September 2015

There... And back!

By Fadlo R. Khuri

Over 33 years ago, I was accepted at Yale University as a transfer student halfway through the spring semester of my sophomore year at the American University of Beirut. I remember the deep sense of ambivalence on receiving notification of my acceptance: on one hand, I was filled with pride as Yale only took three students in transfer into the sophomore class that year. On the other hand, I was happy and fulfilled at AUB. I had been fortunate to take a series of courses that I enjoyed and excelled at. I also loved the University's values, campus, ambience and intellectual offerings. And finally, I had long since reached the internal compromise that many Lebanese citizens make to accept the tenuous situation in our homeland, in exchange for all that it can offer in terms of history, culture and familial nurture.

But there were other dynamics at play. I was, and remain, very close to my brother Ramzi, who at the age of 16 had also been accepted at Yale. He had already decided that he would attend as a freshman in order to jump-start his future career as a mathematical physicist. In addition, as someone born in the United States who had lived there for 1-2 years each twice before, I was eager to explore my American heritage. I loved baseball, rock music, European history, American and English poetry and literature, as well as biology and chemistry, and I thought that matriculating at Yale for at least a year was just too good a potentially enlightening opportunity to pass up.

So I signed on the dotted line, planning to stay at Yale for 1-2 years and then come back to attend the AUB medical school then led by my father, the late Raja Khuri. The idea that I would be a Lebanese expatriate for 33 years while completing my education and establishing my medical and scientific career, never really occurred to me.

Now I am back, having finally completed what I had intended to be my junior year abroad. Back to the campus where I first learned how to ride a bicycle and swim, to the university that educated four generations of my family and to whom I owe the unpayable debt of not only our enlightenment but of our social and intellectual mobility. AUB’s mission is to transform lives and whole societies and I found that, despite finding great happiness and fulfillment at Emory University in Atlanta, it was impossible not to heed the call of AUB, its students, faculty, staff, alumni and Board. I had just gotten comfortable serving AUB as Chair of its Medical School's International Advisory Committee, and as a newly elected member of its Board of Trustees. So this was 1982 in reverse, I thought. Here we go again...

Except the differences are probably more important than the similarities. I am confident that I have used my "junior year abroad" well: to build a family, also deeply rooted in AUB through my wife, Dr. Lamya Tannous, to consecrate a career in science and medicine, and to gain valuable experience in the building and development of organizational mores.
I believe that these experiences and commitments have left me primed and prepared towards AUB’s major overarching goals: the pursuit of excellence, the commitment to make a difference, and the pursuit of a just, fair and collegial society. Over 7 years at MD Anderson in Texas and especially in my 13 years at Emory in Georgia, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to help lead the development of a first class department and cancer center, to establish a research strategic plan for a medical school, and to expand educational, research and patient care services that will ultimately impact the lives of millions. I was able to accomplish these goals, while learning the nuts and bolts of recruitment, academic and healthcare cultures and economies, the cultivation of diversity, and the successful pursuit of new scientific knowledge.

So having spent more than two thirds of my life abroad, what do I hope to accomplish as both AUB’s 16th President and its first Lebanese one? Simply put, I am determined to ensure that the Founders’ intention that AUB achieves widespread intellectual and cultural (and not just economic) mobility is met with the determination to support a just and fair society that expands beyond its hallowed halls. Because I am pretty sure that when Daniel Bliss and his successors engraved the University motto on the Main Gate "that they may have life and have it more abundantly", they didn’t just intend that more intellectually abundant life be confined to this campus alone. Rather, I am more convinced than ever that they intended this impact to spread broadly into the Arab community as a whole.

As I am welcomed back to AUB by a socially and intellectually vibrant and engaged society, I extend my hands in genuine collaboration and collegiality to everyone, both within and beyond these walls, who is determined to make a difference for all the right reasons. I am committed to working together towards further enhancing this magnificent and transformative university, one whose culture is based on the principles of vigorous intellectual discourse combined with empathy and cultivation. And I invite you to join me, our faculty, students, alumni, board and staff in what promises to be a deeply meaningful voyage!