

**Student Speaker Merilin Ekzarkova**  
**Faculty of Arts and Sciences**  
**June 2, 2017**

Dear Trustees, President Khoury, Deans, faculty members, parents and distinguished guests. It is my honor and privilege to stand amongst you in celebration of the graduate class of 2017.

Before I say anything else, I want to say thank you. Thank you to my parents and my amazing fiancée. I would not be standing here today if you had not loved, supported, encouraged me, and in some cases ate my homework or caused me serious injuries so that I could stay home and rest. I am of course talking about my sister.

A special thank you goes to Dr. Fadlo Khoury, President of AUB who continues to work tirelessly to better this place we love and call our second home, to Dr. Talal Nizameddin, Dean of Student Affairs, who is always there for us, and to Dr. Maryam Ghandour, whose leadership of the Career and Placement Services has helped hundreds of students each year and whose personal support to me I will never forget.

Tonight, during these few minutes that I have your attention and with these few words I have to say, I hope to achieve at least one thing: to make you appreciate just how far you have come. I hope that by the end you will be able to value this moment in your lives, because you will never again be where you are now.

The biggest question we all have is what if? What if we don't end up where we want in life, or achieve all of our goals, or succeed in our professional and personal lives? What if this is as good as it gets? Unfortunately I can't answer these questions. I ask them myself everyday. I simply don't know. In fact, no one knows. So instead of dwelling on what we don't know, which is infinite, I would like to share with you two absolutely certain things that AUB, the one constant in our lives so far, has taught me.

The first is that people will always surprise you and given the choice between good and bad, most will choose to do good. I understand that this is hard to see in

our world today what with global warming, wars, and social injustice. But if you just look at some of the clubs here at AUB and the vibrant student life in general, of which I am sure many of you were part of, and what they do in terms of helping the various communities in our country, lectures and workshops to raise awareness of a certain issue, scientific inventions, entertainment, music, sports or creative solutions to everyday problems, you will find that there is goodness in everyone. Sometimes this goodness is overshadowed by difficult circumstances, but it never disappears and always shines through when it is needed the most.

The second is that there is always a choice. No matter what you face or how much you feel the doors closing in on you, you always, always have a choice. You all chose to continue your education, you chose to study here at AUB, and you chose to work hard when you were tired and through everything to persevere. It is because of your choices that you are here tonight. To make a choice takes courage, but it also entails a responsibility. Each choice has certain repercussions. For instance on December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks a 42-year-old African American woman refused to give up her seat to a white passenger on the Montgomery City Bus. This seemingly simple act ignited a boycott and forced the city to repeal its law enforcing racial segregation on public transport. Ms. Parks' choice was pivotal in the Civil Rights movement in the US and to this day her act stands as a one of the most defying in history. A choice that seemed to pertain only to one woman influenced an entire generation and changed history as we know it. Your choices matter, and it is up to each one of you as individuals to take the initiative and have the courage to make responsible choices.

I would like to end by asking you to look back on all of the hard work, late nights and challenges you have overcome to be where you are now, and to take a minute to appreciate yourselves. Each one of you has overcome innumerable obstacles, defied naysayers, and made yourself and your loved ones proud. I ask you not to forget that you always have a choice, don't be afraid to make it, and to remember that you are all good people and because of that you will make this world better for those who will sit in your places in the future.