



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

2024 Student Commencement Address

Darren Walker

Beirut, Saturday, June 8, 2024

To President Khuri, the American University of Beirut trustees, distinguished faculty and staff, and, most importantly, to the class of 2024: Congratulations!

Thank you for the invitation to join you, for the warm welcome to your beautiful campus and city, and for the generous introduction. And I'm especially humbled to share this moment with my fellow honorary-degree recipients: Dr. Ghassan Abu Sittah and Arundhati Roy.

Now, graduates, I know how hard you've worked to reach this extraordinary milestone. I also know that your success required boundless, ceaseless love from the people who guided you from your first steps to this biggest step.

So, Class of 2024: Please join me in thanking all of your families, whatever family means to you; in thanking those celebrating with us in person, and those celebrating with us in spirit. It takes a village—so, please, let's express some gratitude to the many proud villages that raised you, that lifted you up, that fueled your abundant journeys.

Today is special for many reasons. It's a celebration of your excellence and of the promise your future holds. It's the end of one chapter and the beginning of another. And as we pause on the threshold of all you will do next, it's an opportunity to reflect on the community that you have built together—and on the shared, democratic values that bind our communities together across the world you are entering.

From my own life's story, I understand how—and how much—these shared values matter.

I grew up poor, born to a single mother in a charity hospital and raised in a tiny shotgun shack. I grew up gay, at a time when many people saw my identity as a psychological disorder, or a crime. I grew up Black in the segregated American south, in Louisiana and Texas, where the adults in my life were subjected to discrimination in just about every aspect of theirs.

And yet, at every step of my journey, our shared values inspired good people of good will to help me cross bridges of opportunity. Our shared values inspired public goods and public resources—Head Start, public schools and universities, Pell Grants—that provided me a path forward. Our shared values inspired enormous generosity—from institutions that provided me with support and encouragement; from friends and mentors who extended my horizons and challenged me to think in new ways.

Indeed, my story is about what's possible when we live up to our highest ideals—when we embrace the conviction that from many, we are one. And Class of 2024: I know that your stories are about this, too.

American University of Beirut

PO Box 11-0236, Riad El Solh, Beirut 1107 2020, Lebanon

T +961 1 35 00 00 – Ext 2650 | communications@aub.edu.lb

aub.edu.lb

I know you traveled all different paths—all different roads. You overcame different obstacles. You pursued different interests, and passions, and dreams. You made your way from the corner of a Zoom screen in 2020 to this campus at the crossroads of the world—to this magnificent, magical city, with its rich history and culture.

And when you arrived, what greeted you? What energized you? What intoxicated you? What, sometimes, challenged you?

More difference: People who looked, or loved, or worshipped differently than you. People who, perhaps, saw the world through different eyes. People who saw our problems differently. People who saw our opportunities differently.

Moment by moment, you persevered and triumphed across all different fields and disciplines—all different traditions of inquiry, and exploration, and engagement. And after today, you once again will go off in all different directions: To different vocations, different locations—to lead different lives.

And still, from all this difference, look around: Here you are, wearing the same robes and the same joyful smiles. Here you are sharing the same pride in all that you've accomplished. Embracing the same responsibility—the same commitment—to make change in a world that desperately needs it.

You came here as strangers—but you leave here as life-long classmates and friends, united by your shared journey.

Class of 2024: The fact that we are together—at this time, in this place—this is remarkable. And on this most auspicious evening, I ask you to remember this: The power of solidarity—of shared values and shared aspirations—not just despite our differences, but because of them.

Now, I don't need to tell you that division—divisiveness—is a hallmark of our era. We see it in—and in response to—the world's most intractable conflicts: In profound human suffering, in the pain and anguish across this region, a stain on our humanity. We see it in our distorted media, where the few loudest voices garner the coverage and clicks, while the conglomerates reap the rewards. We see it in the so-called leaders who rally the extremes, rather than calling us to a common good. And we see it because of inequality—inequalities of all kinds—inequalities that both aggravate our gathering crises and prevent us from joining together in common cause to address them.

As a result of all this, we—almost instinctively, reflexively—retreat into our comfortable corners, where our biases are confirmed. And we allow our differences and disagreements—we allow our diversity—to be spun into division. As the poet and activist Audre Lorde put it many years ago, difference has been—and I quote—“misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion.”

And so, Class of 2024: My message for you today is simple: It doesn't need to be this way—and it hasn't always been. Our differences and our divisions are not the same thing. The former does not somehow inevitably lead to the latter. To the contrary, our differences are our greatest strength, not a weakness—our greatest asset, not a liability.

At this moment when it is all too tempting to shut out those with whom you differ, I implore you not to build walls, but to build bridges: To transcend divides, rather than widening them; to forge new relationships, by listening with humility, and curiosity, and empathy; to find common ground, at the intersection of open minds and open hearts.

The work ahead will not be easy. It will take comfort with discomfort. It will take risk. It will take hope—radical, audacious hope. And it will take love. But I have every confidence that you—that your generation—is up to the task ahead.

I wish you all the best. Congratulations, AUB Class of 2024!