

Tim Latshaw

Tlatshaw@gmail.com Back when railroads carried more of the nation's loads and prosperity, my hometown of Dayton, New York experienced its most thriving times. Our small, rural town grew out from its stop on the line as locally owned stores and businesses settled in. The Dayton Hotel stood proudly beside the tracks, a watering hole and inn for travelers and trainmen. But like a whistle fading in the distance, the railroads lost importance. Shops closed, buildings were boarded up, and eventually the hotel too become another abandoned, crumbling relic.

In spring of 2006, the building was not the only thing in need of change. I was on a parallel track, a recent divorce having shaken my sense of purpose. Prayer was my way of trying to find my feet again, and I spent more time on my knees than ever before.

The first nudge arrived in a dream. I saw the hotel complete and rejuvenated, filled with people eating, laughing and listening to music. It was as colorful as Joseph's coat, had a soda fountain, and everyone waiting on tables dressed straight out of the '50s.

The dream repeated two more nights. The bar was now a restaurant, and there would be living space as well. The possibilities for service, missions work and making a difference were many and God made it clear that this would be The Master's Plan.

After a couple weeks, the dream no longer consumed my daily thoughts. But my desire to be shown a sign was granted — and a sign is exactly what I saw. Five feet of plywood hung on the side of the hotel: “Bankruptcy Auction.” My prayers changed from “Lord, what should I do?” to “Lord, you really mean this?”

At times in your life when you don't know what to think — or are trying to determine whether you've lost your mind for what you're thinking — family can serve as a sounding board. I called my sister, relating all I had so far experienced. “Angie,” she said. “If this is to glorify God, you need to be at that auction!”

On April 8, I stood shivering inside the unheated building, waiting for bidding to start. I had brought faith, family, friends and \$10,000 — all I had. About 20 potential bidders were also present.

The auctioneer opened the bidding at \$40,000. My heart sank. This can't be from God, I thought to

myself. I don't have that kind of money! No one said a word. The auctioneer dropped to \$30,000. Again, no response. Then \$20,000, but while the opening bid had been cut in half, it was still well beyond my means. I was shaking so badly, I couldn't tell whether it was from the cold or anticipation. Still, silence.

“This is your auction,” the auctioneer said. “We have it start it somewhere.”

A voice came from the crowd: “One dollar!”

“We are not going to play this game,” the auctioneer retorted. In the next instant, he lowered the bid to \$10,000. I swear he looked straight at me as he did so, and I nodded my head. The call was made for more bids, but the audience, as if the fun had ended, fell back into silence. They dispersed as I paid the auctioneer, tears streaming down my face. The building had sold for a quarter of the opening bid — exactly what I had to offer.

Purchasing the building was only the first in a series of challenges. To call the building a neglected derelict would've been kind. Half of the first floor had fallen victim to rot, with a huge hole where an ice machine had dropped into the crawl space below. There had been no maintenance in at least 11 years, meaning no heat or running water, and various creatures had taken up lodgings in nooks and crannies.

Yet I now owned the old Dayton Hotel with the full intention using it to glorify God. And as I began, He continued to reveal the vision by placing more goals on my heart and bringing people to the project.

Spreading the word was an initial challenge, but it proved to be one of God's many fortés. In telling the vision for the café, a local artist rendered a painting of the building as it could be. It has made the perfect complement to sharing my story with others, and people started coming forward to offer their assistance.

One of the first ideas was to hold an annual chicken barbecue to spread the word and display the progress of the project. Tickets and fliers were prepared on a home computer, adults and children sold tickets door-to-door, letters went out and visits were made to local churches, and the grounds were cleared and mowed.

More than 450 dinners were served and 10 local pastors from different denominations were in attendance. After more than a decade of emptiness, people were able to step inside the building even though some areas still had to be roped off. At one point I walked up to my house and fell to my knees in tears as I prayed a thank you to God for his awesome response and confirmation of the purpose.

The barbecue ticket sales had also produced a note: “I want to help. Call me.” with a name and phone number. After the barbecue, I followed up to discover I had not been the only one praying for the building — another had been doing so for 10 years! She brought grant writing into the mix, and although we have yet to receive one, the town hall meetings and press coverage have spread the story even farther.

Because of the grant applications, it was necessary to get a contractor's estimate on the project. Five different contractors were contacted. Two of them didn't even go beyond the front door; they simply said the project was too large. The other three concluded the whole building should be knocked down and start over from scratch. At that point, I had already seen God in the project clearly enough to know not to go against it.

“I am telling you,” I said to two of the contractors, “with God, one woman is going to do what you men cannot.” One of the contractors simply chuckled. The other gave me the estimate.

Work on the building has largely been a grassroots affair with lots of volunteer labor. The front door was left unlocked to allow people to come in and do work whenever they could. It came to a halt during the first winter, however, as there was still no heat in the building.

But like the swallows of Capistrano, the volunteers returned in spring of 2007. The rotten floor was ripped up and a wall removed. A donated dump trailer hauled debris away and donated food supplemented what I provided for the volunteers. What a contractor said would cost \$30,000 to demolish and replace was accomplished for a fraction of that by July. When funds were needed, God added three more miracles to the mix: two donations of \$1,000 each and one of \$500 — just enough to cover the \$2,500 cost of materials to replace the floor!

As work on the building and its grounds progressed, synergies began to arise. The owners of the local railroad were working to prepare the tracks for excursions so there was activity on the line two or three times per week. I was also being urged to use the volunteers to help clean up the overgrown area across from the building to help beautify the town. One day, I mentioned this to the railroad owner.

“You get the people and I'll bring the tractors and we'll clean up the center of town!” he said. Before I could react, the merry “angel of tractors” was gone, leaving me laughing aloud — it was obvious I wasn't

allowed to plan my own days anymore. That Friday I spent most of the day on a riding mower, talking to God about finances. My prayers continued over and over that the Lord would keep breathing life into the project.

Mowing ended around 4 p.m., and I went home to start dinner. Very shortly, my grandson blasted into the house followed by two stunned adults.

“We got a blessing!” he shouted. “A real true blessing!” He told me to choose a pocket and we played a quick game as I selected pockets while wondering whether a frog might be in a pocket that looked a little full. When I finally selected the pocket, it did contain something green.

While I was mowing, they were working in the basement and had found \$3,300 tucked in mayonnaise jars hidden inside the chimney. If I had demolished the building to start over as had been suggested, the money would never have been found – it would have remained in the rubble.

The Master's Plan

The Master's Plan continues, fueled by blessings. I know there is something infinitely greater than money hidden in what others have called rubble.