

Commencement Exercises and Honorary Doctorates Ceremony 2014

AUB graduation remarks by Yusuf Hannun

Thank you president Dorman for this kind introduction.

Distinguished faculty, Graduating students, Families, Friends and colleagues,

It is quite an honor to receive such a recognition. It is a great privilege to be in this company and quite humbling. For me, this completes a major circle in my career development and growth.

I started my journey right next door at the International College. In fact, the very first graduation I remember was when my cousin graduated from AUB and I was around 9 or 10, and I was in awe of AUB, of the graduating students, and of all the learning that must have transpired all those years for all those students in college. It was *my trip* to Disney world. Beirut was in her heyday.

I went to the grade school that my parents chose for me, but when it came time to college, I had some choice (including going to the US to the University of Chicago), and although the civil war was starting to break out, I chose to come to AUB. After all this is where all my friends were going; the friends you acquire in school and college are always there for you; cherish these friendships.

At AUB we could take a dip in the Mediterranean trying to escape cultural studies better known as CS, or sit on the benches overlooking the greenfield, partly pondering whatever happened to Gilgamesh. I still don't know. However, if now I have any regrets about CS, it is that we did not spend more time on it. When else in your life can you spend time to dwell on some of the major contributions to human thought and development (while someone else; mostly likely your parents) are paying for it? Bernard Shaw said that youth is wasted on the young; let us not say that College is wasted on students.

We loved it back then as I am sure you love it now. The hindsight that we did not have then was how unique this campus was and still is. Just look around you and savor it. I have yet to see one that comes even close in beauty.

One chooses to go to College to receive an education.

Education liberates. Of course education liberates financially. It is now well established that students who go to college, over the long run, do financially better. OK. But education more importantly liberates the mind. You start to take possession of your own thoughts. You start to understand the present world around you and the world that preceded you. No wonder this is called liberal education. The ancient Greeks considered liberal education essential for a citizen to participate in civic life. All holy books admonish us and repeatedly to get educated as we seek knowledge.

Therefore rejoice in the privilege of having received an education, and no mistake about it; it is a privilege.

OK, there is education and its value, but more importantly there is *higher education*. I chose to attend medical school here at AUB where I also was introduced to research by some very talented faculty,

including the late Naji Sahyoun. This when I discovered that not all answers are at the end of the textbook; some, actually most answers are not known.

I then chose to continue my training in medical oncology and in biochemistry in the US at Duke University, famous for its outstanding medical center but even more for its basketball team. After a few years of training, I realized that my calling was in research; this opened new worlds for me. You peer into the heart of the cell and see new pathways and new mechanisms; and uncharted territories. Higher education is exciting.

With higher education, one goes beyond learning what one is given to learn, and one starts to contribute to knowledge. Not only are many answers not known, you begin to realize that there are so many questions that have not yet been asked. With higher education you acquire the ability to influence what others know. Now you start to understand not only the world as it is but also the world that is yet to come.

You obviously chose to pursue higher and advanced education in various disciplines. I applaud you for that. You follow a long standing and steep tradition from his part of the world. During the middle ages, Europe was mostly at a standstill as there was little new knowledge being created. In his book “A world lit by fire’, the historian William Manchester described a bleak picture of medieval Europe where people did not sense any difference between one year and the next. Time was at a standstill. Every year looked like the one before it and there was no anticipation of change or advancement. During that time, the Arab and Islamic world was thriving. One thousand years ago, society heavily promoted scholarship and supported scholars. It has been estimated that the money spent by the Abbasid caliphate on just the Translation Movement which started in the House of Wisdom in Baghdad (established by Harun Al Rashid) and that translated Greek text to Arabic, that effort alone was estimated to have cost the equivalent of about twice the current annual research budget of the United Kingdom’s Medical Research Council. That is a hefty investment! But it preserved Greek contributions for humanity, and it also empowered Arab and Moslem scholars to start contributing themselves. The best scholars, of various religions, such as the innovative physician Muhammad Ar-Raazi and Hunayn ibn Ishaq, the great translator and also an innovative physician, had salaries that are estimated to be the equivalent of what professional athletes make today. Our society back then rejoiced in discovery and scholarship and afforded them a huge premium. So society can also make choices as to what it wants to achieve and promote.

As you progress in education and then in your careers and vocations, you too will confront increasing choices, and your paths will diverge from each other. After some years, you can hardly find two people who started out together in school (and even competed against each other) ending up in the same place. We all have our unique track of history to make. Our own dots to follow.

What are these dots? How many of you have listened to Steve Jobs addressing the graduating students at Stanford? [who amongst you does not know Steve Jobs? If you don’t, at least please turn off your iphones!]. Jobs, whose roots are like ours from this region, talked about connecting the dots; that one’s track in life is a series of connecting dots that become obvious when one looks back. He was explaining how dropping out of college led him to take a course in calligraphy that sealed his passion about elegance to add to substance. To him, these dots made sense when he considered them later in life. One other thing we learn from Jobs is that higher education is a life long endeavor. It is catapulted by formal training but it does not always depend on it and it should never cease after graduation. We can take Jobs metaphor of the dots one step further. I believe that you have choices to make and that you

your inner self often directs you to the next dot in your path even when you are not yet fully aware and cognizant of what is propelling you. I contend that your inner self drives you to the next dot, so embrace it.

I chose to get more in depth in biomedical sciences and in cancer research. My inner self was whispering that there was much more to do and learn by delving deeper into how cells work rather than accepting the then current state of affairs in cancer treatment. This led our team to gain many insights that may have not been possible otherwise. That journey has been and continues to be very rewarding. It is full of discovery; it is rife with possibilities to enhance how we understand cancer and deal with it; it constantly exposes one to the flow of young blood eager for mentoring and learning. I just learned a few days ago that two of my trainees (one of whom is in the audience) are in the top 6 of most highly cited arab scientists in the Middle East in the field of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology. This is very gratifying. This path, however, did come at the expense of doing much less clinical work. So as a physician, I extend a 'physician's apology'. My mother is still wondering when I will become a real doctor.

Higher education is not only a higher privilege, but with higher education comes implicit responsibilities. Responsibilities to contribute to the improvement of mankind; no matter how small the contribution initially appears, it will multiply over the years.

With all the good choices that you are going to have and going to make, never cease to strive to learn. Educate and mentor. Serve, and be generous to yourselves, your families, and your fellow human. Gubran Khalil Gubran defined generosity by saying "**Generosity** is not giving me that which I need more than you do, but it is giving me that which you need more than I do."

You are here on this campus to 'have life and have it more **abundantly**' but also give back and give back generously.

You have big choices to make; make them well and I wish you all the luck in the world and a very very bright future.

Thank you.