

# Opening Day Remarks, October 3, 2011

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President Peter Dorman

## **AUB and the Arab Revolts of 2011**

On the past several occasions of Opening Day on which I have had the chance to address this audience, we have had the pleasure, together, of looking forward to the usual reassuring rhythms of a new academic year and of considering the opportunities we have—students faculty, and staff—in new beginnings, whether of course work, friendships, or avenues of research.

In this year of 2011, however, our attention is not only centered on our university community and on the concerns of the relatively sheltered world of academia. Since Opening Day of 2010 the world has dramatically changed around us, not by reason of any single shattering incident, but because of a cascading series of events, beginning with a single act of individual protest: the self-immolation of a Tunisian vegetable seller on December 17<sup>th</sup> last year. Mohammed Bouazizi lingered in a coma for more than two weeks before his death on January 4<sup>th</sup> of this year, and since that date millions of ordinary men and women in the Arab world have recognized in his desperate act a deep desire to imagine a very different life—one for which he was prepared to give up

his own. Since then the governments of Tunisia and Egypt have toppled in a mere matter of weeks, while Libya is nearing the conclusion of a civil war that has yet to coalesce around a ruling body. Revolution remains the order of the day in Yemen after the sudden return of its president, while the ruling families of Morocco, Jordan, and Oman have faced protests of various intensity. Bahrain has been torn by strife of sectarian dimensions and Syria seems headed for growing armed insurrection. Even nations yet untouched by the turbulence itself—and here I certainly include the state of Israel—will be changed by the harsh glare of accountability the Arab revolts are rightly demanding.

It is too soon to measure or even fully imagine the implications of this sea-change; for each individual country the outcome is unpredictable. There are only two certainties: First, there will be no going back to the old autocratic regimes that once provided a measure of stability on the global stage; for they also demanded too much in the suppression of individual freedoms. Second, there will be no quick conversion to the open democratic societies Arab populations are yearning for: that transformation will demand time and enormous patience, and doubtless any number of false starts.

But let us acknowledge that the Arab world has crossed an historical threshold, certainly the most significant moment since the Palestinian *nakba* of 1948—and perhaps even the breakup of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, when its vast domains

were carved up and dispensed at will by the victorious Allied nations. Whatever systems of government appear in the aftermath of the Arab revolts, they will not be imposed by outside powers. On the contrary, solutions will have to be crafted by the inhabitants of each country, according to their own aspirations. And it remains to be seen whether democratic systems identical to those in the western world will serve as viable models in the Middle East.

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So as we begin a new academic year, one question worth pondering is the place of an AUB education in the midst of regional revolt. If we claim to be preparing a new generation of young minds to take their place in the world, what kind of graduates are we producing to face a world of heightened uncertainty and a region full of new democratic longings?

Education is viewed by students and their parents as the best chance to prepare for a lifetime of rewarding work in some area: in Lebanon as in the United States, the overwhelming choice is a major in economics or business, followed by sciences leading to a medical or engineering degree.

There is certainly a reason for emphasizing business, science, and technology, and not only by students. The hard sciences represent fields of research where enormous

progress has been made on multiple fronts. They are based on the premises of rigorous proof and demonstrability, while a strong system of peer review encourages rapid publication and wide dissemination of knowledge. Our understanding has greatly expanded in scientific realms, and human life is materially improved on the basis of that expanding base of knowledge. These fields promise productive careers to those who train in these disciplines, and they offer the chance of development and prosperity to countries that are rising in the global arena.

Scientific proofs, however, are not intrinsically designed to answer the most urgent questions inherent to the current unrest in the Middle East and North Africa. The Arab revolts of 2011 have been spawned by symptoms common throughout the region: high unemployment, rampant corruption and favoritism in government and business, a lack of freedom of expression, a lack of participation in the political arena, inflation in the price of food, poor living conditions, and official disregard of—even contempt for—the ordinary citizen.

There are no easy solutions for problems such as these. If democracy is viewed as a possible answer, let us first admit its limitations. Democracy is usually referred to as a *system* of government; but this terminology conceals the inherent tension and dysfunction that lies beneath its surface. Rather, democracy is a *process* of government, not a fixed system, and it derives its strength from its ever-changing ability to refine

itself, over time, according to the needs and desires of a citizenship that embraces a common identity.

Democracies have moments of triumph as well as moments of failure. In the United States today we are witnessing a failure of the world's greatest democratic state, where political views have become so polarized that lawmakers place ideology and public posturing ahead of any attempt to address the worst economic recession in 80 years—to say nothing of an incoherent foreign policy, a badly skewed distribution of wealth, a crumbling infrastructure, and endemic problems in education and public health.

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Within the Middle East context, what role can AUB play at this historical moment, which is chaotic in the extreme and unpredictable in its outcome?

There is no easy answer to this question that would not sound arrogant. But I do believe that universities have the opportunity to provide a sounding board for the questions of *diversity* and *identity*: in other words, for us to reflect on the richness of mankind's global cultures on the one hand, and the essential commonality of the human race on the other.

Let us first consider cultural diversity, which is one of the goals to which AUB aspires.

As Louis Menand, professor of English at Harvard University, has written, "everything

human beings do is mediated by culture—by language, by representations, by systems of values and beliefs.” Culture is not demonstrated through scientific proof, but through a host of intangible indicators, which can divide as much as they unite: language, geography, historical legacy, visual images, literature, tribal or family connections, religious belief, folklore, gesture, and physical space. These indicators bear upon the reasons why human beings are who they are, in the biological, anthropological, and spiritual sense.

Nor is culture a static entity: tangible proofs cannot be offered in the shifting realm of the humanities that will endure the test of time. Language, representations, and systems of values are constantly in flux, and we, who are living in the year 2011, study cultural phenomena through a lens very different from that of our ancestors of a century ago—or even prior to September 11, 2001, only ten years ago. Cultural mores and perceptions change from year to year, and from day to day.

How then, do we come up with workable solutions to conditions that are ever-changing around us? The solutions are elusive, but developing an open mind and an open imagination is essential, including a respect for other individuals, an understanding of other cultures, mastery of multiple languages, a receptivity to constructive criticism, the willingness to assess and critique one’s self, and the ability to weigh the perennial conflict between ideology and pragmatism.

Martha Nussbaum, professor of law and ethics at the University of Chicago, has asserted that “we need the imaginative ability to put ourselves in the positions of people different from ourselves, whether by class or religion or gender. Democratic politics involves making decisions that affect other people and groups. We can do this well only if we try to imagine what their lives are like and how changes of various sorts affect them. The imagination is an innate gift, but it needs refinement and cultivation, and this is what the humanities provide.”

This power of imagination was recognized by a girlhood friend of the wife of AUB’s founder, Abby Bliss. Before she married Daniel Bliss and traveled to Beirut in 1857, Abby lived in Amherst, Massachusetts, next door to Emily Dickinson, and remained in correspondence with her during her years in Syria. As an adult, Dickinson became a recluse, and perhaps because of that she relied on books to transport her to the wider world outside of her small home town. One of her poems addresses the richness of literature in broadening the horizons of the individual.

There is no Frigate like a Book  
To take us Lands away  
Nor any Coursers like a Page  
Of prancing Poetry—  
This Traverse may the poorest take  
Without offense of Toll—  
How frugal is the Chariot  
That bears the Human Soul.

In her perception that the human imagination can be transported by words and ideas—the “frugal Chariot” of her poem—Dickinson is remarkably forward looking. As we know now, the future, with all of its uncertainties and complexities, will entail a smaller global stage defined by words and ideas. Countries and continents are becoming more intertwined through interdependent economies and the availability of internet communication. Education that does not prepare its students to face people and experiences outside the narrow confines of a single country is a poor education indeed. Modern societies need a full understanding of the complex history of the world and the region around us. Even now, they are too full of simple and damaging stereotypes; these need to be broken down through understanding and critical assessment.

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On the other hand, diversity alone does not address the overriding urgency of the Arab revolts of 2011.

Balanced against the understanding that we are all different in particular ways is the fact that human beings are fundamentally the same, whether separated by vast expanses of space or vast gulfs of time. Dickinson wrote of imagining faraway lands in her own day; let me now read part of a letter written by a farmer traveling away from home on business, sending instructions to his eldest son on how to manage his farm and his household. Written in cursive hieratic script, the letter was sent by a man called



Hekanakht almost 4,000 years ago in southern Egypt. Across that expanse of time we can easily recognize the fussiness of a micro-manager, the belligerence of a proud patriarch, family tensions in the household, problems with the help, and even the poetic exaggeration regarding cannibalism:

“Look, you are the one who ate to his satisfaction when you were hungry, up to the whites of your eyes. See, the whole land is dead and you have not hungered.... So if any of you get angry about this (rationing), look, the whole household is like my children, and everything is mine to allocate. Half of life is better than death in full. See, they’ve started to eat people here (where I am)....

“And get that housemaid Senen put out of my house.... Look, if she spends a single day in my house, take action! You are the one who lets her treat my wife poorly.”

We all know people like Hekanakht. His letter informs us that human nature has not changed very much in four millennia.

And if it has not changed in four thousand years, it is not so very different across borders, or within the same country—in our own time, or in Emily Dickinson’s time.

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My final point, then, is that AUB, and other universities like it, must be prepared to educate what has been called the “complete citizen,” not just the person who is merely capable of pursuing a personal career and who can contribute to the advancement of science and the economy of their community. The complete citizen is someone who has been broadly exposed to many disciplines and different cultures, who is keenly aware of his or her own civic responsibility and the potential of how an individual’s action can influence the modern state—or overthrow a government. Complete citizens must be creative thinkers, critical listeners, and responsible actors. After all, those who have received the finest education are also the ones who bear the greatest responsibility for the shaping of the future. Let us hope that this future will include democratic processes of government in the Arab world. One cannot place faith in future leaders who have not reflected on the universal nature of the human condition, and on the question of which systems of moral behavior are most appropriate for their own cultural ethic.

Let me once again cite Martha Nussbaum: “knowledge is not a guarantee of good political behavior, but ignorance is a virtual guarantee of bad behavior.” In the civil arena, to impart knowledge in the hope of good behavior is our mission.

Institutions of higher education in the Arab world have the opportunity, if not the responsibility, to enshrine the values embedded in traditions that are unique to this region, which emphasize such ideals as the centrality of family ties, local and regional

histories, the scientific legacy of the Middle East, a notably rich literary and philosophical tradition, the pacifist and universalist kernel of the Islamic and Judeo-Christian faiths—the *ahl al-kitab*—and the historic tolerance of ethnic strains of all kinds. These are values of which the West still remains woefully ignorant, or is aware of only through prejudicial eyes.

As we begin the next academic year, let us dedicate ourselves to molding the complete citizens of future years, to cope with challenges that, today, we can only guess at.

I wish you all, once again, a productive and exciting year ahead.