

Honorary Doctorates Ceremony and Commencement Exercises Welcome Address

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Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, honored trustees, deans, faculty, staff, parents and families, and—most especially—the AUB Class of 2018, Welcome to your graduation.

Today is your day, a day which you will share forever with all our graduates, including these five distinguished honorands who have impacted the world through their lasting accomplishments, in cinema, theatre, banking, public health, public life, in science and astronomy, who are also your fellow graduates. Each one of us, on the stage or in the audience, has their own unique story, their own frame of reference. We all have our favorites. Two months ago, I was reading in one of my favorite newspapers since childhood, the *Guardian*, a column by Jonathan Freedland, whose writings I enjoy. In it, the writer lamented what he called the “casual dismissal of verifiable facts” that seems so common today in public discourse at the national and international level. He cites a phenomenon dubbed “tribal epistemology” where information is evaluated not on the evidence, but on whether it supports your worldview, and whether it has been uttered by your leaders, or the leaders of their enemies. As a result, Freedland worries the great division of our time may not be between Left and Right, or North or South, but something more fundamental still: between true and false.

As a scientist and as a physician, I have spent my entire career developing data, exploring them and putting them to the test, and accepting the evidence that they present. While there are different ways to interpret data, we have to agree on their basic worth, their rigor, their soundness to endure real testing. Most of my generation has struggled conscientiously to create a better world—but we have not always been successful. Despite the turmoil we see around us, on balance, if you look at the evidence from Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, the data tell us we are in a better world. Pinker cites less crime, less poverty, people do live longer. We can disagree on the context and significance of these facts, but data are data. But while the world is undoubtedly a better place than it was 100 years ago, we cannot rest on our laurels and we cannot accept things as they are. We must effect positive change. And you, Class of 2018—whether you like it or not—are among the people to whom the mantel of change must be passed. Great institutions and great nations are built by engaged citizens, and engaged citizens participate in the full spectrum of public and private life.

Over the twentieth century, the United States built the greatest research armamentarium in the world by becoming a haven to the finest scientists from central Europe and Asia, people who emigrated in order to find a better future, to ensure the safety of their families and the sanctity of their science.

Lebanon, on the other hand, has made a near miraculous achievement. It has exported its best and brightest talents for more than a century and yet remained competitive with the level of the most developed nations until the early 1970s when the civil war broke out. Yet despite all these challenges, this small nation and some other nations in the Arab world are starting to show some signs of real progress, in knowledge, literature, technology, and empowerment. This nation can be particularly proud of its guardianship of freedom of speech and dissent. Tom Wolfe, the American author and journalist who died last month, could have been thinking about Lebanon when he wrote, “One of the few freedoms that we have as human beings that cannot be taken away from us is the freedom to assent to what is true and to deny what is false. Nothing you can give me is worth surrendering that freedom for.”

We are a long way from where we need to be, but things are happening. However, we cannot take this progress “the better angels of our nature” for granted. Tom Wolfe, again, urged us never to become a “slave[s] to how you think others are judging you”. It is on you, the outstanding graduates of the class of 2018 to work to create a better world, a world where the divide is not between truth and falsehood, nor Left and Right, nor North and South but between what has been accomplished and what we can accomplish still. And for this, you must be dogged proponents and determined advocates and effectors.

One of my favorite poems that has resonated with me since I can remember learning to read, is a poem by the great Robert Frost, the poet of my native New England entitled *Stopping by the woods on a snowy evening*. It is short so I hope you will indulge me while I read it in full.

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Recently, we concluded one of our most magnificent Middle East Medical Assemblies, the 49th, which focused on the importance of mental health across the life span. Of particular note was the importance of sound sleep in mental health. So while Frost spoke to us metaphorically about sleep, I encourage you to develop far better habits than I in getting your required amount of rest. Recognize that life is a marathon and not a sprint, even for you, the best and brightest students of the American University of Beirut.

Yet, there is a sense of a promise unkept, undelivered, and incomplete, when we look at a world where eight individuals, all men, can lay claim to the same amount of wealth as the poorest half of humanity, and where still the ravages of war, disease, and misfortune continue to plague the globe. We are conscious every day that in our mission, we must be more inclusive, more supportive, and more effective in advocating for you, our extraordinary students. But you are the ultimate advocates, you are the ultimate champions, you are the ultimate effectors. So whether you have prepared for a future at a top graduate school, or you are training to become a physician or nurse, whether you have landed your ideal job or not-so-ideal-job as a stepping stone to your ideal job, whether you have decided to create your own path through entrepreneurship, or whether you are still looking for your True North, to figure out your direction in life, you have developed the tools to analyze data critically, to bring people who are at great divides together, to ensure that tomorrow is indeed the purview of what Lincoln once called "the better angels of our nature".

But this will not come to be because of speech alone or because of action, but because of a dogged determination to ensure that there is a better tomorrow. So I ask you to go out remembering that for all of us and especially for you, "the woods are lovely, dark and deep, but I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep."

Congratulations AUB class of 2018! Go forth to change the world for the better.