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Interview with Arturo Onnias

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Arturo Onnias

(Interviewed on 7 April 1992, Amsterdam, The Netherlands)

Video Roll #18

ONNAIS: A-R- T-U-R-O. And the last name is
O-N-N-I-A-S.

Q: And should there be a title and company affiliation?

ONNAIS: I guess consultant. That is what I am doing,
and I am my own company.

Q: When did your relationship with Dr. Juran first begin?

ONNAIS: I met Dr. Juran for the first time, it was about
ten or **11** years ago in Stockholm. I attended a seminar that
he had over there.

And, at the end of the day, since I was working at Texas
Instruments at that time -- and Juran Institute and Texas
Instruments had a relation, a business relation, relative to the
videotape, Juran on Quality Improvement -- I decided to go
and talk to Dr. Juran at the end of the day.

There was a stage. All the people had left. I walked into
the stage and I introduced myself. He told me to sit down
and, of course, I had many questions for him. And I started
to ask questions.

And ten minutes or 15 minutes went by, and he was very kind, very polite. He provided lots of details of what I was asking.

But, pretty soon, somebody came and said, it's time to go. But he kept on talking with me. Of course, I was very please -- and I had more questions. So half an hour went by.

They started flashing the lights on the room to indicate it was time to go. He did not tell me: let's get up and go. So I kept on asking more questions. And, after about 45 minutes, they turned the light off.

So, at that point, I said: I believe they want us to go. We got up and we left. But it was about 45 minutes that he dedicated to me on the stage of this -- I believe it was a theater or something in Stockholm.

Q: Were you surprised? Here is a man who is know as being the very top of his profession. Widely published.

ONNAIS: I was very surprised, because I assumed that, being a notorious person, well-known, that he would not dedicate that much time to me, just by coming up and introducing myself and asking questions.

I was also surprised that he took my questions very seriously. And I remember one, in particular, that he thought about for a few seconds before answering to me. So I -- the attention that he paid to me as a person asking questions struck me as being rather unusual.

Q: Have there been other points of contact with Dr. Juran?

aNNAIS: Yes, I met him many times since. Maybe six or seven other times since that first meeting. I did not have an opportunity, really to speak with him on a one-to-one person as I did the first time.

But what happened with Dr. Juran is that the person -- more than the consultant -- grew on me. Dr. Juran, for me, is a special person. As a matter of fact, I think that if I were to meet him now -- or, I remember last time that I met him, about two years ago -- it has a tremendous impact on me. As a matter of fact, I tend to choke (?) him not to be able to talk to him.

And this surprises myself. But, undoubtedly, I have an appreciation for the man that is rather unusual.

Q: *What do you suppose it is?*

(TAPE OFF, THEN ON)

Q: *Doing this documentary on Dr. Juran has been such a pleasure; we have spent hours with Dr. Juran and his family; we have traveled. And to talk to people who have really known him is just remarkable because our relationship is really quite superficial. The vidoes, this, that. He would come, he would go. But spending time at his home, talking to his grandchildren. And it is extraordinary the depth of feeling that people have for Dr. Juran.*

aNNAIS: Yeah, I am surprised myself.

Q: *How so?*

ONNAIS: As I was mentioning before, for some reason, it strikes some kind of feeling on me that surprises myself. And it seems to be growing on time. As a matter of fact, last time that I was down at the institute, he came around to see what we were doing. And I had a hard time to talk to him.

As a matter of fact, I had -- almost the desire to back up, to see him from afar; not to get too close to him. And that is quite strange.

It is the man that I admire, of course, it is not the expert. The expert, no doubt, he is -- I appreciate and value the teaching. But there is something about the man that, for me, it's quite unique.

Q: I wonder how you explain it. Because so many people are not able to get close to him. You know, he is Doctor Juran. Almost no one calls him Joe.

ONNAIS: Yeah. No, that is not -- that is not the kind of feeling that I have. As a matter of fact, he is not intimidating to me. It is that I look up to him as a person so much, in a way, that it is difficult to just to talk to him in a normal manner.

Because I do admire him. I do admire him as a person for the personal values that he has. The ability that he has over the years to live up to the value that, apparently, he's set for himself.

And I have learned about him, not only by talking to him, but by reading the articles that he wrote over a period of many years. I can mention, for example, an article where he says: "Do you want to be a consultant." With a question

mark. It's a title similar to that. And he indicates who should become a consultant and who shouldn't.

And what he wrote influenced me in making my own decision in developing my own strategy and goals as a consultant.

Q: What kind of things did he say?

ONNAIS: Well, for example, the thing that stuck in my mind the most is that he said, if you become a consultant, and you start to gather people around yourself to get a big organization, your first preoccupation concern will be to make sure that these are employed.

And your growing as a consultant in the interest of the customers will come somehow as a second priority. Your first priority will be to get the people working, because they are on a set that you have in your company.

By being alone -- as he has been for so many years -- he could be very objective because he was not tied down by any other goals that he had to -- or any other commitments that he had to take _ care of.

Q: When you've spoken with him, what factors in his life do you believe shaped him to be the way that he is?

ONNAIS: I believe that he was like that from the beginning. I am aware of many aspects of his life. As a matter of fact, the first time that I met him in Stockholm, he told me about when he was small. When he was living in

New York and the difficult time that he had with his father, with his family.

And all those elements no doubt have an influence on the person. But, in my opinion, the way that he is no doubt he was that kind of person right from the start and those elements just helped or encouraged him to grow up the person that he is right now. But I believe that he was like that.

Q: To what extent do you think that the terrible poverty he grew up, in ... , in Minneapolis, even in Chicago, where everything was such a struggle, propelled him?

ONNAIS: Probably those were a factor that, to some degree, did -- as you said -- propelled him. But I don't believe it was the main factor, because he doesn't not have an edge of aggressiveness. He does not seem to want to -- to get even with what he received. I never felt that inside he wanted to get even with the fact that life was hard on him.

He is fair, even in spite of the fact that he had the hardship. And that's why I think that he was like that, basically. And those elements, of course, had an influence. But I don't think that those were major factors.

Q: The intellect -- just the extraordinary intellect and the memory are what have always astounded us. And he told us that one of the things that he does to keep testing himself is he has an -- you know about his exercise bicycle?

ONNAIS: Yes.

Q: And he watches the television program, Jeopardy. He said he's getting a little annoyed because he's not getting all the answers as quickly as he used to. What about the regimen that he keeps for himself? I've never seen or heard about anyone who watches themselves so closely.

ONNAIS: I admire that, but it is not strange to me, because I am very hard on myself. As a matter of fact, I can drive myself, and I do, much harder than I can drive the people, for example, that reported to me. And I would hesitate to push other people as hard as I push myself.

Therefore, to that degree, I can identify with him, that if you are determined to do something, you can live a life with very strict rules.

Q: Has he ever discussed with you the enormous price he has, in fact, paid for really committing himself to this life's work of his?

ONNAIS: Not really. He mentioned, at times -- or he wrote also -- about the hardship that he had to go through in growing up, especially when the time that he was young. And also I suspect that he did not mention everything that he had to go through.

But he did not go into any details especially with me concerning this area.

Q: What about his more contemporary life? It seemed that his success was almost as demanding as the early years

of struggle. Constantly traveling, constantly being away from the family.

ONNAIS: I would see that as the natural outcome of what he is or what he has done. It does not strike me in any particular manner as being exceptional or unusual.

Q: What traits, what in Dr. Juran's character do you admire most? And seek to emulate.

ONNAIS: I would say the fact that he has personal values that he lives up to it, regardless.

Q: No compromises.

ONNAIS: If there are any, I have not seen them. And I believe -- I would like to point out that probably he has some values in which he knows he can and he should compromise. But there are some that I believe that he will never compromise.

Q: Years from now, as with everyone, you carry memories of people as photographs or as small movies that run in their mind. Tell me about some of the movies and pictures that run in your mind when you think about Dr. Juran.

ONNAIS: Well, I see him as a person that -- with -- in reacting in a very slow manner, in a very relaxed manner,

shows a tremendous -- having reached a tremendous -- have reached a -- I do not know how to say this.

An internal harmony. He's a person that has found peace with himself. And I -- I see him a little bit out of time. I could see Dr. Juran now as I could imagine him three centuries ago. For me, he would be a man that would fit -- it would fit him --

Q: Could we start that again, please?

(OFF CAMERA DISCUSSION)

ONNAIS: Yes. I see -- I see Dr. Juran as a man out of -- out of time. I can picture him living and behaving and conducting his life now in the age of jet travel as he would do three centuries ago. And he would be still the same and in -- and still, he would be a person to admire.

It reminds me of the wise old men. The men that is not tied in and is not influenced more than so much, to the event of the moment.

And, by the way, I must say also that his search for universal principles that runs through his writing, it seems that they also run through his personal life. The value of the guiding principals that he has are relatively universal; they are not tied in to a specific period in history.

Q: Did you ever speak with him about who are his heroes? Who he looked up to?

ONNAIS: Not really. I didn't have an opportunity to -- the first time that I met him is when probably we had an opportunity to talk for about 45 minutes. And he mentioned when he was small, and he mentioned things about his work. But not since.

Q: Earlier today we talked about that first 45 minute meeting as they were turning the lights off.

ONNAIS: Yes.

Q: What we didn't talk about is how even earlier than that, how you first encountered Dr. Juran's works.

ONNAIS: I was not aware of his work before that period. Because I was -- I was assigned to that specific job in 1982. And only then, I began to look into the issue of quality and I learned about Dr. Juran. I was not aware of him before.

Q: Did I understand you read his handbook or you had read some of his writings before that first meeting?

ONNAIS: I wrote his writing after that. Before, I read something. I mean -- I have to say that again.

I read his writing after I met him. Previously, probably I read something but nothing that provided me with a good understanding of who was the man behind the writing.

Q: What was that first seminar like that said to you, I'm going to spend time here, I'm going to go up and speak with

him afterwards? What impressed you most about that initial presentation .'

ONNAIS: I should say that the seminar, itself, impressed me mostly because it was conducted in a very plain, simple manner without using any special visual effects, any special tool, except the overhead projector.

The content impressed me, but only so much, because I was learning. But the man impressed me, much more than the subject that he presented during the seminar.

Q: Do you remember that conversation, the area of subjects that he covered?

ONNAIS: Well, yes. There was a specific question that I asked him concerning his work. And the question was: which was the concept that it took you the longest to come to grips, to realize, to understand.

And he thought for a while, and then he said: the concept that he calls living behind the dikes. He said that -- it took him a long time but when, finally he grasped it, it was -- it had a big impact on him, to the fact the society is exposed to a number of potential problems that are related to quality and reliability.

Q: And one subject led to another. Do you remember when you finally walked away with the lights turned off in that hotel meeting room, what did you say to yourself about Dr. Juran?

ONNAIS: But I would say that meeting was unusual because he dedicated to me 45 minutes in spite of the fact that other people were waiting, in spite of the fact that he was a famous man, and I was nobody.

And that, although the people were telling him, it's time to go, he hesitated to be in any way rude with me and say, we have to stop. He stopped only when it was absolutely necessary. That impressed me.

But I must say that Dr. Juran grew on me, became what he is right now, over time. Every time that I met him, there was something that reinforced the image that I had on him. So it was not really that first meeting meant everything.

Q: You have said that you are more impressed with Dr. Juran as a man than as a teacher or philosopher.

ONNAIS: Right.

Q: Or practitioner. Years from now, Dr. Juran will be gone, and he will have grandchildren and he will have great grandchildren, who have never had the opportunity to know him, or to have any sort of contact with him. If, in 25 or 30 years, you had the opportunity to meet with one of Dr. Juran's great grandchildren; they said, Arturo, what was my grandfather like? What would you tell them about Dr. Juran, the man?

ONNAIS: I would say that the first comment is that he definitely was a rare type of person. I am 52 years old and I

never met anybody else that, in my life, impressed me so much as Dr. Juran as a person. And I met lots of people.

In terms of trying to convey to them what he was, I doubt that I would probably even --

(OFF CAMERA DISCUSSION)

Q: Who is Joseph Juran, the man? And what effect, what impact did he have on your life? As told to Joe Juran's grandchild.

aNN AIS: Let me say, I want to understand the question. How would I explain to a grandchild the impact, yeah.

Q: Who her grandfather was and what he meant to you.

aNNAIS: I would, first of all, tell them that he was definitely a unique person. The influence that he had on me was definitely strong and precise. He's -- the way that he conducted his life represented a model for me. That I try -- I am trying to imitate. Of course, I have no hope to reach the stature of Dr. Juran. But at least I have a reference point.

I doubt that I would try to convey to them who he was, because, in away, I feel that my reaction to this man is very personal. And I would find it very difficult to put it in words.

Q: Would you try for me?

aNNAIS: One of the elements of the fact that he has uncompromising value. I've mentioned this previously. And I believe that this stands out to me as the element that I can name, that I can describe. I believe that other elements are behind my ability to -- to put in words, because they struck a chord inside of me that I cannot really -- I cannot really express.

That's why I mentioned previously that, when I met him the last two or three times, I had the reaction to back away from him, because he represented for me someone that had to be dealt with or treated with great care.

It is difficult to explain. It is something very personal, in a way.

Q: When you say, dealt with great care, is it because of fragility related to age?

aNNAIS: Well, he -- no, not relate to age. I suspect that he is a person that conducts his life with rigor and great discipline. But, at the same time, he must have a tremendous sensitivity to what's happening around him -- to people, to situations.

And from that point of view, to do anything that could, in a way, hurt him it would seem something wrong. I found myself, when he came to Paris to make a presentation for Texas Instruments, to tell him that, from now on, he should ask for a chair to sit down when he was talking. Because I did not feel that it was right for him to stand up for six hours and talk to people while he could sit down.

Of course, he had -- he knew quite well if he should sit down or stand up. But I kind of felt that I have to tell him in a protective manner. He continued to stand up just the same. But I felt that I have to somehow take care of him

Q: What do you think keeps him going at an age when most people stop and rest? He is still writing, still teaching.

ONNAIS: There is a second element that had a strong influence on me. The fact that, at his age, he is extremely active, productive, creative, definitely told me that I should quit the job that I had and put myself in a position where no outside organization or company or date or age would tell me to stop from being active and from being productive .. It would have to be my natural limit that would some day say, it is time for you to retire.

Now, what keeps him going, I suspect that is the same thing that pushes me to go and work seven days a week. It is something inside. I cannot tell you what. For me, it is not strange. As a matter of fact, I feel -- I feel exactly like probably... For me, it's a very natural thing that at his age, he keeps on going. I wouldn't see it any other way.

For me, the concept of retiring doesn't make sense.

(END OF TAPE 18)

Arturo Onnias

Video Roll # 18B

Q: -- *all around the world. Just the other day in Bucharest, a man who is probably in his 70's, Mr. Antonescu, said: "I consider myself Dr. Juran's disciple." In Tokyo, a man in his 70's said: "Dr. Juran is my god." We have found literally men who themselves are greatly respected, who defer, in the most remarkable ways -- from various cultures. What is it that's so universal about Dr. Juran, that these wise people can relate to?*

ONNAIS: He seems to be -- and I am repeating myself-- behind times and events. He is traveling according to his own goals, will, and value -- he is quite aware of life as it is right now, with all its complexity and the fact that we are in the 20th Century.

All those things register. He knows -- he's completely aware. But his internal life seems to be completely detached and it moves along something that he has inside of him, that is not influenced by any of these events.

And that's what strikes me, that he doesn't belong to a culture, or to a time.

Q: *What should history, when the books are written about the quality revolution, what should history books say about the contribution of Dr. Juran?*

ONNAIS: In my OPinio^r4, ~ontribUtiOn is the greatest of all the experts that I know ave provided knowledge to the quality revoluti₃I -- but, again, but that is not really what strikes me about Dr. Juran.

Dr. Juran, the man, for me, is definitely the person that is much more valuable and that will probably be lost and not to be connected with the quality revolution. He has provided a great contribution, but it's not that the mark, in my opinion, of what makes him great for me.

Q: How has he helped shape your professional life. We've talked about the article you've read. We've talked about some of his comments.

aNNAIS: The professional life -- I like and I follow the teaching of Dr. Juran, in terms of working. Except that I also use concepts from different sources. But, basically, I adopted the approach of Dr. Juran.

One element that always strikes me when I read over, or I listen to cassettes over, is the fact there is a harmony among the various pieces that make up the total picture, that I haven't found in any of the other consultants.

Anything that is being said, even if it is a statement that apparently is not that important, indeed, it ties in and it is in complete -- it is completely consistent with the rest that he has thought. So that gives me the indication that before he said anything, he thought long and hard, and whatever he said, there was a good reason for that statement to be there.

Q: Why should television audiences, people who might see this around the world, have the slightest interest in seeing a television on the life of Joseph Juran?

ONNAIS: Well, I suppose that the popularity, or the fact that quality has become such a known issue, will encourage people to watch the program, to see what kind of person was associated with that revolution about quality.

I am afraid that they will -- they will miss -- unless it comes out very strongly -- the most valuable aspect of what is Dr. Juran's contribution. Which is the central part in his teaching, and his personality, for the people that knew him.

I am not really sure that by itself, the life and the deeds of Dr. Juran could really be that appreciated throughout the world. Except for the community that has been involved with the quality issue -- or with the people that met him.

Q: The thing that gives me a little bit of trouble is taken away from his achievements in the area of quality, is Dr. Juran just simply another nice old man?

ONNAIS: No, absolutely not. That's exactly what he isn't. He is a great man. Then that great man also -- in my view -- produced or provided that tremendous contribution to quality. And that contribution is extremely valuable. But is not the central part that, in my opinion, makes the man so impressive and so admirable.

Q: I'm trying to picture in my mind that incident that you described when you approached him in his office. I remember at an IMPRO, for example, although what you say is interesting, in a break, Dr. Juran walked out into the middle of this coffee break area and went to get some coffee. And despite the fact the place was jammed with people, it was as though the waters parted and Dr. Juran walked to the

coffee tureen and poured himself a cup of coffee and stood there, and no one would walk up to him.

I felt so sorry. I said, why is he alone. I walked up and I said, hello. What is that kept all of those people almost at arm's length?

aNNAIS: What it is I cannot tell you. But I can relate to you a sentence that Dr. Kissinger wrote in his book, in his memoirs, when he was talking, when he was describing the time that he was at the White House. And at some time previously to that, he met De Gaulle. And he described the scene that when De Gaulle entered the room, it seems that, physically, the room tilted and deformed itself toward that person that entered the room.

Now, what it is I don't know. But in a way, that figurative -- that image applies to Dr. Juran, as well. His personality has something that it seems that the room will tilt -- or -- toward the place where he is. But what it is, it is difficult to tell, because the emotion are taking over the rational part of it.

Q: People have talked about Dr. Juran's humor. Can you tell us an incident or an anecdote about it that will make clear for us the Juran humor?

aNNAIS: Only through his writing. It -- there is -- in his book, *Managerial Breakthrough*, he describes the situation where the slaves are thrown into the Roman forum, and the lions come out. And he describes the fight. And, at some point, he says, "For the scribe that is sitting on the steps, it's easy to say you should hit the lion in that manner; you should move aside."

And so he goes on and he said, "Yes, this is true, but blood is slippery and, besides, the lions have their own ideas." And that, to me, if that kind of humor, it kind of described the way that Dr. Juran -- I did not express myself well.

But that is the only incident that I know that I appreciate that he puts things IOU know the expression, the defining moment? s there a moment that you have spent with Dr. Juran, that is the defining moment of his character, his personality, his aura -- ?

ONNAIS: Yeah. I would say not. In my case, it has been a slow, growing experience that built over time. There is not a specific moment where I was particular impressed.

Q: How would you finish the sentence: Dr. Juran is the man who?

ONNAIS: Who provided a model for my life. That is by far the most prominent influence that anybody had on me. I would -- I wouldn't know what to say, besides the fact that he provided a model for me.

Q: This may not be a fair question: as this sounds like this feeling has grown and grown and grown --

ONNAIS: Right.

Q: -- in every contact with Dr. Juran, what will be inside when Dr. Juran is no longer here?

ONNAIS: I did ask myself that. And I really don't know.

Q: When he's no longer writing or teaching, what do you think? How will you feel?

Let me ask one last question: what have we not talked about -- the microphone is open -- that you would like to say about Dr. Joseph Juran, that we have not talked about?

ONNAIS: Well, nothing, really.

Q: Take a moment. Everyone always says, oh, when they walk out of the room, they say, oh, I should have said. Something about Joseph Juran that, perhaps, if you don't say it, nobody else will.

ONNAIS: I would say nothing, because the experience is very personal. And it doesn't -- it doesn't cause to be said or expressed. It won't make any difference to anybody.

Maybe I am rude in saying that, but --

Q: No, absolutely not. You have contributed a great deal.

(END OF TAPE I8-B)

