

'I just need 30 minutes of silence'



SARAH ANJUM BARI

Sarah Anjum Bari is editor of Daily Star Books and adjunct lecturer of English at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB). Reach her at sarah.anjum.bari@gmail.com or @wordsintecal on Instagram.

I'll let you in on a secret we in the newspaper world experience four or five times a year. On the third day of Eid, when my family is still making plans to watch a movie or visit a talk-of-the-town bridge, I have to explain why I am going back to work. "Already? You have work tomorrow?", "But it's a national holiday!", "But it's Pahela Baishakh!", "Can't you edit the news report later at night?" The conversation unfolds anew each time: "Yes, I have to go in today because you expect your newspaper tomorrow. I edit this article right now because you may not read the news in the middle of the night, but some people do, and that's why some of us are editing even then."

This isn't a diatribe against work culture in the news industry, nor against our families' expectation that we spend a healthy amount of time with our loved ones. In fact, people in both these parts of my life are known to show monumental amounts of patience and understanding given the circumstances. It is a rant against much more – my work emails, at least, are legally, professionally, and for decency's sake required to wait until the holidays officially end, but there were still about 12 messages in my inbox that required replies, and they required that I complete certain tasks before I could begin to form a response. Completing each of those tasks would take an hour at least. Add them to the hours I need for the more urgent items on my to-do list, and the math shows that my holidays ended before they even began. I don't suspect – I know that this applies to my friends who work in the media world, in the advertising world, who teach, who are studying, and those who are raising a child.



VISUAL: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

The truth is that, even as you sit reading this article, some corner of your mind is worrying about a text you haven't replied to, an email you have yet to open (thanks for the third reminder, Google), a call you promised you'd return, a lunch you promised you'd make time for... are you even still reading? Do you still sit and read things longer than the length of an Instagram caption?

Instead of these pressing tasks, our weekends, holidays, even the end of the workday, are supposed to be about reconnecting with things we don't normally find time for. You want to finish a book that has been on your nightstand for months. You want to watch a TV show everyone has been talking about. It's 2022 and you're still only on the second episode of Stranger Things (Season ONE). What even is Wordle?

We call Dhaka a noisy city, but hardly ever do I feel like the noise stops at our doorsteps. Like the honking that crashes in through our windows and walls when we're attempting a rare nap, the noise of life – of how much we're expected and

required to communicate, communicate, communicate, reply, reply, reply, reply, pick up, ring back, like, comment, subscribe, "hello-can-you-unmute-your-microphone-please?" – the volume is deafening.

I no longer need to cite an article to tell you that overuse of social media has been found to correlate with mental health issues – depression and anxiety topping the list. But I don't think we understand what this really means, beyond blaming video games, influencer culture, and addiction to oversharing on Facebook or Instagram. The virtual "social networks" we entrap ourselves in aren't actually fuelled by algorithms, but by the charged, frenetic expectations we send out into each other's lives, demanding that our every thought, every emotion be met with a reaction at a time of our choosing, even as we ourselves stretch at the seams within the same web. We need to consume, consume, consume, every show, every film, every song, every TikTok-gone-viral, and we need to let the world know that we're doing it all. The panic hits in the

form of guilt: the tasks that lie waiting, others that we've altogether forgotten. The guilt bubbles into paranoia: why is my phone vibrating again? Meanwhile: How dare you post a story when you haven't yet replied to my text? How dare you experience something without first validating someone else's claim to your attention?

Not all of these people around us are bad guys. In fact, none of us are. We add our voices to the noise because we are colleagues, bosses, employees, customers, students. We have deadlines to meet. Memories we would like to create together. Sometimes, we just really need a friend to pick up and say, "Hi. I remember you. I still care."

I'm not a mental health professional, nor an expert in social sciences or in productivity in the workforce. I deal in words and, on most days, I feel so full of them that I want to ram my shoulders against the door and lock out the avalanche pouring my way. I'm so full of words that I haven't written anything just for myself in months and months, and they're bursting out of my brain and through my fingertips in a messy, unrefined outpouring of mixed metaphors. This article changed its topic thrice over the past two hours and I don't think it's very well-structured.

Long story short, I don't have the solutions. I can only tell you about the tiny slivers of the day during which I feel slightly sane amid all the madness of our lives. Here in the office, we get up from our desks and head towards a pantry. The sunlight there is muted, even rosy sometimes. One of us pours coffee, sugar, and boiling water into a mug that is yellow or blue or pink. I sit on a stool behind them and speak not a single word. We sip. Back in my phone, my best friend understands that I have to cancel a plan. Back home at night, my parents and I eat and we haven't spoken since we sat down. It's a sentence we often say to the people we come home to; I know I say it every single day, "I just need 30 minutes of silence." That's all I'd like to send out into the world.

I'm so full of words that I haven't written anything just for myself in months and months, and they're bursting out of my brain and through my fingertips in a messy, unrefined outpouring of mixed metaphors.

REMEMBERING SHINZO ABE

Tragic death of an Asian statesman



ENAYETULLAH KHAN

Enayetullah Khan is the editor-in-chief of UNB and Dhaka Courier.

FROM the moment he appeared on the world stage, Shinzo Abe, Japan's most compelling politician in a generation – perhaps even in the entire post-war era – was cut from a different cloth. Whereas the norm for Japanese leaders during this period has been being the efficient, managerial type, who could be relied upon to not rock the boat, Abe, who was assassinated at a political event on July 8, broke the mould by defining himself in terms of the political vision he espoused with such clarity and purpose.

His distinctive lineage was steeped in politics: maternal grandfather Nobusuke Kishi was part of Japan's war cabinet during World War II (while paternal grandfather Kan Abe sat in the opposition benches in the National Diet, campaigning to end the war), and was later prime minister as well under the new, pacifist constitution that Japan adopted in the aftermath of the war. His

father Shintaro was a leading figure in the Liberal Democratic Party's politics in the 80s, and served a four-year stint as Japan's foreign minister with distinction.

Vital to Abe's vision was a restoration of Japan to its rightful place at the top table, within the international family of nations. Having relinquished the premiership due to ill health after just a year in office once before, this urge was even more evident when he fashioned an improbable comeback to become the prime minister again in 2012. Shortly afterwards, he gave an address at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC, in which he explained his economic and diplomatic objectives and declared that he had returned to the prime-ministership to prevent Japan becoming a "Tier Two Nation." By the time he was forced to resign once again, due to a recurrence of the same ailment in 2020, no one had led Japan for longer as prime minister.

His desire to see Japan expand its sphere of influence was amply reflected in the unusually busy international schedule he adopted. From December 2012 to September 2014, Abe visited an astonishing 49 countries, including Bangladesh. Keen to unshackle his country from the constraints of its post-war constitution, Abe positioned Japan



Shinzo Abe (1954-2022)

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

as a key player in regional security vis-à-vis the Asia Pacific. Perhaps his most audacious foreign policy coup d'état lay in securing Washington's buy-in for the constitutional changes he had in mind, to expand the scope of Japan Self-Defense Forces (it did away with a standing army in the aftermath of World War II) to act in cooperation with and in defence of allies.

Abe's foreign policy moved Japan away from its traditional focus on the "big

three" bilateral relationships with the United States, China, and South Korea, and sought to increase the country's international engagements by expanding ties with Nato, the European Union, and others beyond the Asia Pacific region. Bangladesh was one of the countries that benefited from his endeavours, and he held frequent summits with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, in the process elevating the bilateral relationship between the two countries to a new comprehensive partnership.

In another sign of the greater priority accorded to Bangladesh under Abe, Prime Minister Hasina was invited to attend the 2016 G7 Summit, which Japan hosted that year, as part of the outreach segment. Invitations to the outreach segment are very much the hosts' prerogative, and it was the first time Bangladesh had been invited to attend the annual meeting of rich, industrialised economies.

Notwithstanding his nationalist credentials, the fact remains that his death has occasioned an outpouring of grief from many corners of the globe, and has been officially mourned at the state level by at least two countries in Asia, including Bangladesh. In death, his reputation will likely be further enhanced.

Opinion

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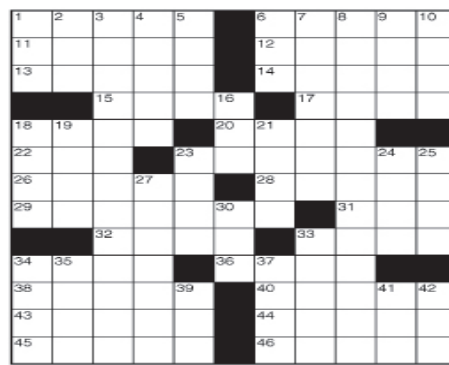
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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Turning tool
 - 6 Top roles
 - 11 Was sore
 - 12 Crowd scene actor
 - 13 Plow pioneer John
 - 14 Sales pitch
 - 15 Singer Mitchell
 - 17 Leave out
 - 18 Took turns
 - 20 Trick
 - 22 Unoriginal
 - 23 Library penalty
 - 26 Scoundrel
 - 28 Decorate
 - 29 mascara holder
 - 31 Relieve
 - 32 "Auld Lang"
- DOWN**
- 1 Young fellow
 - 2 Perfect serve
 - 3 John Grisham novel
 - 4 Ibis's cousin
 - 5 Perfect place
 - 6 "Miserables"
 - 7 Bared
 - 8 John Grisham novel
 - 9 Zwei follower
 - 10 Pretzel topping
 - 16 S&L offering
 - 18 Steamed
 - 19 Stratagem
 - 21 Bryce Canyon setting
 - 23 Incline
 - 24 Lake near Buffalo
 - 25 Cuts off
 - 27 Homer hero
 - 30 Min. part
 - 33 Fragrance
 - 34 Beginning for trooper or medic
 - 35 Prayer finish
 - 37 Fresh
 - 39 Pig's place
 - 41 Fellows
 - 42 Catch sight of



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

DOFF STREAK
OGRE TEETH
OLES ANDEAN
MESSAGES
HUB TESTS
ROMPS SATIN
UKE ADO
ERASE CELEB
DATED AXE
DIPLOMAT
OFLATE TACO
WAITON ITEM
ENTERS CEDE

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