

Undergraduate Commencement Exercises Keynote Speech
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President Khuri, Members of the Board of Trustees, Deans, Faculty, Students, Families and Friends:

Congratulations AUB Class of 2018! You did it! In a few moments, you will graduate from one of the great universities of the world. Perched at the crossroads of the Middle East, the American University of Beirut has long promoted a noble mission of “excellence in education ... advancement of knowledge ... (and service) to the peoples of the Middle East and beyond...”. On my first visit to Lebanon, I am so honored to celebrate this mission and this day with you.

AUB has provided you a world-class education in many fields ranging from agriculture to the arts, from philosophy to physics. An education at AUB is a privilege. But now, as you collectively face the future, I know all of you are wondering—what is next for me? What will guide me as I make life decisions? How do I make a life and not just a living? At my own college graduation years ago, I thought I had some inkling of how to answer these basic, yet profound questions.

But looking back, I now understand that life will present us all with a series of surprises. Each one can be a turning point that will redefine, sometimes in dramatic fashion, what we do and who we will become. And if your life is like mine, you will unexpectedly meet so many who will teach you, love you and invite you to join in new adventures. I certainly never imagined that I would someday be speaking in Beirut before this distinguished academic audience. I recall the famous words of philosopher Soren Kierkegaard who once proclaimed “Life can only be understood backwards but it must be lived forwards.” And I also recall that John Lennon once said “ life is what happens to you while you are making other plans”!

At my own graduation back then, all I knew was that I was an American, born in the United States and raised in a family that celebrated a proud immigrant culture from Korea. In my youth, my parents regularly shared with us children their pride in their homeland, their love of culture (especially the food!), their desire that we receive the best education possible, and their dream that someday we would become fulfilled adults, committed to a life of purpose. With their love and support, I decided to become a doctor.

In my early years of medical training in Boston, I happened to meet a beautiful physician Dr. Claudia Arrigg. She told me she was raised in a family that celebrated a proud immigrant culture from Lebanon. As a child, her parents regularly shared with her their pride in their homeland, their love of culture (especially the food!), their desire that

their children receive the best education possible, and their dream that someday she and her siblings would become fulfilled adults, committed to a life of purpose.

We knew immediately that we were meant for each other. Claudia and I got married and her parents became my second parents. I became immersed in the extended family and the culture. My extended family even joked that I had earned the title “honorary Lebanese American”, thereby joining so many others around the world who hold Lebanon in their hearts. We raised three children who have all visited Lebanon and are deeply proud of their heritage. In fact, our oldest son Steven Arrigg Koh, an international lawyer, has studied Arabic here at AUB. Over the years, Claudia would regularly say “you know Howard, someday we should visit Lebanon—you will love it”. Someday is today. I am so proud of Claudia who lives a life of mission as a devoted physician, surgeon, wife, mother and citizen of the world. Claudia, please rise so we can give you a well-deserved round of applause.

Back in Boston, I also met another extraordinary physician Dr. Fadlo Khuri. Through my career, I have worked with many great doctors. But Dr Khuri always stood out as someone special. First of all, upon meeting one other, we immediately connected over our Lebanese heritage! Moreover, he exuded a rare combination of brilliance, energy and vision matched only by his humanity, humility and generosity of spirit. Fortunately, in 2015, AUB appointed Dr. Khuri its 16th President in recognition of his enormous talents. When I called to offer hearty congratulations, he enthusiastically shared with me his dreams for AUB. Then he graciously said “you know Howard, someday you and Claudia should visit Lebanon—you will love it”. Someday is today. I am so proud of President Khuri who lives a life of mission as a devoted president, physician, researcher, husband, father, and citizen of the world. President Khuri, please rise so we can give you a well-deserved round of applause.

As my early career unfolded, even more unexpected developments occurred. As a young physician, I started off convinced I could cure every patient put before me. Assuming responsibility for another person’s health is a sacred responsibility – indeed, I felt honored to care for patients for over three decades. But early on, I discovered that far too many of my patients were succumbing from preventable conditions, such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, tobacco dependence, substance use disorders, obesity, diabetes, infectious diseases and more. I also saw how poverty, discrimination, lack of insurance, lack of education, emotional trauma, violence and other social forces negatively impacted human health. All these medical and social conditions inflict so much suffering---not just in the US but also in the Middle East and indeed around the world. Seeing so many suffer because of preventable conditions became a source of great personal and professional anguish. But it also became a source of motivation.

When you see patients suffering preventable suffering and dying preventable death, you say to yourself “there’s *got* to be another way.” That feeling drove me to find broader strategies, in addition to direct patient care, to promote health. As life went on,

I was unexpectedly offered--and accepted--two leadership positions in government, first as Massachusetts Commissioner of Public Health and more recently as US Assistant Secretary for Health for the Department of Health and Human Services in Washington DC under President Barack Obama. I never could have predicted any of this. But in hindsight, I realize I was answering a powerful call. That call to public service opened up a whole new universe that changed me forever.

As US Assistant Secretary for Health, I had the privilege of joining so many committed colleagues in a powerful mission to: promote tobacco control and try to save lives otherwise lost to tobacco dependence; protect people during the 2009 global H1N1 pandemic; help implement the Affordable Care Act that has brought health insurance coverage to over 20 million Americans; and address health disparities to help all people, regardless of race and culture, reach their full potential for health. It was a special honor to serve in the US delegation to the World Health Assembly in Geneva, Switzerland, an astonishing annual global gathering committed to global health. Few of my health colleagues are doctors---most of them come from other walks of life: law, policy, politics, government, business, education, housing and much more. All of them want to make a difference.

We humans can agree on one overriding and universal theme: our good health is a precious and fragile gift. No wonder it is said that “yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, today is a gift, that is why they call it--- present”. When people anywhere in the world reach their “highest attainable standard of health”, that represents public health success. Cherishing and protecting that gift can, and should, involve everyone. You don’t need to be a doctor to protect the gift of health. You don’t even need a health degree to protect the gift of health. All you need is to care deeply about the health of someone else-- a person in your family, your neighborhood, your community, your nation or your world. And this uplifting work can bring much hope for the future. As American civil rights leader Martin Luther King once said: “He who has health has hope. And he who has hope has everything”.

Let me assure you, though, trying to uphold mission is never easy. There are ups and downs, joys and sorrows, and dreams and disappointments every step of the way. The journey is fascinating and frustrating, exhilarating and exhausting. There will be pain, struggles, wounds, conflict and setbacks. But learning how to reframe such setbacks can create new meaning and push you to grow stronger. Doing so can make the journey even more profoundly filled with purpose.

So dear graduates, I believe there is a mission and calling for each one of us. I didn’t understand this when I was younger but I certainly do now. Some of you may have no idea what your calling may be ---and that’s fine. And for those of you who already have every step for the future planned --- let me assure you, it won’t happen that way. Life will put before you so many twists and turns that are critically important. But as you face them, please keep your hearts open and ready to hear that quiet voice of calling. If

you do, you can discover what is ultimate in your lives-- versus what is merely important.

And please remember that fulfillment only comes through the passionate love and support of people who will raise you up through every season of your life. People like Claudia and President Khuri and many more. They will encourage your heart, celebrate your unique gifts and believe in you for who you are. When such special people enter your lives, recognize them, thank them and make them feel appreciated. For as poet Maya Angelou once said, "I have learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." In particular, dear graduates, cherish your family who will passionately support you, not only through AUB but also through all the years ahead. Because as the saying goes—the true definition of a family member is one who knows everything about you—but loves you anyway!

So as I close, thank you again for welcoming Claudia and me to this beautiful campus. Lebanon will always hold a special place in my heart. This is my first visit but in many ways, I feel like I am coming home. As you leave, may you fully leverage your AUB education to serve the Middle East and beyond. May you live a life brimming with purpose and mission. And someday, maybe you too can have the incredible honor of sharing, before a global audience, how the privilege of education, the power of calling and the passionate love of family and friends changed your life.