thing ranchers might use to water horses, placed it in the rear of one of his vans, filled it with spring water, and drove it to the site. Anna dipped it out in buckets to stir in her mortar. Dean left that water van parked by our slowly progressing project for at least six weeks; probably more.

If I needed to make contact with the building inspector or the health department, or the lumber yard, or the quarry, or the well driller or the septic tank installer or whoever, Dean would know who to call and did most of it himself. Every time we approached a step in the construction sequence that was difficult for a man and his wife to accomplish, Dean would turn up--

sometimes alone, sometimes with extra hands. He lifted, pushed, hammered, counseled, questioned, encouraged, extolled, entertained and applauded nearly every Thursday for nearly forty months--sometimes for five minutes, sometimes for five hours.

Occasionally he arrived only to read to us. I recall a particularly fine page of cursing--better even than the famous one in *Tristram Shandy*. I would never have thought of calling a troublesome person a coprolite. On another day he presented a series of relevant quotations from the great minds. Those three yellow legal pages are now kept in the box with all the receipts for our construction purchases. A few choice excerpts:

"Better one's house be too little one day, than too big all the year after."

"My house I'm a'building is my castle, gentlemen, and nobody may offer violence here except my hammer, saw, wife and me."

"The modern idea of home has been well expressed as the place one goes from the garage."

This one, I think, was altered a bit: "And the rain descended, floods came, winds blew and beat upon the house with the rock chimney and it fell not."

All of which ended with this from someone named Retsof: "Once you find by the actual diverse effort required that you can build a sturdy home you are assured you can do anything. . ."

Twice, functioning as catalyst, Retsof-spelled-backward literally made the impossible happen. In the first instance he didn't even get his hands dirty. Every house has some kind of spine bone, a heavy beam or girder to which floor joists are attached. Dean had brought some old air-dried lumber from his barn--lengths of two-inch thick pine and hickory as hard as steel. For several days he had showed me how to laminate this giant wood together with spikes and but-end joints. When we were through this monster must have weighed a ton or more, a truly immovable object, fastened to the earth by gravity. All we had to do was lift it into place across the twenty-four feet that spanned the basement slab.

"We'll have to rent a crane," I said.

"Nonsense!" he replied.

"How will I get it in place?"

"We'll walk it over!"

"*Walk* it over?"

"You'll see. Bring an extra man and meet me here Saturday."

Somehow, my daughter, Jennifer, managed to persuade a young B&W engineer to join us over there on Saturday. He looked at the massive beam, at me and Dean and Anna and Jennifer, and shook his head in disbelief. How had he gotten into this?

The first problem was orienting it properly. We had thoughtlessly put it together 90 degrees out of alignment with its final resting place.

Dean told us to all press down on one end. It became a gigantic seesaw almost without weight. Motioning with his hands he had us walk a quarter of a circle, the beam pivoting cleanly and effortlessly until the tip of it was pointed directly at the foundation wall.

Unfortunately, that was the wrong wall for that end. There was still the matter of a twenty-four foot span. Talking gently, he managed to show us how to rest the tip right on the wall. With a little rocking and pushing, half of the thing was soon projecting out over the void.

With Jennifer sitting on the end that was on the ground above, and while Anna prayed, Dean asked the two men to climb a step ladder and nail two large boards to the business end so they would touch the concrete slab and sort of support its weight. "But only use one nail

in each," he said, "and don't drive them tight." Trusting souls, we did as we were told.

When we resumed pushing and tugging, these wooden legs began to pivot, literally walking the beam across the last half of the run. There were tense moments; hazardous moments. The B&W engineer even let go with an impulsive expletive in front of the preacher.

The last eighteen inches were sheer terror with little control of motion and direction, mingled with the fear of an errant battering ram toppling Nick's concrete block support column.

But we did it. We got it in place. It is there tonight even as I read this paper. I am sure it wasn't possible.

Dean sat on the edge of the wall, his feet dangling into the air above us, with as broad and satisfied a smile as I have ever seen on any face. I'll always believe he knew we couldn't do it.

One final example. The books advise any carpenter working alone to frame the walls "in place." It is easier and neater to nail them together flat on the deck, put the sheathing on, and then tilt them up into place. But to do this you need a dozen helpers. I had thrilled at the sight of a line of people lifting a wall at a Habitat construction site. Getting that kind of

party together out there in the woods was simply out of the question.

"No problem," Dean advised. "I'll help you."

"You mean you can round up a dozen or so helpers?"

"No, I'll come alone. There's nothing to it. Haven't you heard of Archimedes?"

Yes I knew something about that ancient Greek who said, "Give me a place to stand and I will move the earth." Plutarch records that when Hieron challenged him to practice what he preached by helping his men who were having difficulty beaching a large ship in the royal fleet, Archimedes arranged a series of cogs and pulleys in a way that allowed him, alone, to draw the fully loaded vessel out of the water and onto the land.

When Archimedes was seventy-five, his hometown, Syracuse, was attacked by Rome on both land and sea. Archimedes superintended the defense on both fronts. Behind the walls that protected the harbor he set up catapults able to hurl heavy stones great distances. Their rain of projectiles was so devastating that Marcellus had to retreat until he could have the cover of darkness. But the inventor had arranged within the walls great cranes which, when the Roman vessels came within reach, were turned by cranks and pulleys so as to drop upon the ships heavy weights of stone and lead that

sank many of them. Other cranes, armed with gigantic hooks grasped vessels, lifted them into the air, dashed them against the rocks, or plunged them, bow first, into the sea. The attack on land met such an overpowering defense the Romans fled, saying they were being opposed by gods. The Romans, strong both by land and by sea, had every hope of capturing the town at once if one old man of Syracuse were removed; as long as he was present, they never attacked again.

The day came when this modern Archimedes was ready to tilt my exterior walls into place, alone, with a little help from me.

Prying the first corner off the floor with a thin bar he called a cat's paw, he stuck a thin stick of wood at that position to hold it. Working in a similar fashion along its twenty-four feet, he soon had the entire cap plate a half-inch off the deck.

Picking up a full-sized crowbar, he repeated the process and got it up to the height of two-by-four scraps, turned on edge. The weight of the wall was clearly overwhelming.

"Maybe we shouldn't try this, Dean."

"Nonsense! A child could do it!"

Beginning to work with longer, stronger instruments that could now be wedged beneath the wallframe, he

managed to lever each three or four foot section of the wall to a height of about a foot. He asked me to put a prop under each new gain.

Soon enough he was using large timbers, rocking on higher fulcrums, and the wall reached a forty-five degree angle. Now it was getting scary. Each time I put a new prop in place, I felt like a fly under a poised swatter.

"Let's quit now, Dean, and go for some help."

"Why would we do that? This is the best part coming up. You won't have to reach under there any more. It'll be automatic."

"Automatic?"

He showed me how to slant longer props toward the wall. With each inch of advance, the thing would slip down a little lower, holding the new elevation.

Before I realized what was happening, the wall was erect and ready to be nailed to the floor. Again, the impossible had occurred, and my catalytic friend had neither sweated nor grunted throughout the process.

I was impressed, a few Sundays ago, by how the father of an epileptic boy said to Christ, "If you can, please help us." Jesus replied, "*If* I can! All things are possible to anyone with faith." Surely he had greater things in mind than my cottage walls or the

Roman fleet, but isn't this what he was getting at when he said "If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you shall say unto this mountain, 'Remove hence to yonder place;' and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you." (Matt. 17:20) Perhaps there is a new theological system to be worked out here. This man from Nazareth may be the greatest catalytic friend of them all.

So where do things stand? Anna and I have it about 98% complete. Most of all, I need to build a front stoop and cover it with a small gable roof. Then there will only be a little inside trim work, and the remainder of the porch railing. Sturdily constructed, it will undoubtedly survive us. But it will stand, not as a monument to a determined preacher and his wife, but rather as an indication of what can be accomplished through the influence of positive friendship.

Lewis, Nick, and Dean, gave more than they have any idea. They turned an impossible dream into reality. Take any one of these three catalytic friends out of the equation, and our house would not exist.