

# 'We shall meet again': A daughter's tribute

NUSRAT HOMAIRA

**A** BBU, you must go to the hospital right now and please text me when you reach there!" I have been waiting 12 months for that text from my father—I keep scrolling my phone's message box up and down but there are no texts and there will never be another. These were my last words to my father, Mahfuz Ullah, eminent journalist, environmentalist and political analyst, who died on April 27, 2019.

On April 2, 2019, when I last spoke to my father, he had suddenly become quite unwell overnight and was rushed to the emergency department of Square Hospital in Dhaka with severe breathlessness. From there he was quickly shifted to the ICU and put on ventilator. Till his death, 25 days later, he lay lifeless in the hospital, first in Square hospital and then in Bumrungrad hospital of Bangkok. A man who was always full of words died without saying anything to anyone. Even the night before he fell terminally ill, on April 1, he was on a live talk show in one of the TV channels of Bangladesh where he spoke about the current political crisis of the country. His death came as unexpectedly to him as it did to us. We did not have the time to prepare nor did we have the time to say goodbye. That is why it took me 12 months to write this tribute. This tribute is like a closure, a goodbye, even though I do

not think I'm ready to say "goodbye"! My two siblings are also looking for some closure but are failing every day. The loss of a loved one kicks you off all your complacencies and makes you realise everything in life is transient. The death of a dear one drowns you in an unknown sadness and makes you drift from everyone around you. It is almost like being in exile. My mother is probably the one affected most by our father's death. In the last 12 months, it feels like she has aged at least 5 years. She has always been a strong independent woman but now when I look at her, I see a woman lost and puzzled in her grief. I have a feeling that all she wants is to be with him again.

My parents were married at age 22. My mother knew from very early on that my father's work would always be the first priority in his life. Nevertheless, he loved her dearly, cared for her deeply, laughed with her and shared her grief. He would always say that he would die before our mother, maybe because he could never wish for a life without her.

He was 69 when he died but was young for his age. He worked like a young man and lived like a young man surrounded by friends and well-wishers. He nurtured friendship and loved to laugh with friends, often teasing them but never in malice. He could relate to people from all walks of life and looked for the good in



Mahfuz Ullah (1950-2019)

each person. Almost 20 years back, our father survived a massive heart attack and suffered several subsequent complications. I think those early brushes of near-death experiences made him appreciate life and live it to the fullest. Often our father would tell us that he wanted to live 10 more years so that he could finish writing other books, one being his own biography. I do not think he was scared of death, rather immortality through his work was a consolation for death to him. In family life also, he completed the full circle. He left behind four grandchildren. He would always tell us that "love flows downwards—first you love you partner, then your children

fill your heart with love, and finally comes your grandchildren who occupy the whole of your heart." He was their friend. They loved him dearly and he loved them more.

We, three siblings, grew up knowing that our father's work formed a core element in his life; but we never felt any less loved. He was always busy but never too busy for us. Our weekends would be spent with him instilling in us the love for books, classic movies and Rabindra Sangeet. He taught us about life and politics and stressed the importance of education. From very early on, he taught me and my sister to believe that anything is possible, and that we should never accept anything just because we are women. He was our best friend, our rock, our therapist, and our mentor and now that he is gone, I am not sure which I miss more, the father or the friend?

Our father would often tell our mother that in the event of his death, his body should only be buried after his children came back to the country to say goodbye to him. In the end, it never came to that point. Throughout the 25 days before his death that he was in the ICU, we were able to be with him all day, every day, holding his hand and telling him we loved him. Everyday many journalists, several well-wishers, and a great many of his acquaintances would call to check on his condition. Often their voices would be heavy with grief and desperation, longing to hear some

good news.

The night before he died, his condition deteriorated drastically. I was up all night sitting beside him, constantly observing his vital signs in the monitor and trying to tame the transition between presence and the void. The beeping sound of the machine felt like a thumping noise in my heart. Next morning at around 10:15 am, the machine went quiet and there was an eerie stillness in the hospital. While he never really regained consciousness in those 25 days, I believe in my heart that he could feel my mother's hand holding his when he took his last breath. Our father was not alone in his death. His two *janazas* were attended by many people who loved him and mourned his death. He was a people's person and the people of Bangladesh bid him goodbye with due respect. We are ever thankful for that.

My father lost his father at a relatively young age and then subsequently lost his mother who was with him till her last breath. He often expressed his longing to see them again. While saying goodbye to my father was the hardest thing I had to do in this life, I find some solace in knowing that he is up there somewhere, happy, holding the hands of his parents.

Dr Nusrat Homaira, PhD, is Senior Lecturer and Respiratory Researcher, Discipline of Paediatrics, University of New South Wales, Sydney, and Sydney Children's Hospital, Australia.

## The Future of Education, Accelerated

TIBRA ALI

THE Covid-19 infection has taken the world by surprise. Human culture is not accustomed to the idea of exponential growth. As a physicist looking for an example to illustrate the power of exponential growth, my mind turns to the chain reaction (which is another name for exponential growth) in nuclear physics. The awesome destructive power released in the explosion of a nuclear warhead is also the result of exponential growth. Just as the nuclear explosions over Hiroshima and Nagasaki ushered in a new world order, the explosion of Covid-19 in the virosphere is also threatening to usher in a new world order. As a nation, we must be equal to the challenge of facing this new order whatever it may turn out to be.

As an educator, it has been my view for a long time that the future of education lies in harnessing the power of the internet. Many world-class educational institutions, such as MIT, have already invested heavily in online education. With the Covid-19 crisis amongst us, we can see that this is no longer just speculation about the future but a necessary condition for survival in this age of social distancing.

After the initial closure of all educational institutions in Bangladesh in mid-March, the University Grants Commission (UGC) on March 24 instructed all the universities to move onto online education. That directive, when it was issued, was seen as a bold and visionary move.

That different universities adopted different strategies to tackle the unprecedented problem of bringing the Spring semester to a satisfactory closure is completely understandable as different universities have different needs. At Brac University, when it became clear that the sudden move to online classes was causing widespread anxiety amongst the students, it was decided, after up to four online classes per course, that we would award grades to students based on the work that has already been assigned and turned in. It must be noted that by then, up to 60-65 percent of the final grade had been accounted for in most courses across the university. So, stopping the online courses did not hugely diminish the term's learning. The fact that the student body didn't have the same

uniform level of access to the internet also factored into the decision of not holding finals.

At Brac University, we were told to be considerate to the situation while grading students, and as such, we were in the middle of devising a clever system by which the grading would reward the students who have been working hard during the semester as well as give the benefit of the doubt to those students who were hoping to catch up in the final exams. The VC had appointed a steering committee that would collate ideas from around the university and finalise a fair and uniform grading system through a consultative process. (Disclosure: I am a member of this committee.)

grades but decided not to assign classes.

Reading through the Harvard Crimson or other online student magazines of these world-famous institutions, it becomes clear that no single grading system is going to be satisfactory to every student for the simple reason that when the semester started, each student had signed up for a system of grades which assumed that the world was in a certain state and, midway through the semester, we suddenly found ourselves in the throes of the birth of a new world order. The best we can do, under these uncertain times, is to minimise the damage to our student body as a whole. But one thing is clear from talking to every student and also reading the press reports of

Also, faced with a completely uncertain future, many of the private universities decided to adopt a policy of foregoing admission tests for student intake for the Summer semester. The UGC has also taken issue with this decision. But like the decision of assigning grades, not only was this decision taken within the legal framework of the Private Universities Act, it was also taken with the wellbeing of the students in mind. With the coronavirus threatening to spread far and wide in the country, it would be completely irresponsible (not to say unethical) for any university to hold traditional admission tests.

We have already witnessed several fiascos over the last month involving the closure and reopening of businesses that led to mass exodus of people, raising the fear of a massive spread of the infection. If the UGC were worried that the intake of fresh undergrads might lead to analogous debacles in the educational sector, then it should have worked closely with the private universities to come up with guidelines to ensure that that doesn't happen. Instead, when asked why the UGC didn't take these decisions in consultation with the VCs of the private universities, the UGC made the astonishing statement that it is not mandatory for them to speak to stakeholders before taking a decision. But shutting down the possibilities of new intake raises the spectre of session jams and financial ruin.

As someone who entered the public university system at the fag end of the Ershad dictatorship, I know and have suffered first-hand the irreparable damage that session jams unleash onto the academic lives of students. Furthermore, private universities operate as providers of higher education premised on a revenue model which is generated through student fees, and not on government grants and endowments. So without the possibility of continuing their educational activities online or in some other shape and form, many of these universities will find it difficult to survive. If that were to happen, what will happen to the thousands upon thousands of students who are already enrolled in these schools? What will happen to the thousands of academics who have dedicated their lives to educating the future generations of Bangladesh? Unlike the

case of the RMG sector, the government of Bangladesh has not announced a generous package for the private universities to weather through any tough times, nor is it likely this will happen. From a purely financial point of view, public universities can afford to go into session jams as their staff salaries are underwritten by the government. But that is not the case for private universities. This confusing and short-sighted directive by the UGC threatens to shut down an entire thriving sector of our economy and jeopardise the continued learning of many.

The argument that has been given by the UGC is that the challenge right now is to survive (*take thaka*) and that we can deal with all these challenges once normalcy returns. But again, this is a fallacious and invalid argument.

First of all, as the above discussion shows, if the private universities are not allowed to take immediate actions to ensure an organised way of bringing the current semester to a close and if they are not allowed to take actions for the intake of new students, many of the universities won't survive this crisis (*take thaka jabe na*). What would be unfortunate about that is the universities will fail not because of Covid-19 but because of a lack of leadership shown by the UGC.

The second problem with the UGC's proposed "strategy" is that we have no clue as to when normalcy will return. Not only that, normalcy, as we know it, may never return. To say that the education of our next generation must be paused may befit a dictatorial regime such as the Ershad government but it is not the kind of "bold" and "visionary" diktat we expect from a government which prides itself on building a "Digital Bangladesh".

Thus it is our earnest request to the UGC to allow the private universities to operate their business in an ethical and transparent manner, taking advantage of the digital infrastructure that is already in place in Bangladesh and also working closely with all the universities to develop new ways of reaching out to students so that the business of educating our young may continue in the new reality that is emerging in front of us.

Our future depends on it.

Tibra Ali is a professor at the Department of Mathematics and Natural Sciences of Brac University.



Bangladesh's education authorities should be open-minded when dealing with private universities during the Covid-19 crisis.

Similar lines of reasoning were used at IUB to reach the decision to assign grades based on work that has already been turned in.

The decision to award grades based on work already turned in was not taken in a vacuum. We, teachers, don't take decisions about grading students lightly. We are fully aware that the grades we assign shape the future of our students as well as the reputations of our institutions. Thus many of us looked at how the best educational institutions around the world were dealing with this issue. Harvard University, for example, decided to go for satisfactory/unsatisfactory grades. Cambridge University, on the other hand, decided to assign numerical

interviews with students around the world and also in Bangladesh: that they are anxious that this will delay their education. In other words, the show must go on.

The UGC's second press release stating that in the absence of finals some students will not get an opportunity to improve their grades is unethical and so no grades must be assigned is a specious argument at best. It misses the big picture and the huge uncertainties that the education sector is facing. The UGC statement also lacks any coherence as not only did they forbid the private universities from assigning grades without holding finals, they also forbade them to hold final exams online.

As someone who entered the public university system at the fag end of the Ershad dictatorship, I know and have suffered first-hand the irreparable damage that session jams unleash onto the academic lives of students. Furthermore, private universities operate as providers of higher education premised on a revenue model which is generated through student fees, and not on government grants and endowments. So without the possibility of continuing their educational activities online or in some other shape and form, many of these universities will find it difficult to survive. If that were to happen, what will happen to the thousands upon thousands of students who are already enrolled in these schools? What will happen to the thousands of academics who have dedicated their lives to educating the future generations of Bangladesh? Unlike the

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

**ACROSS**

- 1 Wonderland letters
- 6 Extra
- 11 Did a yard job
- 12 Grottos
- 13 Stamp collector
- 15 -- Vegas
- 16 -- Salvador
- 17 One -- time
- 18 Make better
- 20 Young one
- 21 Horse doctor
- 22 Had on
- 23 Madrid mister
- 26 Radials, e.g.
- 27 Rowing team
- 28 Ravine
- 29 Unrefined
- 30 Made fresh

**DOWN**

- 34 Battleship
- 35 Annoy
- 36 In the style
- 37 Coin collector
- 40 Old car part
- 41 TV's O'Donnell
- 42 Comic
- 43 Youngman
- 44 Overly fond
- 45 Stein's kin
- 46 Start of an idea
- 47 Fraught with peril
- 48 Jeans measure
- 49 Cow of commercials
- 50 Cronkite, for one
- 51 Compress
- 52 Sign of error
- 53 Crookite, for one
- 54 Make better
- 55 Buddy
- 56 Ace, e.g.
- 57 Do museum work
- 58 Manor settings
- 59 Diplomatic skill
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