

Opening Day Remarks, September 9, 2013

AUB President Peter Dorman

The Broad Continuum of Learning

Good morning. It is my great pleasure once again to welcome you to another gathering of our university community on Opening Day at AUB.

I want to address a few words on the topic that is foremost in our minds today: for we are convening at a time of national and regional uncertainty. I cannot speak of what tomorrow or the days or weeks ahead may bring—that would take a prophet, not a university president. These days I am short on prophecy.

However, we can learn from our history. For over 147 years, through times of peace and conflict, this university, in the heart of Beirut, has been welcoming new students and faculty to the optimism stimulated by a new academic year. Four years ago, in comments following his receipt of an honorary degree at AUB, Elias Zerhouni noted that, while governments may rise and fall, universities persist and thrive for long centuries, ensuring the cultural and intellectual continuity on which nations are firmly grounded. It is education, above all, that provides the hope and promise for a more just and peaceful world. Regardless of events, which we continue to monitor and evaluate with the utmost attention, AUB will persevere with our commitments to our

students, to their parents, and to our employees and their families, in ensuring that the legacy of this institution remains a lasting one, for Lebanon, for peoples of the Arab region, and for all those thirsty for a better life. I will return to these thoughts at the end of this speech. In the meantime, it is not the political currents of the moment that are the topic of this Opening Day address, but above all the aims of education.

I also want to note that this fall we are observing an academic year that does not only begin the normal routine of classes, but which inaugurates a new calendar altogether. Two years ago a University-wide task force recommended that AUB synchronize its calendar with those of most universities in the US and in Europe, a change that would enable us to partake of broader international exchanges for both students and visiting faculty. Moreover, with the fall semester now ending before the winter holiday in December, we will enjoy a short January term before the beginning of spring. This term offers the chance for a number of options: reserved research time for faculty, dedicated time for the scheduling of workshops and seminars, intensive courses on an optional basis, work on MA theses for students, internships, or even foreign travel and vacation. Our faculties have the freedom to devise for themselves the best use of this interim period. Graduation next spring will fall on May 30 and 31, allowing AUB students to begin their summer jobs and commitments earlier than ever.

Incidentally, in 2013 this forward change in calendar also required many of us to truncate our summer by two weeks this year: I thank you for your prompt return for the beginning of classes, and promise that in 2014 we will all enjoy the usual long months of summer break!

Once again this fall, AUB has been fortunate to attract the best and brightest minds of this country and the region. And as with most young people, they hope to find in their college education the means to develop professional skills that will carry them through long and productive careers. Traditionally we tag those professions by names corresponding to the schools or departments that make up AUB itself: businessman or engineer; economist or computer scientist; epidemiologist, sociologist, nutritionist, nurse, philosopher. The diplomas that AUB issues name these fields prominently along with the degree awarded. The system works well in providing professional credentials; but actually it reveals little of a person's overall education and outlook.

To be sure, AUB's educational focus is on graduating alumni who have marketable professional skills. But to what extent have our graduates become broadly educated men and women? In a complex, wired, and fast-paced world, the question in front of many educators these days is not how to supply a limited range of professional tools, but how to train young people for lifelong success.

And how our faculties teach and conduct research reflects distinctive intellectual outlooks. We use very different methods of inquiry to explore and explain the world around us.

For example, the natural and social sciences are grounded in a methodology that is evidence-based and evidence-driven. At its most rigorous, scientific method is grounded in proofs that advance human knowledge in defined and progressive stages. With every discovery, the foundations of science and horizons of exploration are expanded. Proofs begin with a stated hypothesis or proposition, which then leads to an experiment that may or may not show the validity of the hypothesis. Results must be repeatable and demonstrated multiple times to establish proof. Thus the intent of scientific inquiry is aimed at the discovery of irrefutable facts, formulas, and processes that can be duplicated and used universally.

The spring of 2013 has been memorable in terms of newly demonstrated scientific proofs. In March, our colleagues in physics were thrilled by the announcement of the tentative proof of the existence of the Higgs boson, an elementary particle whose existence was hypothesized almost fifty years ago. The discovery lends growing credence to the existence of the Higgs Field, which itself forms the major underpinning of the Standard Model of particle physics.

In the field of computational mathematics, Yitang Zhang, a little-known instructor at the University of New Hampshire in Durham, gave a paper in May of this year, proving that there exist an infinite series of prime numbers that regularly occur in pairs (that is, prime numbers separated from each other by 2). His argument answers the “twin prime conjecture” that has never been demonstrated before. The conjecture itself may have been first put forward by Euclid of Alexandria, who lived in Egypt around 300 BC, showing perhaps that good scientific results are worth waiting for.

On the other hand, among the arts and humanities, methodologies for knowledge creation are fundamentally, almost perversely, the opposite. They are less focused on posing hypotheses that lead to the discovery of proofs (or disproofs). Rather, they are aimed more commonly toward encouraging dialogue on questions that are open to multiple arguments, and may never lend themselves to full resolution: what is the nature of reality? Is love stronger than evil? Are belief and reason incompatible? The worth of such propositions lies in the rich discourse rather than the end result.

At its most extreme, the intent of humanistic inquiry is aimed at unique utterances or creations whose value is precisely that they are non-repeatable. They are emblematic of the unique expressiveness of an individual’s mind, or of a cultural ethos. Out of countless examples, one can mention Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus*, T.S. Eliot’s *Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*, containing compositions in all 24 major and minor keys, or the

Mesquita in Cordoba, whose agile Islamic architectural forms are by no means diminished by the clumsy Gothic nave inserted in later centuries.

In an article entitled “Poetry Makes You Weird,” Professor Eric Wilson of Wake Forest University elucidates why poems resonate deeply with us, but in fact he could have been speaking of any work of inspiration: “poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar....In shocking us into awareness, poetry urges us to relate to the world in fresh ways.” Thus while science offers proof, poetry offers shock.

The triumphs of the humanities prove nothing in the literal sense. Yet they share with the physical sciences the result of taking the human creative impulse into reaches unknown and unsuspected. In retrospect they establish the basis for what we acknowledge to be landmarks of a universal legacy of thought and accomplishment. Whether it is the poetry of pre-Islamic *ghazals* or the description of the human genome, the creative impulse “urges us to relate to the world in fresh ways.” We see and comprehend the world with new eyes.

There is an essential unity to the striving for human knowledge, a broad continuum of learning that enables us to see with new eyes. Why then should we tolerate academic institutions that remain compartmentalized and bound by turf?

In his commencement address to the graduating class of 2013 at AUB in June of this year, Noam Chomsky referred to the tyranny of arbitrary borders between the nations of the Middle East, which originated at the collapse of the Ottoman empire and were drawn by France and Britain, the colonizing powers of the time. He stated, “the legitimacy of borders – for that matter of states – is at best conditional and temporary. Neither have inherent legitimacy. Almost all borders have been imposed and maintained by violence, and are quite arbitrary.”

In regard to both teaching and research, we know very well that the boundaries that traditionally define academic fields are as mutable and arbitrary as the Sykes-Picot Line. Perhaps those academic boundaries have not been imposed by violence, but they are often defended with vehemence. At the founding of the Syrian Protestant College, a relatively small number of courses were offered in topics such as rhetoric, ethics, logic, philosophy, mathematics, natural philosophy (physical sciences), languages (Latin, English, Arabic, Turkish), and history. The faculty of medicine was organized to train physicians, and the nursing school was added in 1905. It was only after World War II that three other faculties were created: Engineering and Architecture, Agricultural and Food Sciences, and Health Sciences; to be followed by the Olayan School of Business in 2000, all to answer the specialized demands of an increasingly complex world market.

AUB now offers 46 undergraduate majors, 64 masters programs, and 9 PhD degree opportunities, a proliferation that reasonably aims to meet the requirements of a globe that expects ever more specialized skills.

Therein lies the importance of one the Provost's main initiatives, and mine as well: to break down the individual silos of information we traditionally teach and to encourage and enable the cross-fertilization of disciplines across our campus. The Division of University Interdisciplinary Programs, formed only last year, will champion opportunities for faculty members to engage in collaborative projects through a mechanism that recognizes and values such work. This past year two new centers have been created, to enhance the proactive sharing of knowledge and research across multiple fields. One is the Farouk K. Jabre Center for Islamic Science and Philosophy, established to explore the foundations of Islamic learning and its flourishing legacy beginning from the 7th century of our era onward. The second, the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship, will focus its research on the character and development of open societies and democratic systems in the present century. More such centers, serving as springboards for discussion among students and professors, and scholars of east and west, as well as the global north and south, will surely follow.

And now we find ourselves at the beginning of a new year. How is a young person just entering college to choose among the fields of study we provide for her? The school system in Lebanon tends to militate against the

unchained exploration of a person's inherent and perhaps latent skills at the college level. Having passed the Baccalaureate II exams, most of our incoming students enter as sophomores. They are admitted only after having declared a major field, one often encouraged by their families. Nothing could be further than what I encountered at college.

My undergraduate experience was one of constant uncertainty and switching of majors. I began with a vague intention to devote myself to studio art, and pursued that avenue for at least a year before discovering I lacked one major necessity: any natural talent for drawing. Switching to art history, I excelled at memorizing the names and styles of artists and architectural trends, but still found something lacking in personal connection.

During my sophomore year, in a moment of private desperation, one of my roommates talked me into taking an introductory course in anthropology. In learning about the ethnography of native cultures, through authors such as Bronislaw Malinowski, Margaret Mead, Raymond Firth, and Claude Levi-Strauss, I more or less accidentally stumbled on a field that appealed to me in multiple ways. Anthropology led me into related fields: sociology, structural linguistics, semantics, and developmental psychology. So I didn't plan my major, nor was this predetermined from my application: I just fell into it rather late, an experience shared by many of my fellow students.

Nor did my undergraduate experience prepare me very well for graduate school. When I entered a PhD program in Egyptology, not knowing what was in store, I had absolutely no knowledge of ancient Egyptian history or religion. I could not have explained to you the difference between the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms. What saved me was an instant fascination with the ancient languages and their intimate relation to Egyptian art and cultural norms, where a rich, interconnected field of exploration awaited—and still awaits, if there are any budding Egyptologists out there in the audience.

Maybe there is something to be said for accidental education. In a world become ever more complex and uncertain, the question, “Where do you see yourself five years from now?” holds less and less relevance. Young people today are far more likely to pass through multiple careers in their lifetimes. A good number of our engineering graduates now enter careers in business. So how do we best enable students to prepare themselves for varied and challenging lives?

We loudly declare the value of a liberal education, but there is a broad misunderstanding about what that term means. Public perception is that liberal education has little relevance to career preparation and is therefore of poor market value. In a recent survey it was learned that many students believe liberal education is synonymous only with a broad distribution of required introductory classes: one math class, two in English, two electives in

the humanities, one survey of world civilization, and three courses in the physical sciences.

In the last year, the American Association of Colleges and Universities has called for a revamped definition of what a liberal education means, and it does not dwell on course distribution.

Instead, it recommends that universities focus on life skills that can be taught alongside specialized content in any and all disciplines, and which form the basis of intellectual growth. These skills include what we usually associate with the liberal arts: critical and creative thinking, excellence in written and oral communication, quantitative literacy, information literacy; and teamwork and problem solving. None of these should be consigned to any one program of instruction, and certainly not to introductory courses.

Beyond this sphere, there is the realm of personal and social responsibility, which forces us to address the globalized world of the 21st century. Close interaction with other nations will require civic knowledge and engagement with communities, intercultural competence and understanding, ethical reasoning, and skills for lifelong learning. In short, a universal outlook is premised on freedom of expression, a sense of cultural embeddedness, and a deep respect for diversity: less a training for a career, and more of an exercise in imagining the life worth living.

In this sense, liberal education in the 21st century is closer to what Socrates urged on his fellow Athenian citizens in the 5th century BC: the quest for the

virtuous life. In this quest, Socrates himself acknowledged the humble stature of the one who seeks knowledge, whether citizen, student, teacher, or philosopher: “True wisdom comes to each of us when we realize how little we understand about life, ourselves, and the world around us.”

Knowledge to be acquired in class lectures and required courses, neatly organized by reading lists and quizzes and exams, represents only the externals of what liberal education has to offer. The broad continuum of learning, allowing us to “see with fresh eyes,” underlies all of these surface trimmings. So what is the measure of the education our students receive at AUB? Is it the name of the major printed on the diploma, which certifies achievement in a specific field, the first step in career success? I would prefer to believe that the most eloquent measure is proclaimed by other words on the diploma: “The American University of Beirut.”

In writing recently on the purpose of a college education, the president of Amherst College, Biddy Martin, echoes the sentiments of Socrates while also touching on issues of community cohesion. She states that “college is for finding a calling, or many callings, including the calls of friendship and love.... It is about the gains we make and the losses that come with them. In an age of sound bites and indignation, college is for those who are brave enough to put at risk what they think they know in recognition of the responsibility we have to one another and to those still to come.”

This is a summons to civic awareness and engagement, to responsible and responsive citizenship, to openness and clear thinking, to compassion and to ethical standards. It is a call for moderation and a coming together for common purposes, not only in the near term but for the sake of generations that will follow. It is a call that is especially relevant for us in the uncertain and unpredictable times in which we find ourselves living. In many ways it explains why we have come together today, to begin a new year at AUB.

I want to end with a poem written by the Irishman Seamus Heaney, who died just ten days ago, honored in 1995 with the Nobel Prize in Literature. Writing from an Irish perspective, he nonetheless speaks across boundaries of nations and time to pose propositions that are as universally relevant as particle physics. In his poem “A Herbal,” Heaney uses the imagery of ordinary nature that, incidentally, brings to mind the mountainsides of Lebanon. In simple words he invokes fields of heather and broom, flowering honeysuckle, sunsets and oak trees, together with a sense of place and belonging that is also recalled in the late Anthony Shadid’s poignant memoir, *House of Stone*. Here is Heaney:

Between heather and marigold,
Between sphagnum and buttercup,
Between dandelion and broom,
Between forget-me-not and honeysuckle,

As between clear blue and cloud,

Between haystack and sunset sky,
Between oak tree and slated roof,

I had my existence. I was there.
Me in place and the place in me.

Is there a proposition in this passage? Is there a scientific proof? Of course not, and yet there is resonance. What is the validity of such common words strung together in short phrases? How does the poem speak to us in this Assembly Hall?

The indelible connection to homeland and rootedness in the landscape, although voiced by an Irishman, is a feeling that will be recognized by the Lebanese as well. And it goes a long way to explain, I believe, why so many of us are in this room today. Many of you have spent long years in Lebanon, and others have returned more recently. But all are prepared to give something back to the nation and to the education of the next generation of its citizens and scholars: “Me in place and the place in me.” On the visceral level, this phrase echoes the Lebanese notion of *ardh*. In the geopolitical context, Lebanon holds a unique position in the Arab world: it is a nation where liberal thought has long flourished, where science is pursued for its own sake, where a multitude of languages, ethnic traditions, and religious conviction come together—maybe not as one, but as an enriching plurality: the perfect laboratory for experiencing a liberal education.

This academic year is opening at a time of national and regional turmoil, which I have only touched on in my opening comments. We at AUB are

proud of our home in Lebanon and in the Arab world – indeed our milieu has helped to define this university, a touchstone of cultures and civilizations.

Tens of thousands of graduates have passed through our gates and have gone on to change the world. Tens of thousands more will do so.

Yet with the privileged position we enjoy at AUB come responsibilities as well: to foster understanding, to enable mutual respect, to nurture open minds, to commit ourselves to the betterment of our local and global communities. That is why we are here. That is why we remain. I invite you to embrace these values as fundamental hallmarks of the AUB experience. They will serve you well – as scholars and as citizens.

As this year opens, we know the urgency of our task.

May we enjoy peaceful times, and bend our minds to the joys and satisfactions of the broad continuum of learning at AUB.