

President Fadlo R. Khuri
Undergraduate Ceremony
June 3, 2017

The Power of Doubt

Your Excellences, esteemed Board of Trustees, parents, families and friends of our outstanding graduating students, our splendid faculty and staff, congratulations. Congratulations on seeing your efforts pay off with yet another superb class, the AUB Class of 2017. Our magnificent students, it is an honor to greet you tonight, years after you first entered the gates of this University, to wish you the best on this new journey awaiting you ahead.

أصحاب المعالي والسعادة والسيادة، ضيوفنا الكرام، حضرات أعضاء مجلس الأمناء الأجلاء، أهالي عائلات واصدقاء متخرجينا المبدعين، أعضاء الهيئة التعليمية والادارية الرائعين، اهنئكم على تخريج نخبة جديدة من هذه الجامعة العريقة. طلابنا المميزين، إنه لشرف لي أن أرحب بكم اليوم، بعد سنوات على دخولكم الجامعة، لا تمنى لكم مزيداً من النجاح في رحلتكم المستقبلية. ورمضان كريم .

“Experience is not what happens to you, but what you do with what happens to you,” said Aldous Huxley.

Your journey at AUB has been full of rich and powerful experiences. You entered the gates of this University coming from various streams of the country, of the region, and of the world. You left your parents’ nests to be embraced in this great font of struggle, knowledge and enlightenment, a place committed to inclusivity and diversity, and unequivocally to excellence. You have come a long way to be here tonight, and you have shaped and tailored your personalities through experiences interacting with your fellows, engaging with your professors, and serving in various clubs, organizations, and publications. You have grown through the knowledge you have acquired in both your major and elective courses.

Today you are ready to take a major leap into the great unknown, into a world that is both frightening and exciting. When these moments become overwhelming, remember that it is these very trials and challenges that you have been through that expand your knowledge, broaden your horizons, and help you define your character.

We hope you have found and achieved that which excites you in your years at this University. I hope you have taken this opportunity to start to explore all you one day will be. We struggle to find meaning, but it is this very struggle that makes us humans. It is inevitably part of this meaning.

We are after all flawed creatures, and our struggles for meaning begin in the early stages of our lives. It is part of our human nature, and we must embrace it, by acknowledging its presence, by understanding it and by constantly trying to overcome it.

“Character is built in the course of your inner confrontations. Character is a set of dispositions, desires, and habits that are slowly engraved during the struggle against your own weakness. You become more disciplined, considerate, and loving through small acts of self-control, sharing, service, friendship, and redefined enjoyment,” wrote David Brooks, in his bestselling “The Road to Character.”

Every human starts their life with vulnerability, and puts in a lifetime of effort to overcome it, while following their ambitions. Follow your dreams, not solely looking into yourself, but look around you – look at your community, understand what is lacking towards establishing social justice. Human transformations do not come clear and curated. You will be offered opportunities in your career that will make you think twice, and you will engage yourself in long deliberate thought about seizing those many humanitarian opportunities to impact the lives of those less fortunate. A whole character is embedded in a community and the wealth of that character depends on the health of the community, and so it is incumbent upon all of us to be engaged, involved and doing the best to help others.

It is in these moments of doubt that a person often finds their purpose and their vocation. You will naturally be hesitant before taking a step that pushes you out of your comfort zone. It is the most important decisions that are usually preceded by moments of self-reflection. In these moments, allow yourself to weigh your options, and seize first those options that benefit you and the larger community, equally.

Two and one half years ago, I was first offered the chance to lead this historic institution. I reflected carefully on this opportunity to completely change gears. It was unquestionably a moment of great doubt, but it is precisely in those

moments of doubt that we find our True North. It is important that you genuinely challenge yourself, determine your personal mission and fulfill it –always keep an eye on the community you serve, and understand how your own skills can best create a lasting and meaningful impact.

Our students graduating tonight have a limitless drive to conquer the globe and achieve what they aspire to be. My advice is to avoid being overly competitive with others. Do not allow yourselves to be defined by external distinction and validation. All of you are gifted, and personal achievements cannot bring you long-lasting satisfaction or inner peace, but rather instant, disruptive moments of pride, and perhaps, illusionary happiness. It is, however, the service of others that can make you whole, and will allow you to lead an inwardly peaceful and fulfilling life.

So, every time you are faced by genuine doubt, recognize that the power to effect meaningful change resides in precisely these defining moments, and that it is in your hands to take a decision that might forever alter the course of your life and those of others. But that decision may well place you in a position where your service will most benefit those around you. In your decision-making process, reflect on Kant’s three different but equivalent formulations of the universal moral law:

“Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end.

Thus the third practical principle follows as the ultimate condition of their harmony with practical reason: the idea of the will of every rational being as a universally legislating will.”

Throughout the course of my own life, I have learned that one can serve their fellow man through unanticipated avenues. You are graduating from a University whose founding father, the great Dr. Daniel Bliss, said in words that still resonate to this day “We were not anxious to appear great, but we were anxious to lay foundations upon which greatness could be built.”

The epitome of service is the surrender of entitlement in order to do good for those in greater need. With Lebanon ever precarious, with a war-torn Arab World, and the biggest humanitarian crisis happening right at our door, it is you, our graduates, who are looked to as beacons of hope, hope for a better tomorrow. You are the bringers of change, the salvers of wounds, the providers of hope, and caregivers for communities. All of this can be achieved only through real doubt and introspection, by service and sacrifice, by application, by knowledge.

And once that service is done well, and it is time to move on, don't look back in anger or in pride. But rather recognize, as former Secretary of State and Nobel Peace Prize winner, George Catlett Marshall once said: "When a thing is done, it's done. Don't look back. Look forward to your next objective." That is a quality that embodied our own late, much mourned trustee, Maroun Semaan, who believed deeply in the power of philanthropy, as his daughter Nour so memorably stated this last January, when she said: "He always wondered how someone with means could rest his head on his pillow while a neighbor of his, near or far, is unable to make ends meet". Both Marshall and Semaan embraced and embodied servant leadership.

Today, we miss our dear friend, alumnus, trustee and philanthropist Maroun Semaan whom we all lost last month. We celebrate his meaningful life today through the distribution of the first degrees in Engineering and Architecture under the faculty bearing his name: "The Maroun Semaan Faculty of Engineering and Architecture".

I ask you all to join me in observing a moment of silence in his memory".

Thank you.

Today you graduate more confident and more capable, equipped with the faith, skills and knowledge necessary to change the world for the better. You have learned much at AUB, you have learned resilience and perseverance, and today, we are all proud of you, administration, faculty, staff and parents. You have emerged stronger and wiser, with your views, whatever they might be, sharpened and tested, though you still have a lifetime of learning ahead. Look back at your parents and loved ones gathered here today and those who could not be here. They have believed in you, nurtured you, and deserve your thanks, and your applause.

Go out now into the wider world and do not be daunted by doubt. There is much exciting knowledge to acquire through endurance and stamina. Look around at your classmates, and then go forth into this world with purpose and humility.

As the great poet Abou Nawwas said:

فقل لمن يدّعي في العلم فلسفةً حفظت شيئاً ، وغابت عنك أشياء

Congratulations to you, graduates of 2017, and know that at AUB, you will always have a home. You will find solace in pausing on its beautiful Mediterranean campus whenever your vision is obscured by doubt and distress, by paradox and by pain. Return to your campus whenever you need a renewed sense of purpose. I, today, have hope more than ever, that it is you that will remold and reshape Lebanon, the Arab World and beyond, to best serve our wounded populations, that they, like you, “may have life and have it more abundantly.”

Congratulations, AUB Class of 2017. Go forth and change the world for the better, as all of us assembled here, and most importantly, as you yourself, now know you can!