

Undergraduate Commencement Ceremony
Commencement Address
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Thank you Dr. Fadlo Khuri, thank you trustees, thank you AUB, proud loving parents, friends, guests, beautiful graduating class of 2016.

I am so deeply honored to be here today for your commencement from one the finest universities in our region, at this extremely important moment of your journey.

Apparently I am here today to give you advice... to inspire you in a way! But it is actually you who have been my inspiration for the past few days. You have also been my worst nightmare! I haven't slept for the past week, waking up at night with my heart pounding, scribbling a few words to the light of my phone, preciously trying to hold on to what I think is a brilliant idea only to wake up the next morning and realize that it was actually a very stupid one. What can I possibly say to inspire you? I'm going to be very honest with you... You are a scary generation (I feel old saying this!); you can unlike me with a click or scroll past me with a simple swipe! You are a tough crowd to please, and on top of that, you are AUB students! What could I possibly say that you don't already know?

Yes, this speech was tough to write, my language is film. I am not used to writing speeches. It doesn't mean that what I am about to tell now you is a rare gem, (in fact you'll probably forget it tomorrow) but I thought that the best way to go about it is simply by sharing with you some of the little lessons I have learned on my funny little way from Baabdath to this podium.

Graduation day is often considered as one of the happiest days of your life. If you believe that, it means that tomorrow is going to be a less happy day and Monday... Well we all know what Mondays are like! So maybe this is where I tell you the story of how I found my happiness again. So that when you take off those hats you can find yours.

After film school I started working in advertising directing commercials and music videos. At one point, I was doing really well: I liked what I was doing, working nearly every day, I became mildly successful, earned a fairly good amount of money and was not only accepted but sometimes even applauded by the industry. After a few years though, while i was driving alone to a set one early morning I caught myself with a strange feeling. I had lost my enthusiasm, i had become num and jaded! I had simply become unhappy! I had a dream - I went to film school for a reason! — And something was missing. I needed to go for it. I was lucky enough to afford the choice i was going to make: That day, I left everything and locked myself in a room, and with the help of two friends, started writing the script that later became my first feature film "Caramel".

Though people reminded me every day what I had left behind, I needed no reminder of the doors that were opening in my head.

It was in this period of uncertainty and discovery, that I found happiness again. I felt so alive, so aware, so sensitive to the world around me that — and this is true — I would get goosebumps and sometimes even burst into tears simply by watching some random guy crossing the street. I finished the script, directed the film, which found its way to Cannes and festivals all over the world. The film did extremely well, sold in over sixty countries. But, over the course of this beautiful circus, this amazing fairy tale, the applause and the glamor, I found myself miming happiness. I wasn't really happy. That feeling, that rush, was gone. I couldn't understand what was happening to me. Have I become blasé? Have I become insensitive? And it was only after three years that I found it again -- when I sat down and started writing my second film.

So I learned that happiness for me is not the success and the glamor, it is not at the top of the mountain but on the road uphill to it, it is not eating the carrot but running after it.

In fact my Oscar speech is already written. I wrote it when I was 12 years old with my little sister Caroline. We already know by heart the list of all the people we should be thanking just in case. There is a pretty good chance I will never get to say that speech, but it is the idea, the project of it, that puts a smile on my face, the journey towards it, that makes me happy. I might seem naive, but I truly believe that if everybody does what they truly burn for, what makes them truly happy, the world will be a better place! How many people do you know go about their whole life without once asking themselves this question: Am I happy? I know it might seem like a luxury to some but no matter how tough life can be, find your aim, big or small, run after your happiness even if you know you will never achieve it. Whether it is growing a plant in your garden, sending your kids to school, or traveling back and forth to the moon. What makes you get up in the morning, get out of bed, brush your teeth, put on your clothes and leave your house? So what I'm trying to say is listen to yourself. To that voice. When you're alone in the car, stuck in traffic, or who knows, even in the shower - listen. In spite of the noise, even if it is hard to concentrate sometimes, listen to the whispers of your heart. Trust your guts, trust your emotions, look for the goosebumps. Don't let other people's opinions - or their driving for that matter - drift you from what makes you truly happy. Because it is that voice that changed my life. Let it change yours.

I heard somebody say something in a conference one day, I don't recall who it was of course — because I have the memory of a very old fish — but I do remember what he said: Human beings are born butterflies, and die caterpillars and it stuck with me since because I think it is true. Look at babies and children, look at how free they are when they are only babies. They do as they please, talk as they please, behave as they please, free like butterflies. And it is only with time, when they start growing up and looking at this pointed finger telling them what they should or shouldn't do, who they can be or cannot be that their wings start to shrink and their backs start to bend under the pressure of society and its rules and what other people think and their stare. And they end up curled up and hunched over like a caterpillar!

And you start asking yourself what happened to that girl or boy I wanted to become. Why is there so much distance between who I wanted to be and who I allowed myself to become?

People have pointed that finger at me many times. "You're a director. Why do you act? Why do you write? And on stage? And now you're running for municipal elections? You're a mother of two, you're breastfeeding? You're crazy!" To those people and their fingers, I lift my finger – I mean this one (index finger) — and say I can be all those things. I don't have to be boxed in one personality, one profession. I can wear many hats. I would have even wanted to be a dancer, a painter, a journalist, a reporter, a sculpture, an activist. Maybe that is why I like acting so much, because it allows me to explore my other possibilities, my different natures. It is the only place where it is not illegal for me to be somebody else. In real life, you either end up in jail or in a mental institution for being someone else; You can't wake up in the morning and start reacting differently, people will automatically label you as crazy! But isn't this the exact opposite of crazy? Isn't this some kind of wisdom? To explore the infinite possibilities of who you can be? To make hard choices to achieve what you want even if the combination is unusual.

And it is often these unusual combinations which bleed into each other and strengthen each element. Now I know that there might be people in this crowd with ideas not for one project but for three: to be a chef, an architect and a painter. Do them all. They are all you, and with some work, and a good schedule you can do it. But also don't let people label you as lacking direction. Because being a better chef can inform your "day job". Your painting hobby could make you a better engineer. My latest experience in local politics allowed me to grow as a filmmaker. Everything is connected — part of one big puzzle, which you and I are both still trying to figure out.

Who you are doesn't have to stop at the edge of your fingers; you don't have to limit yourself to this distance! Spread your tentacles. My yoga teacher always tells me stand up straight and stretch your spine as if there's an invisible thread pulling you towards the sky. Use those invisible threads at the edge your extremities to extend yourself infinitely; don't contain yourself to just one body. Become spidermen and wonderwomen and extend your webs to everything you can grab, connect yourselves to others, feel the others, listen to other people's needs, become the voice of those who have no voice.

I am sorry to say this but the amazing education you have received here at AUB is not only a blessing but it is also a heavy weight, because it gives you the responsibility to impact other people's lives. How you choose to live will influence other people's living. Your battles will impact other people's victory. Please, be conscious of the power that you have, that this degree has afforded you.

Don't just sit in the comfort of your life, look up and away from your smart phones, don't close your eyes to the atrocities of the world, don't refuse to hear the suffering. Behind those walls there is a barefoot child that s had hardly anything to eat today, sitting at the gate, relying on you to find a solution for his situation, there are basic human rights that need to be regained, there is a whole justice system that needs to be reformed, a corrupted government that needs to be overthrown, there are kids rotting in jail because there are no specialized places to protect them.

I'm saying this because we too often don't believe in our capacity, as Lebanese people and, particularly as a nation.

When I was a kid in school, the teacher used to tell us, you see that small tiny little dot on the map? That little thing you can barely find? This is Lebanon. Compared to the hugeness of other countries, I grew up thinking, we're too small to make big things happen, we're too small to make a difference. And I'm sure a lot of you have experienced this. How many times do you catch yourself saying "Wow this place is so beautiful I can't believe it is in Lebanon, this boy is so handsome, I'm sure he's a foreigner." This attitude, this cliché, is killing our country.

Sure, there are problems everywhere here. I don't need to tell you how we can't elect a president, how we can't escape the sectarian thinking or how we can't even pick up our own trash.

I'm sure that because of this situation many of you see your degree as a ticket out of this country. To a big city where you can make it big and conquer the world! I also left Lebanon for a short while. But I asked myself, what is my mission in life, where am I needed the most? My answer and the answer for many of you, graduating class of 2016, is right here. Lebanon. France doesn't need another architect, London doesn't need another engineer. Yes, there are countless — almost comically creative — cases of chaos here, but there are also unbelievable opportunities and more importantly responsibilities. I had the opportunity to work abroad many times, to work on films with foreign actors and in other languages. And I'm telling you it is very tempting. But I find that my voice and heart are here. My stories are here, my characters, are always here — speaking Lebanese, behaving Lebanese, arguing in the way that only Lebanese do. Where others see a vacuum, we should see opportunity. It is all around us. I love this saying by George Bernard Shaw: Some men see things as they are and say, why? I dream things that never were and say, why not? Yes create rather than renovate. Things are possible here because it is a small country and everything is to be reinvented. Lebanon can be a laboratory - it can become an alternative, modern, progressive society that thinks differently. Our society, backwards in many ways, can be a leading innovator because many of its institutions are broken or don't exist at all. We have in front of us a blank page — rich in history, heritage, and human capital.

This attraction to my country has led me to incredible projects, like my involvement with Beirut Madinati. This campaign, to me, signifies much more than politics, it signifies a group of people daring to think alternatively. Daring to break the boundaries and customs of politics and "the way things are done here" by being true to themselves and their ideas. By doing more — not just posting a picture of a man with gelled hair before elections, but organizing open dialogs with citizens, creating a manifesto that reflects the citizens. Many of these great people, by the way, are sitting right here on those chairs behind me and among you. (Mona Fawaz, Jad Chaaban, Alan Shehadeh, Mona Harb who is somewhere in the crowd) They are AUB students and teachers! Be proud of what this university has given you. And continue in its legacy by creating new paths and pushing the frontier of what we think is possible here. I was so humbled to be around so many of your inspiring alumni — to rethink and reimagine the future.

It's true sometimes what we really want seems so big and out of reach that we don't dare to ask for it! Don't be afraid to let life know what you want and work towards it!
I am going to tell you one last little story.

When I was still in school in my teenage years, way before I entered film school, when even approaching a film camera was still an impossible dream, I used to have this very clear image in my head: I am standing in a beautiful movie theatre, on the big screen I can see the credits of a film I had directed rolling, people are up applauding with all their hearts and standing next to me is the music composer of the film, and he is the man of my life. More than twenty years later, that vision became a reality: During the screening of my first film “Caramel” in Cannes, I was standing in a beautiful movie theatre, on the big screen I could see the credits of my film rolling, people were up applauding with all their hearts and standing next to me was the music composer of the film, and he was my husband-to-be Khaled Mouzannar. Believe it or not what I had unconsciously asked the universe for had become a reality. Believe that when you ask for something with all your strength and work hard for it, the entire universe conspires to make it happen!

Exactly as it conspired to stop the rain today, in spite of the scary weather forecast, so I would be able to calmly bestow upon you my wisdom!

So to the beautiful graduating class of 2016 congratulations; out there is world waiting for your ideas, for your talents, for your capacities, there is a country called Lebanon waiting to be saved! Waiting for you to save it.

In fact there is a whole region called the Arab World that needs your smarts, your energy, your know-how and dedication...

So as you take off those hats today, whatever your goals is, whether your dream is to see your plant grow or to solve world hunger, promise me to ask yourself one question every morning as you open your eyes: Am I happy? Because it is only then that you can be the best version of who you are.

Thank you