



**AMERICAN
UNIVERSITY
OF BEIRUT**

Commencement Address 2024
By **Fadlo R. Khuri**

A Paean to Failure

Greetings excellencies, trustees, faculty, staff, administrators, alumni, friends, parents and especially graduates of the outstanding class of 2024, welcome to your graduation! Today, while we celebrate your many accomplishments, I want to pivot to discuss the relevance of failure and how it helps propel us forward towards even greater success. Not only to observe or experience, but to learn from and celebrate.

The ancient Greeks accepted failure. They celebrated it. They lionized it. Think of the opening lines of the Iliad:

“RAGE:

Sing, Goddess, Achilles' rage,
Black and murderous, that cost the Greeks
Incalculable pain, pitched countless souls
Of heroes into Hades' dark,
And left their bodies to rot as feasts
For dogs and birds, as Zeus' will was done.
Begin with the clash between Agamemnon--
The Greek warlord--and godlike Achilles.
Which of the immortals set these two
At each other's throats?
Apollo, Zeus' son and Leto's, offended
By the warlord. Agamemnon had dishonored
Chryses, Apollo's priest, so the god
Struck the Greek camp with plague,
And the soldiers were dying of it.”¹

This is failure on an epic scale. The feud between Achilles and Agamemnon is a monumental failure of leadership and equanimity on both their parts, with scores of Greeks meeting their death because of an honor feud over a woman. Contemporary American critics might call this dispute the “mother of all failures.” It occupies a substantial portion of the plot and breadth of the first great epic poem in the Western

¹ Homer. The Iliad. Translated by Stanley Lombardo, Hackett Publishing, 1997.

canon. Yet the ultimate hero of the Iliad is neither the all-conquering Agamemnon nor the wily Odysseus who devises the Trojan Horse. Rather it is the mighty Achilles, who for all his legendary prowess falls victim to his unchecked fury and poor judgment. Achilles' fatal flaw lies in his inability to learn from his previous failures, the defining quality of the tragic hero from Homer on through Shakespeare to the present. The Greeks defined that failure of judgment, that lack of a capacity to learn from one's errors, as *hubris*.

The scions of ancient European civilizations were far from the only ones to celebrate failure and loss. The greatest pre-Islamic Arabic poetry included the poetry of lamentation. Hence, the immortal words of Imru' Al Qais,

- 1 - قَفَا نَبْكَ مِنْ ذِكْرِي حَبِيبٍ وَمَنْزِلٍ * بَسِطِ اللَّوَى بَيْنَ الدَّخُولِ فَحَوْمَلِ
- 2 - فَتَوَضَّحَ فَالْمِقْرَةَ لَمْ يَغْفُ رَسْمُهَا * لِمَا نَسَجَتْهَا مِنْ جَنُوبٍ وَشَمَالِ
- 3 - كَأَنِّي عِدَاةَ الْبَيْنِ يَوْمَ تَحَمَّلُوا * لَدَى سَمَرَاتِ الْحَيِّ نَاقِفٍ حَنْظَلِ
- 4 - وَتُوقَفًا بِهَا صَحْبِي عَلَيَّ مَطِيئُهُمْ * يَقُولُونَ لَا تَهْلِكْ أَسَى وَتَجَمَّلِ
- 5 - وَإِنَّ شِفَائِي عَبْرَةٌ مُهْرَاقَةٌ * فَهَلْ عِنْدَ رَسْمِ دَارِسٍ مِنْ مُعَوَّلِ
- 6 - وَلَيْلٍ كَمَوْجِ الْبَحْرِ أَرْخَى سُدُولَهُ * عَلَيَّ بِأَنْوَاعِ الْهُمُومِ لِيَبْتَلِي
- 7 - فَقُلْتُ لَهُ لِمَا تَمَطَّى بِصُلْبِهِ * وَأَرْدَفَ أَعْجَازًا وَنَاءً بِكُلِّ
- 8 - أَلَا أَيُّهَا اللَّيْلُ الطَّوِيلُ أَلَا أَنْجَلِ * بِصُحْبِ وَمَا الْإِضْبَاحُ مِنْكَ بِأَمْثَلِ

يصف الشاعر في الأبيات الستة الأولى الأطلال، والوقوف على أطلال الديار وذكر المنازل ومواضعها، والتحدث عن آثار الأطباء التي كانت يومًا، كما يتحدث عن حنينه للأحبة الذين فارقهم ولم يعودوا إليه.

In the first six verses, the poet describes standing on the ruins of homes, mentioning houses and their locations, describing the traces of antelopes that once were. He also shares his longing for departed loved ones, never to be seen again.

The great poet's lamentation of loss of home, heritage, and the beloved sets the stage for the next phase of Arabic commemorations of catastrophe. One of the most significant of these came after the Battle of Uhud, where the Prophet Mohammad and his followers sustained exceptionally heavy losses. In a recent essay, Professor Nadia El Cheikh describes how defeat in this battle helped define central concepts and practices for the emerging Islamic concept of *Al Umma*, of nationhood and its

requirements of conduct. The vengeance inflicted on the followers of Mohammad in the Battle of Uhud is so extreme, so wild, that it recalls the slaughter Achilles wrought on the Trojans after the death of his companion, Patroclus. And yet the failure to anticipate the vengeance of Bani Quraish on the Muslims leads to an opposite effect: a restraint on the type of revenge that can be taken. This at last is an example of learning from failure, and its effect on morale and discipline in the Muslim military ethos is hard to overestimate.

Epic failures such as the Battle of Uhud and as found in the saga of The Iliad, continue to the present day and can be found in our recent past. In 1948, the eminent AUB professor Constantine Zurayk coined the phrase *Al Nakba* to describe the catastrophe inflicted on the Palestinians when the Arab nations failed to protect and maintain the Palestinian people in their homeland and Western powers failed to stop the nascent Israeli state from carrying out this ethnic cleansing and wholesale theft of land. Zurayk's prophetic judgment that peace would elude the entire region so long as the rights of the Palestinian people went unfulfilled would come to haunt the MENA region as the *Nakba* continues to hover menacingly over the Levant and, to a lesser degree, over the entire Arab world. The inhumane War on Gaza we bear witness to is but the latest tragic consequence of this colossal failure.

The question of Palestine has been a central core of our shared experience at AUB. The failure to address, much less resolve it fairly and humanely, hangs over the lands we draw our students from, much as Professor Zurayk predicted. But now it has become the *cause celebre* for young people around the world. They refuse to sanction the continuation of this profound injustice, ignored as it has been by the Western powers for nearly a century. Not in your name and not in your time. No amount of patronizing or policing will sweep the cause under the door, and I am confident that this youthful generation will see it through such that Palestinians, like African Americans five decades ago and South Africans twenty years after that, can extoll, in the words of the late Martin Luther King Jr: "Free at last. Free at last. Thank God almighty we're free at last!"

The failure of peoples, of nation states, of fairness and opportunity for all marks our paths historically. It is a failure of men, of leaders, of grand visions and their woeful implementations. But in the seeds of these failures, we can glean the well-disguised kernels that will one day sprout, lighting the path toward equitable progress.

As Albert Camus wrote: "In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer. And that makes me happy. For it says that no matter how hard the world pushes against me, within me, there's something stronger – something better, pushing right back."

That invincible summer of Camus is in fact born amid winter's trials and tribulations. This is a truth you, our graduates, and our three honorands share. Every one of you by now has had the opportunity to try something that was beyond their capacity, to strive wholeheartedly but to fail. And in coming to terms with your "failures," you have learned defining lessons, even when you never quite succeed in scaling that particular mountain.

I can certainly relate. I have had applications for training programs, grants, and papers all denied, petitions for nominations and awards, proposals and plans, declined repeatedly. Every defeat was painful, distressing, even on occasion demoralizing. But those failures have made me, as yours have made you, much the better for it. Like you, like our magnificent honorands and trustees, I learned from defeat, disappointment, and disillusionment to emerge in an “invincible summer,” stronger, more purposeful, and wiser for those experiences.

Therefore, AUB Class of 2024, celebrate your successes in graduating today, secure in the knowledge that every misstep was ultimately a stride forward in our shared journey to a better life for all, towards shaping a society where every life can and must be made more useful and more abundant.

In closing, I offer each one of you and your families my profound congratulations. I request you indulge me in watching this 33 second video on failure by Michael Jordan. A great champion and ferocious competitor, Jordan’s repeated failures when it mattered, and lessons learned from them, blazed his trail to enduring athletic success. That also must be our path, success earned the hard way, ultimate communal success all the more rewarding for having failed at it time and again. This then is my final charge to the class of 2024. Go forth and fail mightily, not reluctantly or shamefully. Fail with all your spirit, and learn from those failures, that your successes will one day carry your communities, societies and nations forward to better, more sustainable and inclusive futures. Thank you and congratulations.