

Jolts®

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In his memoir, Pulitzer Prize winning author James Michener told of a profound experience he had more than eighty years earlier when he was a boy of five. A farmer living nearby had “an aging apple tree” that was no longer producing apples. He wrote:

The farmer, on an early spring day ..., hammered eight nails, long and rusty, into the trunk of the tree.... That autumn, a miracle happened. The tired old tree, having been goaded back to life, produced a bumper crop of juicy red apples, bigger and better than we had seen before. When I asked how this had happened, the farmer explained: “Hammerin’ in the rusty nails gave it a shock to remind it that its job is to produce apples.”

Michener asked the farmer if the number of nails was important. The farmer: “If you’re going to send a message, be sure it’s heard.” Michener asked if the farmer would do the same thing the next year. The farmer: “A substantial jolt lasts about ten years.”

As Michener approached the eighty-year mark, he had, in his words, “some fairly large rusty nails hammered into my trunk – a quintuple bypass heart

surgery, a new left hip, a dental rebuilding, an attack of permanent vertigo – and, like the apple tree, I resolved to resume bearing fruit.” In his case, that meant telling epic stories of people and nations. At his age, he could not accomplish much of what he wanted to do; much would be left unfinished. But he wanted to “present [a] true account” when meeting his maker. His last years were among his most productive. In a five-year period, he wrote eleven books, two of them very long. He said: “It was almost an indecent display of frenzied industry, but was carried out slowly, carefully, each morning at the typewriter and each afternoon at research or quiet reflection.”

Michener’s story of the rusty nails – the jolts – and his subsequent productivity caused me hours of reflection. A few jolts have rocked my life. A financial reversal caused me to change the way I approached my career and work life. Family issues caused me to eschew materialism and focus on relationships and experiences. An important jolt was when Rhonda and I had been dating for about six months. The doctors thought I might have cancer due to some bone irregularities. That jolted me into realizing that I had to be with Rhonda every moment possible, and I needed to marry her as soon as possible. Retirement is a jolt – suddenly you’re a senior citizen! And jolts keep coming, reminding me of my mission in life. And what is that?

I liken 3 Nephi 5:12-13 unto myself. Mormon wrote:

“Behold, I am called Mormon.” But I’m not Mormon, so I say, “I am called Jim.”

“Behold, I am a disciple of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. I have been called of him to declare his word unto his people that they may have everlasting life.”

That’s my purpose, and the jolts remind me to stay on course. The purpose is all-encompassing:

1. First, I must live so that Rhonda will be mine forever. The covenants I am keeping to the best of my ability will entitle me to have her forever. And it’s living eternally with her that I want the most.
2. Second, there are the children and grandchildren who need positive examples of gospel living as much when they are forty as they do when they are four or fourteen. We also have siblings and extended family that we love very much, and we want them to recognize and feel our Savior’s love through us.
3. Third, there is the work of finding and binding our ancestors to the Savior and to us, for without them, neither we nor they can be made perfect. Part of leaving a legacy is helping our posterity know about their ancestors and recognize that they are the products of a proud heritage

of sacrifice and faith that paved the way for them. Like Michener, I want to write an epic book that meets the divine criteria to “offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness; [presenting] in his holy temple, when it is finished, a book containing the records of our dead, which shall be worthy of all acceptance.”

4. Finally, there is the work of gathering Israel on this side of the veil, helping Heavenly Father save as many of His children as possible by inviting them all – believers and non-believers alike – to come unto Jesus Christ so that He can save them. Missionary work will continue until the great Jehovah says that the work is done, and we each want to do our part in this glorious cause.

There is no doubt the Lord will call each of us to do difficult and uncomfortable things. And he may have to send us a few jolts, a few rusty nails hammered into our trunks, to remind us of our purpose in life. The Savior said that He is the true vine and we are the branches. If we are willing to be productive, He will purge us (perhaps through a few jolts), so that we become even more productive. Because, as He said, “Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you and ordained you.” Why? Like Michener’s apple tree: “to bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain.” (See John 15:1-16.) Because after all,

the most any of us can do is to serve willingly, faithfully, diligently, and gratefully whenever and wherever Jesus calls.

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.