



**AMERICAN  
UNIVERSITY  
OF BEIRUT**

**AUB Founders Day 2023**

**December 4, 2023**

**Mohammed Abobakr**

### **Beyond the Red Sea: A Journey of Hope and Human Connection**

It was April 2015. A child on a rocking boat with over a hundred other souls in the middle of the Red Sea, fleeing the destruction of Yemen's war. His house rendered unlivable, his parents without jobs or income, his education suspended until further notice. But in that precarious moment, his thoughts were not on the future; his entire being was consumed by the urgent need to hold on tight, to not be swallowed by the vast, unforgiving sea that encircled him. Amidst this turmoil, one might ask "What future awaits this child?"

On the 2nd of February 2020, the child from the rocking boat found himself standing on a uniquely enchanting street. Illuminated by the soft glow of streetlights, it was a scene unlike anything he had previously encountered. Before him stood grand gates, their presence both majestic and welcoming, seemingly opening into a world far removed from the one he had known.

He stepped through, struggling to carry his heavy, worn bags—silent testimonials of a life that had navigated life's unpredictability. A security guard, noticing his struggle, offered assistance, a simple act of kindness that felt monumental in his world of constant upheaval. As he descended the stairs within this venerable institution of learning, his eyes were drawn to an inscription on the walls, a guiding philosophy etched in stone: 'That they may have life, and have it more abundantly.' At this moment, beneath the weight of these words, the child felt an unfamiliar sense of peace wash over him. For the first time in his turbulent journey, he felt a glimpse of what it might mean to be home.

That child, standing at the crossroads of a past marked by conflict and a future filled with promise, was me. As I reflect on my journey I realize that my story goes beyond being an account of survival and personal development. It stands as a testament, to the influence of compassion, opportunities, and the life-changing potential of education.

I was brought here on the MEPI Tomorrow's Leaders Scholarship, a lifeline I nearly missed when initially placed on the backup list. Yet, here I am, supported by MEPI and AUB, embarking on an educational journey once beyond my wildest dreams and a standard of living little me would have never thought possible.

In AUB's vibrant halls and classrooms, where debate and dialogue are not just encouraged but celebrated, I found my voice — once silenced by fear — now welcomed and heard. Surrounded by bright minds and an environment dedicated to turning ideas into reality, AUB has been instrumental in transforming my perspective and empowering my expression.

Much of my transformation I owe to the beautiful souls at AUB's Center for Civic Engagement & Community Service. For the first time in my life, I could volunteer, contribute to meaningful causes, and, in a small way, help others navigate their challenges – much like the gentle winds that once guided my course.

AUB's liberal arts education opened doors to fields I had never imagined exploring. Philosophy, a subject virtually unknown and often misunderstood in Yemen, became an unexpected avenue of discovery.

In the philosophy classes at AUB, my mind intertwined with the thoughts of Socrates, Plato, Kant, and a blend of Arab philosophers like Al-Kindi and Ibn Rushd.

Among these varied philosophical voices, John Rawls' 'Veil of Ignorance' concept stood out. Introduced in a political philosophy class, it's a thought experiment that challenges us to design a just society without knowing our position in it. This approach to justice and fairness, seen from an impartial perspective, sparked a profound transformation in my thinking.

It led me to adopt a guiding principle in my life: 'What if it was me?' This question transcended philosophical exercise; it evolved into a lens through which I viewed my actions and decisions. Having endured some of the harshest conditions imaginable, and now blessed with the privilege of a voice at AUB, I felt a compelling duty to use this perspective for the betterment of others.

'What if it was me?' became my call to action, urging me to actively engage in helping and empathizing with those in need. This principle pushed me to apply the empathy and ethical considerations I had learned in philosophy to real-life scenarios. It also led me to a deeper reflection on the interplay of hard work and fortune.

Hard work has been a constant, from the desperate grip on that boat in the Red Sea to the academic challenges at university. Yet, getting into the nuances of fairness and opportunity, it became clear that my efforts, crucial as they were, did not solely shape my path.

Countless individuals in Yemen, under the oppressive shadow of hardship, exert as much effort, if not more, to no avail. The life-changing scholarship and the opportunity to study abroad that came my way were powerful currents that propelled me forward in tumultuous times.

This blend of Rawlsian philosophy and personal experience underscores a humbling truth: my journey owes as much to chance and the kindness of others as to my hard work, perhaps even more. It steers my thoughts towards broader questions about the distribution of opportunities, fairness, and our collective responsibility in shaping a just world.

This contemplation gave birth to a concept I call the 'morality of conflict regions.' Our lives in such areas are often the legacy of past generations' failures, leaving us to grapple with suffering not of

our making. So, do we focus solely on salvaging our individual lives, opting out of our collective troubles, and accept our role in robbing the future of the next generations? Or do we dedicate ourselves to building a better future for the next generation, a future we may never experience? This predicament, experienced deeply by those who have witnessed their futures being robbed, especially in the Global South, urges us to reconsider our responsibility, in shaping a more just and equitable world for everyone.

The answer, I believe, lies in transcending the conventional motivations of self-interest, often glorified in capitalism. Adam Smith, a pivotal figure in economic thought, famously stated, 'It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their interest.' This perspective underpins the idea that self-interest inadvertently leads to societal benefit.

However, this viewpoint may overlook the foundational elements of human communities that predate monetary systems. Looking back at pre-monetary societies, we observe communities thriving on love, compassion, and camaraderie. In these societies, mutual aid and collective well-being were paramount, illustrating that our most profound emotional responses are not to material loss, but to the loss of loved ones. This suggests that our evolution as social beings is deeply intertwined with our ability to care for one another, not just for personal gain but for the collective good.

Therefore, true influence and help, as I've come to understand, are rooted not in the pursuit of material wealth but in a form of selfless love. This love transcends traditional categories, manifesting as a raw, unconditioned affection for humanity. It's about finding joy in the happiness and well-being of others, seeing their fulfillment as integral to our own. Such love is a powerful force that can transform societies, particularly in conflict regions where the need for empathetic, community-oriented action is most acute. It's in these settings that the concept of self-interest falls short, and the necessity for a deeper, more altruistic approach becomes clear.

Through my journey at AUB, a profound understanding of selfless love emerged, transcending the personal realm to encompass a global perspective.

I realized that the principle of 'What if it was me?' was not limited to those in my immediate surroundings. This newfound understanding erased the imaginary lines that often divide us, revealing a shared human experience that resonates universally.

In a world of constant news of conflict and suffering, this broadened perspective has been both a blessing and a burden. It has granted me the ability to see beyond the confines of my own experiences, to understand the pains and struggles of others, even if they are thousands of miles away. It has turned abstract news into personal stories, transforming statistics into faces and names.

The principle of global empathy, has never been more poignant than now, as we witness the harrowing situation unfolding in Gaza. A brutal conflict, resulting in the tragic loss of over 16,000 civilians, brings a profound sense of grief and helplessness. As we absorb the news, the anguish and suffering of the people in Gaza resonate deeply within us, a painful reminder of the fragility and preciousness of human life.

In these moments, the distances that separate us diminish, and the shared human experience of suffering becomes painfully clear. This empathetic response transcends borders, cultures, and histories, uniting people across the globe in a collective sense of sorrow and a desire to help.

The global reaction to the crisis in Gaza has been a testament to the power of engaged citizenship. People everywhere are taking to the streets in solidarity, signing petitions, volunteering to send aid, and calling their representatives, engaging in every form of democratic expression available to them. This wave of support and activism is a powerful demonstration of how, in times of dire need, humanity can come together to enact change and offer support.

This situation underscores the importance of active citizenship not just in moments of crisis but as a continuous commitment in our lives. It's a realization that our growth as a community, a society, and indeed as humanity, hinges on our engagement in the civic sphere. Active citizenship should not be seen merely as a duty in times of turmoil but as an integral part of our collective journey towards thriving.

As the world grapples with the crisis in Gaza and individuals everywhere rise to the call of active citizenship, I am reminded of the ethos and actions of AUB, a place that has profoundly shaped my understanding of these very principles.

For over 157 years, AUB has been a beacon in the region, embodying not just the pursuit of education but championing the common well-being and nurturing of free minds. Whether responding to the Beirut port explosion, battling the challenges of the pandemic, or confronting regional crises, AUB has consistently been there, standing as a beacon of support and resilience. Its prompt actions, ranging from providing critical aid and healthcare to lighting darkened streets are a testament to its unwavering dedication to the community and the world at large. An example of this is the Shereen Abu Akleh scholarship which fosters future journalistic integrity. AUB's enduring presence in times of need exemplifies its commitment to engaged citizenship and making a tangible difference in society. These actions firmly establish AUB as a place 'where free minds flourish.' Here, the ethos of engaged citizenship resonates deeply, particularly relevant in the Global South. The university serves as a model where educational opportunity meets profound social responsibility, creating an environment where students are educated to be not just scholars but contributors to a better society.

Such engagement in acts of empathy and responsibility fosters a more connected and compassionate world, urging us to transcend our individual lives and embrace our role in the collective journey of human progress. Our commitment, whether in local communities or in solidarity with those far away, is vital. It's through these acts that we forge the essence of a global community – united in adversity, striving tirelessly for justice and peace.

In this spirit, let us act so that when a child navigates the tumultuous waters of life, they too can have life, and have it more abundantly.