

**American Community School Graduation Ceremony**

**Keynote Speech by**

**AUB President Peter F. Dorman**

**June 5, 2009**

**Beirut, Lebanon**

I am delighted to have the honor and pleasure to extend a welcome to the graduates and parents of the ACS Class of 2009! Today marks a memorable and exciting passage, a threshold in the lives of you newly minted ACS alumni. The world now begins to open up to you in terms of personal choice, opportunity, and--for a number of you--travel abroad and living away from your families for the first time. There is really only one major hitch: before we get on with the real business of graduation—the conferring of your diplomas--you will first have to listen to the invited speaker. It is the sad fate of all graduation speakers that they know they are not really the main event: and it is your sad fate to have to wait until I am finished. But since this is your day, I will try to be brief!

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This day is full of excitement and anticipation, for you and your families; mingled perhaps with a touch of poignancy and sadness, on account of classmates you whom have befriended and whom you may not see again for a long time. So, as you wait here—with some impatience for the passing out of the diplomas—I would ask you only to pause and take note of this particular moment in time as it passes us by. I would ask you to reflect on the years you have spent at ACS and where this graduation day may take you, for this moment will not come again. In addition to the diploma, what experiences and what memories will you be taking with you, that may shape your own future self? The opportunity to address the ACS Class of 2009 has also given me a chance to reflect on my own experiences at this same school, over forty years ago, so I am doubly grateful to be with you today.

For me, ACS holds a whole treasure of memories, both good and forgettable—as it must for anyone who has spent the years of kindergarten through 9<sup>th</sup> grade at the same school. Let me share just two of them with you. They are very different from each other, and at first glance neither has much relevance to this day.

One of these events was the time in middle school when our class taken to visit the Nahr el Kalb, just south of Jounieh, where the river pours out into the sea below a rocky headland that blocks the coastal path. In ancient times, a narrow path was the only access around and over the headland, and passing armies had carved successive records of their conquests in the bedrock. The earliest stela at Nahr el Kalb belongs to Ramesses II, the next was Esarhaddon of Assyria, some 500 years later, then Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, followed by Greeks and Romans, leading all the way up to the independence of Lebanon. I found that history was literally carved in the land, but in a way that few could read, due to the jumble of languages and the erosion of the inscriptions. It excited my imagination, but I never imagined I would ever have the chance to pursue that excitement further.

Then there are the less pleasant memories. In my primary years, in the first to third grades, I always dreaded the periodic school plays in which my classmates avidly competed for leading roles, while I begged silently to be an extra in the back of the crowd. One year, one of my teachers badly miscast me in the role lead as Santa Claus, which not only required a lot of hot padding inside an itchy red costume, but required me to memorize the immortal line: “ho ho ho.” And when it came time for me to deliver the line, out of stage fright, I suddenly lost my voice and it came out as a terrified squeak that delighted the audience of mothers even more than if Santa Claus himself had dropped by. The whole awful afternoon remains seared in my memory. I will return to each of these stories in a moment.

Along with my brothers and sisters, I attended ACS during a sort of “American” decade in the Middle East, just ten years after the end of World War II, during the presidencies of Ike Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy. American prestige abroad, in the wake of the war, the reconstruction of Europe, and the Marshall Plan, had never been higher. The thriving boarding department at ACS was full of American kids from all over the region, mingling with the many students from Lebanon and nearby countries as well. One large contingent of imports consisted of the Aramco kids, whose parents were stationed in Saudi Arabia and who sent a whole stream of children to Beirut every year. Those were the days of sock hops and saddle shoes, and everyone danced to the sounds of Perry Como and Motown. We also relied on new students from the United States, arriving every fall semester to bring us up to date on what clothes and fashions were now current. I especially remember the first time I saw a new dance demonstrated by a student just arrived from the U.S. named Henning Vent: it was

called “the twist.” I was amazed to think that anyone might actually be considering this dancing—and then quickly learned how much fun it was to do myself. The age of bebop had given way to new styles of weird dancing, all with different names, each of which soon fell out of style.

That earlier time was full of a certain naïve optimism on the part of most Americans in their ability to enjoy their own affluence and to influence the world beyond. That optimism came to a crashing halt two months after I left Beirut to attend school in the United States, in the fall of 1963, with the unthinkable assassination of John F. Kennedy, shortly to be followed by the escalation of war in Vietnam and the rise of the civil rights movement, all of which fundamentally changed the country.

If we fast-forward to the present day, we are no longer in an American decade: the picture is very different from what we enjoyed at ACS in the 1950s and 1960s. The United States has lived through eight years of recent trauma, some of it self-imposed, and Americans, sadly, no longer arrive in droves in Beirut. In the interim, Lebanon has also survived a horrific civil conflict. Nonetheless, in my view, you are enormously fortunate to have come of age in this magical and frustrating country. Lebanon is, at the very least, a trilingual civilization that looks both East and West. It is culturally and historically more advantaged in terms of its size than almost any country in the world. For that matter, perhaps we can say it is culturally and historically more burdened as well.

Nonetheless, after graduation, like those of us who have come before, you will have a chance to define your years at ACS by the challenges that made you grow, by those friends you hold dear, and even by those teachers who inspired you. Which experiences at ACS will ultimately make a difference to you?

Whatever memories you choose to hold onto, there are two quests I would urge on you in the years to come, during your post-ACS existence. One is the quest for voice. By “voice” I mean that each of you has the capacity to make an impact according to your own gifts, and will speak to your community in very different ways. Some of you have the literal gift of gab—perhaps the most entertaining gift, and one that I do not possess--others a gift for creative or journalistic writing, others a talent for humanitarian care, cultural understanding, simple persuasion or more complicated rhetoric, political polemic, musical entertainment, or

the fine arts—the list goes on. How you choose to join in the communal debate beyond the family circle will depend on how well you recognize your innate talents and employ them to their fullest advantage. It is really a commitment to civil dialogue.

The second quest I would hope for you is the quest of passion, and it is an entirely inward-looking one. This is the challenge of discovering the path that is most deeply satisfying to you, whether it be through your career, your home life, your hobbies, your private meditations—in other words, your most personal commitments. It is for you to decide what you love doing most, and commit yourself to it passionately. Be patient about your options! I did not identify my professional passion until graduate school, when I stumbled into an Egyptology program at the University of Chicago and discovered that pharaonic history and ancient hieroglyphic verb forms were among the most fascinating things I had ever encountered. And suddenly the rock-cut inscriptions at Nahr el Kalb—which I had first seen as a child—took on enormous fresh meaning: not only as monuments that marked the ancient road, but as records of military conquest, religious dedication, royal self-aggrandizement, artistic composition and balance, and complex grammatical constructions. They were an illuminating window into the past. This quest for passion is what you owe yourself and those most dear to you, by striving for an intense satisfaction in what you commit yourself to doing.

I have mentioned the importance of considering the “moment we are now in,” on this graduation day of 2009. Together with your own private thoughts and memories of ACS, as you leave this fine school, let us also contemplate the possible impact of looming national elections in two days, together with the remarkable speech by President Obama in Cairo just yesterday, which heralds a long overdue change in the American stance toward the Middle East. We all hope fervently for a more open dialogue that will lead to bridges of understanding, but the future--for the moment--remains in suspension. As for all you new ACS graduates, who are soon to be eligible voters, whether in Lebanon or elsewhere--how will your voices make a difference to that hopeful new dynamic? I am confident you will speak out loud and clear. I know you will do far better than I did, when I was asked to deliver my not-so-hearty “ho ho ho.”

I wish you the joy of future years and trust that your quests for voice and for passion will be rewarded in equal measure. And most especially, I offer you the heartiest congratulations, to you--and to your families celebrating with you--on this extraordinary graduation day.