Life Is Like an Onion

*What counts is not what you do, but what you think and feel as you go about doing. That is what propels you to do more.*

Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish essayist, is credited with defining life as “an onion that makes you cry as you peel it.” I like this simile; it is witty. But I think that the alternatives to not crying as the onion of our lives peels in front of us is to exit it on our own terms, or to peel it so that one is immune to all suffering and protected from all risks, which would be impossible and extremely boring. Life is full of glorious moments, the triumphs of our mind, our will, our dedication, those moments when we soar beyond and above the wattle of our humaneness. Life is also full of misery and pain when our humanities cannot seem to go past the scum and the sorrow. At another level, the onion analogy also assumes that we lift every layer of our lives in full awareness of the implications. Prometheus unbound!!! This Greek titan willingly stole the fire from Olympus, aware of the enormity of the crime and the horrible consequences. Ontologically, I wish I were my own master at every moment of my life and master of my every decision and every action. But I know that more often than not the onion peels by itself as if we were mere twigs at the mercy of tsunamis. For as it happened a few days ago . . .

4 A.M. Reveille blares away. Run to the computer, engage the
web engines, search the news in every language I master. I ought to have the news!! The world may be blasted to smithereens without my knowledge. It sure will be a calamity, for the world could be blown to pieces, but never without me not knowing it the very instant it is happening—although I know very well that my only contribution to the whole affair will be my demise along with the multimillion inconsequential others. Two hours later, 6 A.M., the light of my existence routs me out from the computer and invites for coffee—quality time, in fact a compilation of what the day is to be like and a reaffirmation of love and devotion to each other. The cat purrs away in pure happiness. All is well at the home front and we ready ourselves to face the world, which by now I am positive still is there, I just confirm it on the web.

“What is going to be then, eh?” Anthony Burgess had Alex, his psychopath, ask this question every time he met his three droogs. None of them knows the meaning of freedom. Alex is an automaton inexorably driven by his evilness or at the mercy of his bureaucratic handlers and he orders about his pathetic droogs and smacks them. Like dogs, they ran out, tails in between legs, yapping away their miseries. Such life, such onion!! What is it going to be then, eh? Go face the world. You are an academic. The world depends on your intellect and the students are eagerly waiting for you to distill in them your wisdom. 8 A.M., meet them, teach them, wow them with your brilliance. 9.30 A.M. back at the office to meet with the administrators. I noticed as they come in carting heavy briefcases, their foreheads furrowed, that these modern Atlases carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders are about to deliver bad news. Money is al-
ways short and this time none could be budgeted for my pet project. Hours, days, weeks of writing the proposal, meeting the players, obtaining political support, inflaming hopes and promising to the academic troops that this time we will get it—all gone and only promises obtained. 11 A.M., face the troops, be brave. There is always another day, there will be more battles ahead, we shall overcome, we shall prevail, out cause is just, and all that. NOON. Quiet in the office except for the incessant ping! ping! announcing the incoming emails. This is the newest demand on our lives and I have to resist the temptation of stumping on the machine that has made us slaves of our own technology. But there is an inner urge—get those emails, God knows there must be something important, get to the emails now! Voila, the Dean. There he is giving words of wisdom about how to approach the budget issues next time and get the project back on track. Ah, the Dean, how many times has he gone through the same process and had his pet project squashed by the bureaucracy. I like him. I like when he faces us, his troops, and tells us what to expect with certainty (unless the politicos change their mind again, of course) and what not to even dream about as there is no hope in earth of getting that lab, that new building, or that hoped for new position for your department. I do not envy his job. God, what a big onion he has to peel, he must cry a lot! 1 P.M., research time—look at your data, enjoy it, massage it, it is your ticket to the Nobel Prize. Dream a bit, thou shall be famous!! 3 P.M., drive to a nearby town to do a forensic consultation and use the opportunity to meet with the Directors and colleagues at the local hospital in the hope of interesting them to participate in a new research project. Rehearse as
you drive how you are going to present your case and tell them how they will benefit from the grant that I am sure we are going to get and how they will be participating in the glory once we do the research and publish the results. Regarding the patient, it was just another case of mental illness and violence. The more I do them the more I think that we are losing the battle on the matter of stigmatization of the mentally ill. One single incident and the public immediately believe all mental patients are dangerous and that they have to be sent back to the mental hospitals; but there are not too many of these hospitals left, so to prison they go, the mental patients. 6 P.M. back to the office and the ritual of going through the mail. There is one letter from the Research Council. I know what this is about. I opened it slowly and with trepidation, how many times have I failed to obtain a grant this year???, but lo and behold . . . WOW!! I got that research grant this time. Thanks God it is late and there is nobody around to hear me shouting and dancing and jumping in joy, they may think I have finally flipped. I am exhilarated. 6.30 P.M., as I drive back home Wagner is on the radio, the Walkyries are riding, tatararara, tatararara, tatararararrrhh!! I got that research grant, all is well in Valhalla.

Home. 7 P.M. The light of my existence is just driving in as I arrive. Oh, how much I love thee, I am so happy, I already forgot the administrators and my pet project. She is also happy. She is an academic too and today her life unfolded as it should. No problem for her peeling that onion, no crying. But I cannot stop talking and she knows I am overjoyed. She let me rambled and smiles sweetly at me. The cat is happy too, she purrs away with all her motors. One drink to unwind, just one. Also
some wine with dinner. Can’t overdo the drinking, alcoholism is never too far away from anybody and besides I need to read some important articles in the Journals and now at 9 P.M., I am looking ahead to three more hours of work because the Research Councils and the journals are waiting for your reviews and the chapter you promised your friend for his book is also due. You need to email it to him tomorrow at 4 A.M. when the cycle starts again. MIDNIGHT. Bedtime. Think a bit of the events of the day. Reconcile your thoughts, pray, and be thankful. And as per Ortega y Gassett, well, all I can say is that I can have my onion and eat it too. No, he is not right. I am the master of my own life. I can peel my onion slowly or frantically as I have done it today, be sad or be elated, pine or take my lumps and my pleasures as they come, but overall, enjoy my life and no, not cry, that onion is not that worthy to fret so much about and besides . . . after all . . . ZZZZ.

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