

Opening Day Remarks, September 24, 2012

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### **Personal Journeys in Higher Education**

Good morning, and it is my great pleasure, once again, to welcome you to the annual ceremony that celebrates the opening of a new academic year.

We have often heard AUB described as an oasis of calm in a bustling urban environment: this is true in so many ways, and I think each of us realizes the sudden feeling of peace, greenery, and quiet when one enters the campus through one of its gates from Rue Bliss or the Corniche. Part of this is a real physical feeling, one of refreshment and cooling during the hot summer months, and part is a more subtle sense that AUB is a place of serious learning and of intellectual striving. In the face of recent conflicts that are still referred to as the Arab Spring, the quiet and the separateness of the AUB campus is even more marked, as our dorms and classrooms are filled again, and as we greet an academic year with the anticipation of new beginnings.

It is the contrast between the real world and our own campus that reminds us that universities are places of privilege—by this I do not mean places that are accessible only to people of privileged backgrounds. Rather, universities are places where minds are shaped through transformative intellectual experiences, in a way that rarely happens beyond the close embrace of an academic community. AUB in particular is, I believe, a place where each of us—whether students, faculty, or staff—may undertake personal journeys of exploration that have a long-lasting effect on us individually, on our friends and peers, and on our neighborhoods.

What we gain from journeying through this great university depends on the various roles we play, and on our expectations for what an academic community offers.

We know that students come to AUB to obtain the essential tools they need for a profession, and—as in most of our peer institutions—the most popular majors remain engineering, business, technology, and pre-medical training. But our university is, and always has been, something more extraordinary than a professional training school.

We know this, for example, from the remarkable accomplishments of our alumni. The most recent issue of *MainGate* magazine highlights the careers of both recent and long-time graduates, each of them reflecting on individual personal journeys taken through the university years and the most important lessons they acquired at AUB. These comments are all worth reading; a few of my favorites are: “the most important thing I learned at AUB is how much I have in common with people from all over the world.” Or: “there is not a single question in life that cannot be debated, then accepted or discarded by the human mind.”

We also know AUB is extraordinary from the growing body of research that is published by our faculty, an achievement that has helped propel AUB upward by 50 places this year in the international QS World Rankings, to number 250 in the world. We know our university is extraordinary by the international scholars that convene on our campus for conferences and workshops, and the way in which the values that AUB exemplifies are regarded as models for Lebanon.

However, we would be doing ourselves and the region a disservice if we were unable to ensure that the gates of our campus were not open to as wide an audience as possible. As you know, we have made concerted efforts in recent years to greatly enlarge our pool of unrestricted financial aid, so that no needy student need be turned away because of tuition fees, and so they can be offered the same journeys in life as others more fortunate.

The question of what a university education costs is directly related to what students and parents perceive a university education is worth. Recent commentaries on the issue, which can be found in the western press and in academic journals, generally measure the cost benefit of college tuition in relation to the salaries that alumni will earn after graduation: How long will it take for today's graduates to recoup their financial outlay, including living costs incurred at college for three or four years? And in light of continuing high unemployment in so many countries, what guarantee is there that graduates will even find a job that matches their credentials and skills?

Some universities in the United States are now charging \$50,000 or more for annual tuition alone, and the collective debt burden of American graduates last year topped a staggering \$1 trillion. Are the immediate costs and the long-term debt burdens worth a university education? Individual salaries vary greatly according to the field of specialization, and some newly minted alumni can be earning six-figure salaries from day one. Unfortunately, this does not usually include poets, philosophers, artists, and teachers.

However, every civilization needs poets, philosophers, artists, and teachers: some ages are even defined by them. For example, when one thinks of the Italian Renaissance, the first image that springs to mind is perhaps the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel or the works of Da Vinci and Raphael—not the Florentine banking system, as innovative as that was.

How can we reasonably assess the worth of a university education?—by its immediate outcome at graduation? or by some other standard? One vital purpose of a university education is to offer young minds the tools with which to explore new perspectives, to examine their own assumptions critically, to make a wide circle of new friends, to challenge their peers. In this sense, the journey taken by every entering student will be very different from the next.

One measure of the worth of a university education is diversity of the campus community, which enriches the journey. For its size, Lebanon is surely one of the most diverse countries on earth. Within its boundaries there is a unique mix of confessions, beliefs, languages, geography, economic backgrounds, and ethnic origin—a diversity to be envied by any of our sister institutions in the region or in the western world. AUB is fortunate to be guaranteed a flow of students and a stable population of faculty members who represent a rich and challenging mix of backgrounds, talents, and opinions—all within our own campus walls.

Why is this so important? Because journeys by definition should take us out of our comfort zones and into different worlds of experience. Coincidentally, the interest in globalized education and international experiences has never been stronger. American universities have long embraced student exchange programs, with a growing preference for those that transport students to non-western campuses, including China, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. These programs expose students to radically different cultures and ways of thinking. At some institutions, such as Arcadia University in Pennsylvania, fully 60% of entering students take part of their first year overseas.

My own daughter spent a spring term in Cairo, where she made a host of new friends, received a solid grounding in Arabic, and learned to love *kushiri*. She chose to spend another eight months in Beirut after her graduation, and it was her knowledge of Arabic that helped her secure her very first job in social welfare in New York, assisting families newly arrived from Middle Eastern countries.

One inveterate traveler of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Mark Twain, is the author of one of the most famous journeys ever undertaken in fiction, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Not only is this story a rite of passage for the young hero, it is an exploration of the racist culture of America, a tale of high humor, and an exploration of American country dialects. In his introduction, Twain famously remarked that

“persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot.” Journeys we undertake in life cannot be planned in advance with the expectation that we will find a narrative, a moral, or a plot; but they are certainly worth it, for the surprise and unpredictability of the trip itself. Like Huckleberry Finn, we are different at the end.

Mark Twain also noted, in another context, that “broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one’s lifetime.” In other words, if you can take a trip overseas, do it.

As it happens, the Lebanese secondary school system does not encourage study abroad. Most of our incoming students enter AUB as sophomores, having qualified for advanced placement by passing the Baccalaureate exams. In just three years at AUB, they must still manage to pass all course requirements for a full BA or BS program, which requires an overloaded schedule of 15 credit hours per semester. Under these conditions, it can be almost impossible to arrange a study abroad program and still achieve all the required course targets within that brief time. A heavy load of classes also reduces the chances of devoting extracurricular time to club activities, music groups, athletics, or community involvement. Nonetheless, I would urge all our undergraduates to explore every possible avenue for study abroad, through our Office of International Programs, and urge our faculty mentors to advocate the importance of these life-changing cultural journeys.

Campus life and international exchange, however, are only the externals of diversity. They primarily offer opportunity—but the true personal journey is an internal process that can only happen with another enabler, the tools of erudition, that is, with reading, writing, and reflection—a second measure of what a university education is worth.

Exposure to a broad range of reading exposes us to the wellsprings of thought and provides educated men and women access to a common pool of knowledge on which we base a shared understanding.

Erudition allows us to exercise deep analytic thinking and gives us the ability to make relevant and novel connections across cultures and fields of knowledge. It can also give us a deeper insight into the ways in which language and thought are intertwined.

On the other hand, the modern world brings university educators new challenges to the reliance on old reading lists that used to be the basis of the great books sequence and the civilization courses. Certainly, tweets and blogs are changing the way in which we communicate with each other, both through established broadcast media and through more informal means. Some of this unfiltered digital information is fresh and provocative; some of it is brilliant; some of it is bogus; some of it is morally repugnant. Personal journeys in higher education build within us the tools to assess this kind of information independently, to judge it, and—as our alumnus has said—to accept it or discard it.

Whether in analog or digital format, broad reading helps to connect us with great thinkers who are no longer living, and with personal journeys of the present and the distant past.

During last spring's commencement we heard from the keynote speaker at the undergraduate ceremony, Professor Wadad Kadi, who quoted a poem written by the 9<sup>th</sup>-century writer el-Jahiz, which is in essence a hymn of praise to the book:

A book, if you consider, is something that prolongs your pleasure, sharpens your mind, loosens your tongue, lends agility to your fingers and emphasis to your words, gladdens your mind, and fills your heart. . . . Moreover, have you ever seen a garden that can go into a man's sleeve, an orchard you can take on your lap, a speaker who can speak of the dead and yet be the

interpreter of the living? Where else will you find a companion who sleeps only when you are asleep, and speaks only when you wish him to?

Professor Kadi was especially taken by the delightful notion of a “garden that can go into a man’s sleeve, an orchard you can take on your lap”; the image vividly brings to mind the proliferation of downloadable Kindles and e-books that can literally be tucked into our pockets.

If we go farther back in time, we know that even ancient civilizations had not only an awareness, but a deep appreciation of the richness of their own written traditions. In pharaonic Egypt, for example, literary works from earlier ages were treasured and copied out again and again over centuries, with the names of their authors both preserved and revered. In the tomb of one individual buried in ancient Thebes 3,800 years ago, three beautifully preserved scrolls were discovered. This wealthy Theban official had chosen to have three great classics of Middle Egyptian literature buried with him when he died, essentially taking a private reading library with him into the afterlife. One of these, the *Tale of the Eloquent Peasant*, extols the ability of even common people to frame persuasive and poetic arguments, a fable we can understand even today. Another, the *Tale of Sinuhe*, recounts the adventures of an Egyptian official on his own desperate journey of escape and repentance into the arid uplands of Syria, where he must deal with foreign customs and a strange language. (This may have been one of the first semester-abroad programs.) The third—perhaps the most remarkable—is the *Dialogue of a Man with his Soul*, which recounts a man’s inner struggle with suicidal thoughts, debating with his own shadowy self the morbid fascination with death and the affirming values of life. Each of these three compositions illustrates the ageless importance of intense reflection, the eloquence of human speech, and the internal journeys that all of us take.

And if we still have any doubts about the worth of reading and the universal value of broad knowledge, we have only to bring ourselves up to the modern era and recall the words of Groucho Marx: “Outside of a dog, a book is man’s best friend. Inside of a dog, it’s too dark to read.”

Finally, let me return for a moment to the question: “what is a university education worth?” While I am tempted to answer with the MasterCard message that it is “priceless,” the presumption underlying this question is that there is a cost benefit that can be measured and assessed. For our purposes it is the wrong question.

Broad knowledge and creative thinking elicit the ability to connect trains of thought and, at universities like AUB, enables the intellectual journeys that lie at the heart of academic life. These are shared by students and faculty members alike. Universities are places where intellectual debates take place that have no obvious economic value. Questions worth asking, and problems worth solving, do not always have a financial payback attached to them.

As a simplistic example, you may have noticed last week that, after several decades of work, scholars from the University of Chicago have announced the completion of the Demotic Dictionary. I am sure the first question in the back of your mind is “what is demotic?”; and the second may be “so what?” (These are both excellent questions.) Demotic is the common script employed in Egypt for business accounts and personal correspondence during the Ptolemaic and Roman domination of the Nile Valley—and one of the three scripts used on the Rosetta Stone. Demotic forms a direct bridge between the everyday speech used by Tutankhamun and Ramesses II and the language of today’s Coptic church. In the Semitic tradition, demotic employs verbs, nouns, and pronouns that have identical roots in modern Arabic.

Although the Demotic Dictionary has no monetary value, and cost hundreds of thousands of dollars and years of man-hours to produce, it attests eloquently to the enduring connections among the cultures of

the eastern Mediterranean in late antiquity, the historic diversity of the Middle East, and the fact that the present is indelibly linked to the past.

Academic journeys such as the Demotic Dictionary—like the search for the Higgs boson—are often begun without a clear map or any guarantee of the answer at the end of the road: pure curiosity is an essential impulse. AUB’s newly drafted academic strategic plan sets out the importance of exploring curiosity among faculties; we as an academic community need only stretch our hands across faculty boundaries. These journeys, which begin in the mind, are taken among scientists and scholars thirsty for knowledge in its own right, and need no other justification to the outside world.

In a recent column in the New York Times, Stanley Fish, professor of the humanities and law at Florida International University, asserted that “the real benefit [of academic research] is experienced... by the scholars in neighboring or even distant fields who look over and see a model or vocabulary that will help them negotiate an impasse in their work. The real benefit, in short, is internal to the enterprise. ...”

In closing, let me note that AUB’s student population is presently around 8,000 students. The university is providing not “an education” for them, but rather 8,000 educations; the substance of what is being delivered is both ephemeral and hard to measure in quantitative terms. In addition, AUB’s faculty members number over 700, all of them undertaking their own intellectual journeys, as mentors to students and colleagues to a global community of scholars. The questions they are asking may not have immediate answers—but the exploration itself is worth the adventure.

Each of us has already begun his or her own journey in this academic year. In encountering diversity of opinion, richness of reading, and creativity of thought, I wish you productive and unexpected travels, and a safe harbor at the end.