

Jack-of-All-Trades or Renaissance Man?

This is a written version of the toast to Jack Jonathan given at his 90th birthday party, **June 2, 2011**, by his colleague and co-author Sheelagh Hope.

During the Italian Renaissance, it was believed that “man has a capacity for unlimited personal development.” There was a celebration of individuals who were competent in a broad range of abilities such as physical acumen, creative endeavors, intellectual competence, and social adeptness.

An individual who dabbled in many areas was simply a Jack-of-All-Trades and master of none; whereas someone who excelled in several areas was lauded as a Renaissance man. I contend that our Jack is a Renaissance man. Let me explain.

Jack often says, “My whole life has been a relay race with myself.” How is that possible? When you consider Wordsworth’s assertion, “The child is father of the man,” you can understand that, indeed, Jack’s whole life has been a relay race with himself.

Consider the nautilus shell. The spiral begins with one small cell in the middle. As the nautilus grows it breaks out of the first cell and moves into a larger cell. Slowly, as the cells enlarge a spiral forms.

Let’s call this first cell of the nautilus “baby Itzhak”, the Jonathan’s second son. He was born June 2, 1921, in Cairo, Egypt. His mother tongue, and the language of the family, was French. But the grandmother spoke Spanish to the children and the family servants spoke Arabic. So from their birth, the children were exposed to three languages. By the age of two, this precocious little boy was already displaying his intelligence, independence, and adventurous nature.

A big change was in store for Jack and his brothers as they reached school age. Their father had been impressed with a Silesian Father who had started an elementary school. The wisdom and humanity of the man so impressed Jack’s father that he enrolled his three little Jewish sons in this Italian Catholic school where they learned a new language, Italian. We could say that Jack moved into a larger cell of the nautilus shell of his life.

All was not smooth. The boys were teased because of their ancient Hebrew names. After bearing up under this teasing for several months, Itzhak, the second son, took the lead and confronted their parents. “We are teased every day and it is too much. We want new names.” “You want to give up being Jonathan’s?” “No we want modern first names.”

And so Itzhak became Giacomo; Eliahim, the oldest, became Raymondo; and the youngest son, Ichaya, became Carlo. Italian, their fourth language, became their language of scholarship.

The family moved to a dairy farm outside the city, but the boys continued a long arduous trip into town every day to attend school. The farm gave Giacomo a lot of scope for his

imagination and sense of adventure. Despite the hard work, it was a child's paradise to live on a farm – an opportunity for the children to get to know their capabilities.

Soon, however, Giacomo's imagination got him in trouble. Crossing the street one day, lost in his thoughts, he did not see a motorcycle bearing down on him. Fortunately, he was not killed, but his left leg was badly shattered and he ended up bedridden for 6 months.

Insightful Papa Jonathan seized the opportunity to challenge his son's imagination through reading. At first there were adventure books that a boy might enjoy. But gradually, he brought more adult books about history and the world around. He channeled his son's imagination and vigor into intellectual realms. Giacomo took to this with gusto and even when he was able to get up and go out, he never lost his fascination with the life of his mind.

To insure his son's full recovery, Mr. Jonathan enrolled Giacomo in a boarding school in Alexandria where he would be in a sheltered environment. It was at boarding school that Giacomo had his first experience as an author. Given the task of reading during the noon meal, he chose to write a story and pass it off as a professional tale. His adventure story got a good reception and he was proud to have fooled his classmates. However, when he returned to the classroom, he discovered a note on his desk, "Shorter sentences." The teacher had NOT been fooled!

In 1935, there came a turning point in the lives of the family. Mussolini, with an eye to the natural resources of Ethiopia, invaded the country. Mr. Jonathan was so horrified by this unwarranted action that he pulled his daughters out of the Italian elementary school and sent them to an English one. Giacomo and his brothers, close to finishing their schooling, remained in the Italian school system.

When Giacomo began his high school education, he attended the Royal Italian Lyceum in Cairo. A caring son, he thought of studying accounting so he could help his father with his business. However, Mr. Jonathan insisted that he follow the classic course of study. "I can teach you accounting in a few days. But a classical education will last you a lifetime. It will give you the discipline to learn anything you need to learn." A classical education included philosophy, Latin, history, and Arabic among other subjects

At his new school, sixteen-year old Giacomo was presented with an exhilarating new challenge. His left leg, damaged in the accident, had healed shorter than his right saddling him with a limp. Because of this disability, he was expecting to be excused from the obligatory sports program. However, the wise coach insisted that he would participate with all the other boys. Soon it became clear that even with a limp he was a natural runner. Furthermore, on a running track, which is slanted, he could run as if the track were level. His disability was an advantage!

Giacomo learned the pride that comes when you train with discipline and then excel. He learned the joy of teamwork. His relay team, of which he was captain, was very successful, eventually winning the Egyptian national title in 1938 and an opportunity to try out the new stadium in Rome that was built for the 1940 Olympics. Sadly, the war interrupted the 1940 Olympic Games; but that success stayed with him throughout his many careers.

Even before Italy went to war, in 1939, the Jonathan family endured an unexpected tragedy when Mr. Jonathan died suddenly of complications due to diabetes. This was the beginning of Giacomo's adult life – a life that has, since then, focused on taking responsibility for doing whatever is necessary to ensure his own and his family's survival. He got a job in an English company selling printing equipment and supplies, finishing his last year of his baccalaureate in the evening. Entering the adult world of work, Giacomo left behind his childhood and became Jack.

When the Italians joined the Nazi war effort in 1940, an act of sabotage by the distributor of the American Intertype line casting machines presented Jack with an opportunity to become the company's exclusive agent in Egypt. The proviso was that he would have to retrieve over 50,000 matrices and spare parts from the sand pit where they were thrown and put them in order. The necessity of providing for a family of 7 drove Jack to accomplish this astonishing feat in record time. At the young age of 19, he became the exclusive salesman for the company in Egypt.

To celebrate his promotion, and appear more adult, he grew a mustache!

Not long after that he joined the United States Office of War Information as production coordinator for the American propaganda effort in the Middle East and Europe. It was here that Jack got a post-graduate education in writing and speaking English, printing, publishing, and managing a critical organization. Ever curious, and with boundless energy, he found time in the evenings to learn about photography and the developing of photographic images.

Time passed. Jack's family responsibilities lessened as all his siblings grew up, took jobs, and got married. Now he could marry and start his own family.

The United States Information Agency (USIA) was making a transition from creating war propaganda to raising awareness about American traditions and culture by introducing American books and literature translated into Arabic. So that Jack could better serve their new mission, they invited him to visit the United States to learn about American culture and industry.

It was on that trip, in the fall of 1950, that he was fulfilled when he met his wife of 60 years, Rena Della Libera. Her family was Italian! She spoke fluently in French! She had a passion for knowledge! But he did not truly realize what a gem he had until they settled in the United States. Rena proved gifted in creating and maintaining relationships with friends and family. Her talent would balance Jack's challenges at work and offer him an opportunity to develop many life long friends.

She returned with him to Egypt for a year; but when the revolution began in 1952, they knew it was time to leave. It was an opportunity for Jack to change careers – he wanted to make a living from photography like David Douglas Duncan who visited him at the embassy. With that in mind, he created an exhibition of photographs of his beloved country. Rena, through her contacts at the Fulbright Foundation, found venues in Cairo and Alexandria. Miriam, his sister and assistant in his department at the Embassy, helped with all the arrangements needed to mount an exhibition. Although the exhibition in Egypt was a great success, finding a job in the States as a photographer proved difficult.

After a year in Cleveland at World Publishing, Jack was offered a job with Hallmark Cards. In 1954, Jack, Rena, and their one-year old son settled in Kansas City. Jack's position at Hallmark was a dream job. He was able to use all his talents in writing, publishing, photography, and management. There was plenty of opportunity for his vigor and boundless imagination. With "Hurricane Jack" on board, Hallmark's product line branched out in many directions. The word was that if Jack was involved in a project it was "gold".

In 1982, Jack retired from Hallmark to pursue a business opportunity in Europe with Swarovski. Five years later, Jim Stowers asked him to help with the marketing of his company, American Century Investments. Once again, Jack brought all his talents to bear on whatever Jim asked him to focus on. One of their projects became a small publishing company, Stowers Innovations, which published over 7 books – many of which won prizes for their content and design.

Now, in 2011, Jack is finishing a manuscript about Jim and Virginia Stowers' astonishing philanthropy – the Stowers Institute for Medical Research. As Jim's close friend and confidant, Jack is the natural person to write the fascinating story of how the Stowers built a world class Institute for basic biomedical research.

Jack believes like Picasso that "it takes a long time to grow young." So, we arrive at the last cell in the nautilus shell, but not the end of the story.

Addendum - 2017

Even after having achieved excellence in many fields, Jack's life continues to expand as he imagines and produces new ideas in the form of books, stories, cards, and photographic images. Now more than ever, he relies on a diverse, talented team of devoted friends and colleagues, who help ensure that his life continues to be full of meaning as he develops his own company, Melagrana Editions.

The motto for Melagrana, "Words fly, but writing remains," sums up Jack's whole professional life - a life of creating products with paper that can last for many generations. Since turning 90 in 2011, Jack and his team have created a photographic installation, *Healing Images*, for Children's Mercy Hospital in Kansas City, MO; a photographic exhibition for the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Egypt, January 2016; a catalogue raisonné, *Egypt: The Eternal Spirit of Its People – Stories of an Exhibition*, Autumn 2015; and a children's picture book, *Gelsomina and Benvenuto: A Love Story*, December 2016.

Now we are preparing for a new photographic exhibition in Sarasota, FL at the Ringling School of Art and Design, June 2017.

I am almost breathless as I write and read this list of accomplishments in only 6 years. It is so hard to believe that Jack will be 96 years old this birthday, June 2. Surely, just these last six years are enough to affirm my opinion that:

Jack Jonathan is a Renaissance man whose imagination and generosity of spirit is an inspiration to us all.