

MUSINGS

Friends Forever in a Happening Place!

FAKRUL ALAM

There were six of us, bosom buddies who had studied together in the same school and college, friends for years—“good” boys. And there were the same number of them, if not more, from the same Dhaka school and college—“nice” girls. We came from an exclusively boys’ school and they from an exclusively girls’ one. And it seemed for seemingly forever for a couple of months that never the members of the twin groups would meet. But we so wanted to meet, talk and....

In late 1960s Dhaka, however, most boys like us would be content merely to ogle girls and dream up long distances romances. True, there were not a few “smart” ones in our midst who boasted of going out with their “girl” friends. A few even claimed that they had gone

legs are thin!”....

Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

Like Eliot’s Prufrock, most of us didn’t dare “disturb the universe” by asking for a “date” from a girl, and were content only to fantasizing relationships with angelic women because of inadequacies about ourselves in our own estimation, timidity, what not.

But to go back to the University of Dhaka and those of us friends who had been admitted to its English department in October 1969. Most of us did not dare talk to the girls we kept ogling everywhere in the campus. In classes, corridors, the Mall, the Registrar’s

We no longer felt the shyness, the tension, and the timidity that had kept us from mingling for days, weeks and even two months till that time. We kept talking. Topic after topic came up, our conversation accompanied by giggles and, at times, peals of laughter.

Sunday (our weekly holiday then!) assembled in front of the Arts Building to be bused to the launch station in Narayanganj.

For the first time in months us boys and girls of the 1969 batch felt like true *sothirtos* or class friends. It was as if the picnic ambiance had set in with sunrise that day. The more relaxed and colorful clothes we were wearing, the closer contact between us all as we boarded the bus and sat in parallel rows relaxed the girls, and made them as well as the boys dare to introduce themselves and talk a bit. By the time we got down from the bus in Narayanganj the bit of wintry fog that had created a bit of a veil in the Arts Building had fully lifted and we could be much more intimate and take in each other in broad daylight, having gone beyond introductions in the past hour or so.

For sure, the excitement of being on a picnic in a mixed group was palpable by then. Waiting in the even closer space of the boarding station apparently reserved for us, we began to introduce ourselves further (although it was soon obvious that we had learnt each other’s names well from the roll calls), talk and exchange pleasantries. Indeed, in no time we were smiling freely a lot—at what was being said and even when nothing was being said!

But we became even friendlier and relaxed in each other’s companies once we boarded the paddlewheel steamer. Using it for our picnic was clearly a great idea that our teachers had. Not only the girls, but our teachers too mingled with us as we formed small groups and took in the sunshine, the cool but not cold breeze blowing across the river, and the whole riverscape. Clearly, our teachers led by the redoubtable Dr. Khan Sarwar Murshed had chosen to design a trip that would bond all of us—teachers and students—forever. But the teacher who stands out in my memory from that day was Dr. Jyotirmoy Guha Thakurta, who talked to us freely (I am writing this on Shaheed Buddhijibi Dibash, 2019 and remembering him as well as the other teachers I knew who were murdered, either like him in March or on December 1971, fondly and sadly).

At one point, and as the Welsh singer Tom Jones’s “Green, green grass of home” was being played over the microphone, Dr. Guhathakurta said to our group of boys and girls—why don’t you all dance to the tune and keep dancing to the music?” We were taken

back by his friendliness and question. We were also too shy to dance in public then, but we sure felt like doing so.

By the time we got down from the paddleboat steamer for the next and final part of our journey to Sonargaon, a walking tour of Panam City, the ice had broken between us boys and girls. We no longer felt the shyness, the tension, and the timidity that had kept us from mingling for days, weeks and even two months till that time. We kept talking. Topic after topic came up, our conversation accompanied by giggles and, at times, peals of laughter. There was something about the old city setting, the narrow road to and from Panam City, the walk across the *char*-like place that took us from the steamer to that road and back, and the late lunch we sat down for, that contributed to a bonding that would last for a long, long time.

And afterwards? There were at least a couple of romances that developed between us boys and girls who first broke the ice and talked to each other the day of the picnic. One of them led to a happy marriage. The other one, however, ended abruptly, terminated tragically when my best friend in school and college till then was martyred in trying to cross the border and join the Liberation War in November 1971. There were also a couple of relationships that got so complicated that they ended creating distance instead of lasting bonds. As for the other exchanges, although some of us did not continue in the Honors program and opted to leave the department and the University of Dhaka after 1971 or later, we have remained pretty good friends. Although scattered all over the world (in 4 continents to be more precise!), we have been in touch, one way or the other.

Such breaking of the ice happened, of course, between boys and girls of other departments as well. The late 1960s was a time when Bangladeshi men and women were coming together in an increasingly liberal and relaxed atmosphere. The University of Dhaka was, for sure, a happening place for young men and women for all seasons and all reasons, and friendship/lasting ties between those studying there for a sustained period of time was not only inevitable but also something intently wished for. One remembers such ties as one more reason to celebrate our alma mater’s hundredth anniversary in 2021!

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past “fielding” (a “Binglish” word then in vogue used to denote staring at girls longingly from a distance!) and would boast that they had managed to enter into relationships. Rarely and occasionally there would be a boy who claimed that he was playing the field—a real “playboy”! For sure, he was the envy of most of us who seemed eternally stuck in the dilemma made forever memorable by T. S. Eliot’s incomparably penned lines in “The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock,” spoken by a man condemned to single life because of timidity and self-doubt—

And indeed there will be time
To wonder, “Do I dare?” and “Do I dare?”

(They will say: But how his arms and

Building and the British Council, the roads around the Arts Building and TSC itself (the most exciting place in the world for us all outside the departmental corridor), we kept eyeing girls and (in our minds only!) narrowing down the ones we would like to talk to and fantasize about (who knew?) ending up in a relationship with them.

And so, days went by and a couple of months too. We would be meeting the girls seemingly all day (classes were held then from morning to evening). But in classrooms there were strict segregation. Therefore, we didn’t get around to doing anything much even after the first few weeks except exchange perfunctory greetings. Though subsidiary classes—which brought together students of

different departments of the Arts faculty together—were quite large, classrooms where Honors classes were taken were smaller and intimacy inducing. But nothing helped solve the problem of breaking the ice between us groups of boys and the girls of the English department for a while.

True, soon the long distance looks of anonymous faces were interspersed with more familiar glances exchanged between fellow classmates with names learnt from roll calls carried out diligently by teachers. Some of the male students earned more glances from the girls than others because they were more adventurous and/or attractive one way or the other; some of the girls even ventured to smile and exchange pleasantries in passing with us and in the more intimate but safe space that was the English department seminar library, the relatively small British Council book corners, and even the comparatively cavernous TSC dining room. But really, weeks went by and there were no real verbal exchanges that could light up into something else.

For us English department students, all this would change in January (I can’t recall the exact day; none of my class friends I talked to about the day can) when a notice appeared in the departmental Notice Board announcing a departmental picnic. We were informed that we would be going to Sonargaon for a whole day and that the trip would involve going by bus to Narayanganj and then taking a BIWTA paddlewheel steamer to Sonargaon and back. We all paid up the subscription and one winter

MUSINGS

REFLECTIONS

TOHON



COMPLICITY
I watched *Casualties of War* on TV. The story is set during the Vietnam War. Three American soldiers, despite protests from a fourth companion, rape a Vietnamese girl and eventually kill her.
The story revolves around the agony the fourth soldier suffers. The drama is so real that I not only hated the three soldiers, but it made my blood boil. I wished the fourth

soldier had killed his fellow soldiers before they could rape the innocent girl. Since that did not happen, I wanted the three soldiers to be punished, just as much as the fourth soldier did. But the system wouldn’t allow it. The major with whom the fourth soldier lodges a complaint says that in a war that is the name of the game.
Metaphorically, the story features an offender, a victim, a human conscience and

an onlooker. The offender is one of us – a human being, one of our kind. Bringing him to justice is not true justice. We should all be brought to justice – including the prosecutor, the jury, the judge, the highest authorities and the onlooker.

Guilt will not go away if we are not ashamed of crimes and do not take penitence and put ourselves in pain. Acts like condemnation, announcing a verdict, preaching non-violence, or even raising the fear of hell mean nothing. They simply hide our complicity.

How would one ever know that he is an accomplice to the action he condemns?
PILGRIMAGE
I thoroughly enjoy my cool morning shower. The process of first wetting, then massaging the body with soap and finally rinsing it is so refreshing. How I wish I could give such a refreshing shower to my inner self.

One of the most disgusting chores that I often have to do is pick up the excrement of our dog, Spotty. It has an awful odour and it turns my stomach. The other day, as I was attending to this chore, I realised that millions have to do worse things, like cleaning human excrement. The worst part is that they must do it for a living.

I cleanse my heart every time I attend to such a despised chore.

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In 1980 while I was pursuing PhD in the U.S.A. I stumbled into the world of philosophy. Beyond my engineering studies, I devoted myself to my new-found passion. Since that time, I have been maintaining a diary. The following episodes are based on selected journal entries.

INVISIBLE FAULT LINE
During a casual conversation, my philosophical viewpoint angered my good, old friend of fifty years. He was so angry that he abandoned our friendship. I was dumbfounded for I could not believe what was happening. When I realised that it was real, I phoned my friend to beg his forgiveness, but to no avail.

I have come to realise that invisible fault lines run somewhere deep in our minds. These fault lines lie where we are immovable from our deeply held beliefs, faiths and instincts. There would naturally be a tremor when two opposing fault lines collide.

The saddest part is that we are unaware of our own fault lines, let alone those of others.

ETERNITY IN HEAVEN
I befriended a crippled, teenage boy. I asked him what he would do if God gave him one – just one – day of normal life. He replied, ‘I would go out for a walk. I would walk, walk and walk all day. The day would be like eternity in heaven.’

‘Oh God!’ I cried. I have already lived a

long life without knowing that I have been living in heaven. Now I feel vulnerable that my heavenly life might end at any moment.

DESTINY
As I enter the narrow alley, I slow myself down to the pace of a man in front of me. The man is too old to walk at a normal speed. As I become impatient, I realise that the aged man represents my future. I accept my destiny and follow him humbly.

LOSS
I am worried about the sale of our property. If it is not sold soon, We will run into financial difficulty.

Last night, the real-estate agent informed me that an offer has been made on our property. The offer is quite low compared to my expectation. It is an interesting situation. Can I have peace of mind, regardless of loss or gain.

In response to my recent letter, the mother of my long-lost friend writes: ‘Only God knows a mother’s grief. Outwardly, I pretend all is well, but inwardly my pain never ceases. Why did He choose to give and then why did He choose to take it back – this remains a mystery to me to this day.’

How would I ever know a mother’s grief? How trivial is my problem compared to the loss of one’s child? Should I not put aside my worries and concentrate on loving our children while they live? They may not be with us tomorrow.