

Honorary Doctorates and Graduate Commencement Ceremony

Presentation of Honorary Degrees

Samir Z. Zard - radical chemistry giant

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Mr. President Khuri, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, and Fellow Honorees, let me first of all say that this distinction fills me with immense pride and gratitude. My heartfelt thanks go to the President and Trustees of the AUB for bestowing upon me this greatest of honours, and to my colleagues of the Department of Chemistry who have nominated me.

The AUB has always been very dear to my heart, ever since I was admitted in 1971 as a free-auditor summer student. This was at the instigation of the late Professor Suheil Bushrui, of the Department of English Literature and a friend of our family. I was only 16 then and attended Chemistry 101, taught by the formidable Professor Adib Sarkis, whose stentorian voice could be heard three floors up the chemistry building. My recollections of this first encounter with the AUB were of course marked by the beauty and tidiness of the campus, but, perhaps even more, by the amazing Jafet Library. I would spend hours cloistered in the air-conditioned stacks, not just to escape the heat of the summer, but because of the irresistible smell of the books and the promise of the limitless knowledge contained in them.

Two years later, I enrolled as a regular student and my training as a professional chemist started in earnest. I was especially interested in organic chemistry and enjoyed and benefitted greatly from the crystal-clear lectures of the late Professor Costas Issidorides. I would sometimes sneak in to listen to the equally legendary lectures of Professor Makhluף Haddadin. Professors Issidorides and Haddadin alternated in teaching organic chemistry 211 and 212. They are also co-discoverers of the elegant Beirut Reaction, a source of fame and money for the Department of Chemistry. Unfortunately, the start of the so-called civil war interrupted my studies and forced me and many others to leave for calmer skies, while Professors Issidorides and Haddadin stayed behind and continued teaching and helping students despite the awful conditions prevailing at the time. This is a tremendous lesson in devotion and courage.

One cannot go through life without the support, guidance, and encouragement of family, friends, and mentors. I have been very fortunate to have been surrounded by many exceptional people, who have made a reality of what science fiction writer Harry Harrison said, that « every day should be unwrapped as a gift ». To all of them, I should like to express my heartfelt thanks and gratitude. My sincere thanks and gratitude also go to my collaborators, for without their talent, hard work and enthusiasm, no significant research could have been done. To a scientist, there are few things more exhilarating than the excitement of discovery and seeing one's younger collaborators and students stand on their own feet and evolve into creative and independent thinkers.

This brings me to the question of education. Education gives a person the ability to jump centuries and to have at his fingertip all the knowledge accumulated by mankind, especially in this age of ultra-fast communication. To paraphrase Raimondo Montecuccoli, a famous Italian general of the 17th



century, a nation needs three things to prosper: education, education, and education. All nations, large or small, old or new, that have prospered, have given utmost priority to the education of their citizens; but education must also be accompanied and buttressed by the freedom of thought and entrepreneurship and by an equitable justice. When we look around us and see so many countries oscillating between one form of dictatorship and another and sinking deeper and deeper into chaos, we can appreciate the critical role played by the AUB and other educational institutions in fostering the relative liberty and prosperity we enjoy in Lebanon, despite all the severe problems within and without the country.

I should now like to conclude by extending my warmest congratulations to all the young AUB graduates and their proud parents on this very special sesquicentennial commencement ceremony. It is said that you cannot put an old head on young shoulders. I will, nevertheless, add to my congratulations the wise advice of Sir Winston Churchill, the great man himself, who said: "The only guide to a man is his conscience; the only shield to his memory is the rectitude and sincerity of his actions. It is very imprudent to walk through life without this shield, because we are so often mocked by the failure of our hopes and the upsetting of our calculations; but with this shield, however the fates may play, we march always in the ranks of honour." So, young graduates, make the best of your lives and of the education you have received and march always in the ranks of honour.

Thank you.