

Opening Day Remarks, October 4, 2010

Connecting the Academy

Good morning. Distinguished guests, honored faculty colleagues, trustees, students, and staff of AUB: I am delighted to welcome all of you back to campus as our university opens another academic year.

It's been a hot summer in Beirut. Kathy and I returned from the United States at the beginning of September, only to learn that we had escaped the worst of the heat, which rose into the 40s centigrade during August. I mention this not to make small talk; in fact, the recent heat we've encountered plays its part in the substance of this address.

Most of us regard the beginning of classes as a time of intellectual renewal and new opportunities. We have a clean slate in front of us, with new students and classes to teach. The press of course preparation, reading assignments, and exam schedules will shortly plunge our campus into a familiar and hectic routine that is largely self-sustaining until graduation next June.

Like all universities, AUB functions at the point at which the theoretical and practical realms collide. That is, what we choose to teach, and the extent to which we succeed in communicating that knowledge, make a great deal of difference to the next generation of graduates, who will become the next leaders of society. To judge by its alumni and the historical record, AUB has succeeded remarkably well in that respect.

I believe that AUB's success is due to a unique capacity that is the topic of this address: connecting the academy. And by this I don't even refer to the basic, one-on-one connection that is most essential to the academic experience—the relationship between the professor and the student—the process of teaching, learning, mentoring, and socializing—the process that is especially foremost in our mind as we begin another year.

In addition, it is necessary for a great institution to connect on in three other ways, having to do with internal systems, external disciplines, and the chaotic chatter of the world beyond.

To begin closest to home, from time to time we need to step back and think about what course materials we use, why we employ them, whether we succeed at communicating,

and whether we are delivering the education our students can use in the real world.

This is an exercise in formal assessment: useful for external accreditation, but even more so, as internal validation, to ensure that curricula continue to have direct relevance to our fields of knowledge.

This year we are revamping the internal connections essential to higher education.

Across the University, our departments are examining learning outcomes for students and assessing whether the goals for degree programs are being supported and met. We are defining what constitutes proper standards for general education and writing-intensive courses. New visibility has been accorded to our centers for academic computing, as well as teaching and learning. Our new office for international programs has been established to formalize agreements between AUB and universities across the globe, to facilitate the visits of fellow academics and exchange students, and to urge AUB students to take advantage of opportunities to study abroad, to increase their exposure to different cultures and ways of thinking.

Also this year, AUB has established a new cabinet-level post, Vice President for Information Technology. The benefits of effective IT are enormous, beyond merely a matter of cost efficiency. The work of her office will transform the integrative functions of our university, including the business and financial systems, the digitization of patient records, the introduction of operational modules for human resources and

financial aid, the establishment of a secure central data bank, and the management of critical inventories. But on the academic side, this will also allow, among other things, on-line course registration, data-driven classroom schedules, computerized grade scores, up-to-date and secure information on the admission of prospective students and decisions on financial aid, access to on-line teaching evaluations--in other words, ways we can connect students to the information they are most anxious to have.

This kind of self-reinvention is a form of connectedness that is essential to higher education, and oddly enough, at AUB, it is not just a recent concern. In its early days, the Syrian Protestant College suddenly found itself in the vortex of self-assessment just sixteen years after it was founded. At the commencement exercises of 1882, Dr. Edwin Lewis, professor of chemistry and geology, delivered a lecture in which he appeared to endorse the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin. In what became known as the Lewis Affair, a number of disgruntled faculty members held a series of contentious meetings to debate whether the teaching of Darwinian evolution undermined the College's theological mission. In the aftermath, as we know, Dr. Lewis and four of his colleagues resigned from the institution, and for a time the future of the medical school was in doubt. A Declaration of Principles, pledging adherence to religious tenets, was enforced on current and future faculty hires, to forestall further conflicts between curriculum and mission. As a side effect of this affair, of the four new medical faculty

hired as replacements, none could speak Arabic, a situation that hastened the decision to make English the language of instruction. I think we can all agree the Lewis Affair is not the kind of self-assessment we would like to undertake again anytime soon.

Connecting to disciplines and across disciplines is a matter of greater complexity. A year ago last April, Dr. Mark Taylor, chairman of religious studies at Columbia University, published a widely noted commentary in *The New York Times* entitled "End the University as We Know It." In this editorial, Dr. Taylor argues for the abolition of traditional academic departments and instead proposes that learning and research be organized around "zones of inquiry," named for broadly defined fields of concern: "Body," "Networks," "Time," "Money." These "zones" could bring philosophy into contact with mathematics, engineering with sociology, comparative literature with finance.

Provocative in its intention, Taylor's essay does point out that universities tend to be traditionally turf-bound, according to disciplinary boundaries fixed decades or even centuries ago. They are often ill-suited to respond to the flexibility of knowledge creation in the modern world. As Taylor notes of traditional departments, "beliefs shape practices as much as practices shape beliefs."

While AUB is not quite at the point of disbanding our faculties wholesale, a number of our established research centers already bring together faculty and students from different disciplines to examine issues that span disparate fields of inquiry, such as the Center for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies, the Center for Advanced Mathematical Studies, the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, and the Nature Conservation Center for Sustainable Futures. And more will come. Why is the trend important for this university?

In a recent issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, a number of academics were asked to identify what the next big issues of the 21st century would be. For lack of time, I will only touch on three of them.

Stephon Alexander, associate professor of physics at Haverford College, observes that “the fundamental questions of science overlap with questions in the arts and humanities, enabling collaborations between like-minded individuals in their respective fields.” He then outlines the congruence of physics and music in the development of new musical forms, and notes the relevance of “mathematics common to string theory to musical cognition and tone/chord recognition.”

Jonathan Haidt, professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, points to the recent discovery that the human genome is more dynamic and more variable than initially assumed. We are faced with the phenomenon of “fast evolution” and,

according to Dr. Haidt, we will be “hearing less about the Pleistocene and more about the Holocene—the 12,000 years since the beginning of agriculture” —which used to be just an eyeblink in the evolutionary timescale. But the Holocene is now seen as a period when significant adaptations were quickly developed by humans, including the tolerance for digesting milk as adults, and the ability to breathe at high altitudes—adaptations resulting from exposure to new climates, diseases, diets, and social structures. In other words, particular human social behaviors and choices have themselves impacted human DNA, almost within the historic time frame.

Elaine Howard Ecklund, director of program on religion and public life at Rice University, asserts that: “to protect the environment, we need to understand both the science of climate change and things like the religious motivation to care for the environment. Cancer treatment has as much to do with access to medical care as it does with the etiology of cells gone awry.”

What these writers all share in common with us is a recognition that the looming challenges of academic inquiry are more easily addressed by cooperative efforts among many fields of knowledge. For the future, multi-disciplinary engagement is where the excitement lies.

And now, this is where I wish to come back to the hot summer of Lebanon. Recently, we in Beirut have noticed unpredictable spells of heat and cold, the late ski season this winter and the lack of snow cover on Sannine. But the casual comment has become causal. We no longer regard observations about the weather as purely innocent: we suspect they may point to portents of worldwide climate change. The effects of human intervention on the natural world have not only become intertwined on a global basis, in certain respects they may be irreversible.

The rise of worldwide temperatures has been spurred by the expansion of an industrial infrastructure that originated in the 19th century. Based on non-renewable fossil fuels, that infrastructure still supports the world's essential economic engine. The geography of Earth has been altered in ways that can be seen from space, including the break-up of the ice shelves of Antarctica and the disappearance of glaciers and ice caps. It is a self-perpetuating phenomenon as well: as the diminishment of the icecaps decrease the reflectivity of earth's surface, governments continue to rely on traditional and cheap fuels to stoke economic progress, which only exacerbates an apparently unbreakable cycle.

Weather-induced tragedies—such as the recent floods in Pakistan, and Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans—inflict human displacement, famine and loss of life. Changing rain patterns are especially ominous signs for arid countries in Middle East, and the

scarcity of water raises the issue of equitable use of natural resources over time. It is not enough to interfere at any one point in this circular chain: one must understand the social and cultural impacts that any one intervention can have.

It is a truism that we live in a world becoming ever more globalized, where text and video communications can be instantly transmitted, where local events can have international impact, where economic tremors are no longer isolated to a single country, and where goods and cultural influences alike are imported across hemispheres. The world has become intricately connected in ways that touch our societies, our beliefs, and our patterns of behavior. Aside from the challenge of developing technological sustainability, how can AUB approach the equally pressing urgency of cultural convivencia?

Dr. Parker Palmer, a sociologist and Quaker, and founder of the Center for Courage and Renewal, has espoused the importance in universities of developing the habit of listening rather than speaking, of keeping an open mind in order to feel at home in a diverse world, qualities that arise through a strong grounding in general education. He asserts that “if our students are to continue to develop this habit we must restore our commitment to the liberal arts. We must teach them to seek out opposing viewpoints; to appreciate ambiguity; to explore contradictions without fear; to appreciate the truth of paradox....”

Explorations of paradox can take surprising turns. Earlier this spring, Kathy and I visited the Beirut Arts Center and discovered a modest exhibit, entitled “Sexy Semite,” by the Palestinian performance artist, Emily Yacir. As her main objective, she wished to highlight the contradictions of the differential “right of return” —of Palestinians on the one hand and of Israelis on the other. Under current law, as we know, it is possible for Jews who live anywhere in the world to immigrate to Israel, regardless of who they are, and to claim a home there, while even Palestinian families who left their villages only in 1948 and whose homes may still stand are denied that right of return. At the same time Yacir wished to challenge the meaning of the word “Semitic,” which technically denotes the family of ancient and modern languages that fall under that category, as well as the populations that speak Semitic languages. But more commonly in its negative form, anti-semitism refers to prejudicial actions undertaken only against Jews and against the policies of Israeli statehood.

To expose these contradictions in a gentle and humorous way, Yacir convinced a group of her friends in New York to place bogus personal ads in local newspapers, to be published on Valentine’s Day, the international day of love. Each advertisement described the sender as an attractive and nubile young person of Palestinian descent, looking for a desirable Jewish mate to marry, so that, as a spouse, he or she would be

able to return to their homeland. In every ad, the word “Semite” had to be used as part of the description, intimating the common ethnic and linguistic bond between these peoples.

In the exhibit, we never learn whether any of her friends received offers of marriage; but Yacir did receive one unexpected response. After repeating her project for three consecutive Valentine’s Days, several New York newspapers began to notice the timing and the odd wording of the ads. At least one editor described the event as a probable terrorist plot with coded meaning, so Yacir decided to end her artistic experiment. What began as a challenge to the far-reaching questions of “what is Semitism?” and “what constitutes the right of return?”-- or “can one really go home again?” --ended up being painted as a national security threat. Such are the perils of the modern artist—and the perils of asking people to examine their cultural assumptions.

Nonetheless, asking such questions in the public domain is at the heart of what a great university should do.

In closing, I’d like to note that connectedness has its downside as well. In so many ways, we are infinitely connected, to the extent that we cannot sort out or fully digest the information that floods in. We are inundated by e-mail; we tweet and twitter, we

cross the street talking into mobile phones, oblivious to the traffic around us. Our internet preferences have been turned against us into marketing tools. We all know that the world is inhabited by multiple civilizations characterized by differing religions, cultural practices, political systems, and levels of literacy—and all seem to be knocking at our door.

So as another academic year opens, one goal we may attempt is to recognize and accept the necessary chaos of unfettered connectedness, to distinguish what is relevant and important, and to locate a center of grounding where connections truly matter. If this institution can set the example for our students and try to connect in ways that matter most, we will have carried on a great and historic tradition, for them as well as for ourselves.

I wish you all a productive year, with all the paradoxes and contradictions it may bring you.