

Graduate Commencement Exercises Keynote Speech

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Hi, good evening, and Ramadan Kareem.

Congratulations. You've made it. You've taken your last exam, turned in your last paper, and you are now graduates of the American University of Beirut class of 2019. You've enjoyed your last AUB Outdoors as students, probably feeling guilty because you should have been studying for finals. You saw things you thought you would never see in your lifetime, like the United Faculty finally defeating Maroun Semaan Faculty of Engineering and Architecture, on penalty kicks, in the Big Game. And today you join the ranks of distinguished alumni.

Over these years together, you have grown into a remarkable community. You won slam poetry contests and business school case competitions, debate prizes and architecture awards. You've been recognized as the top Arab women in computing. You've volunteered to teach English to Syrian refugees and Arabic to foreign exchange students. You've made something beautiful. Now you're passing through the Main Gate into the rest of your lives.

The world outside feels different today. You're graduating at a moment in time that is simultaneously wondrous and monstrous. It's a moment of unprecedented advancements and possibilities, of biotech and artificial intelligence, of innovations, cures, and breakthroughs. But this is also a moment of conflict, heartbreak, and manmade catastrophe—what my friend Dean Iman calls “the hard reality out there.” It's a world of unmatched connectivity, yet also a tower of Babel where everybody seems to be talking and nobody seems to be listening. A world where the phone in your pocket holds more data than the great ancient libraries, yet the distinction between information and wisdom is painfully clear.

How – amid such terrible beauty, such dizzying change – do you rise above the rancor, the noise, the meanness, and the tempting quick fixes to find your life's purpose? How do you discover happiness, harmony, meaning? In the words of a great poet we lost this past year, Mary Oliver: “tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?”

I have no certain answers or lectures to offer. But I can tell you what I have seen. The process of discovery – the act of becoming – takes a lifetime of work. As long as you're alive, this work will never be done. For all that we accomplish, we all remain works in progress. My message today is about the work you will have to do for yourselves, and the work you will do for each other.

For many of you the first challenge you will confront, upon graduating, is to work on yourself – to find a job and choose a direction. Know broadly where you want to go. Be open to what comes your way. In fact, put yourself in the path of lightning.

I have always been a dreamer. When I graduated, my plan was simple: change the world. And like many dreamers, I didn't get the job I wanted. And I watched my classmates, one after another, land high-paying jobs as investment bankers, consultants. I doubted my place in the world.

After graduate school I worked briefly at the United Nations. To my surprise, I found it wasn't for me. Several rejections later, I was offered a position at a global health care company – a far cry from the world-changing law and diplomacy. Or so I thought.

My corporate journey brought me for the first time to Africa – a continent that over time has become central to my own life's story. My corporate career turned out to be an extraordinary classroom. It brought me to the worlds of public policy, ethics, philanthropy, and social change. In an unexpected, unplanned, and completely marvelous way, it prepared me for my role at the Foundation today. I just didn't know it then.

As you look back, life will teach you that planning is best done in retrospect. As you look forward, what you really need to be is to be open and ready for new experiences. This fact still astounds me. Someone who grew up in a very small town in Malaysia is now at the helm of a global foundation based in Canada that was endowed by an American company and is focused on addressing issues of poverty in Africa and here in Lebanon. Life rarely occurs in a straight line.

Of course, living in Lebanon, you know that. Finding creative ways to navigate life's twists and turns seems to be part of the country's DNA. That's the spirit that led AUB students, in the darkest days of the civil war, to dream up and then make real the first-ever AUB Outdoors. It's a spirit of creativity – even defiance. That same spirit can help you thrive in a complex world.

That's the spirit of the AUB students who started the Green Shift in Tripoli. When the trash system failed the city, they didn't complain or place blame. They found solutions. So, I want to salute the remarkable AUB students who are also building Lebanon's recycling sector and teaching a new generation to shift to a sustainable lifestyle.

In that same spirit, three young AUB undergraduates from Somaliland and Rwanda started an award-winning NGO called Solace for Somaliland. They took what they learned here at AUB to solve problems of their home communities.

You should be very proud that these change agents, these social innovators are AUB students. And we are honored that they are also Mastercard Foundation Scholars.

There's a world of solutions to be had, but not if you look away from the problems. Learn to embrace the problems in your midst – to love them, even – and you will find not just solutions, but meaning and success along the way.

We never solve problems alone. We need community. In times of uncertainty, the world needs more human engagement. More understanding across cultures, not less. In a turbulent world, community can be a source of solace, stability, and solutions.

All of us are part of multiple communities that make up the fabric of our lives: professional communities, intellectual communities, cultural communities, and spiritual communities. Some we were born into, others we joined, and some we lead. You may come from a small village but find yourself initiated into a tribe of architects and engineers. It's limiting to be seen in only one frame. Each of us holds multitudes. It's worthwhile to see each other that way.

Be generous in welcoming others. Be greedy in learning from them. Take a moment and think of people you never would have met had you not been at AUB. Think of what you would have missed without that encounter.

So I encourage you to put yourself in the path of an encounter that could be life changing: the encounter with difference. This is a path where strangers become friends. Where different cultural threads become part of the fabric of common humanity. Today this school is harkening back to its finest traditions, when people gathered here to seek knowledge from across Africa and Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and the Americas. Let that spirit of welcome be part of what you take with you.

The problems of the world are often caused by community – but they can be solved by community too. Think about what you will contribute. Think about the character of the communities you enter and build. Will they be walled off or welcoming? Built on common resentments or common humanity? When they come up short, as all communities do sometimes, do they hold outsiders responsible and lash out or do they hold themselves accountable and learn? You will be shaped by your communities. But make no mistake, you will shape your communities as well. And sometimes a single voice can be decisive. Let that voice be yours. Use it.

Let me close with the wisdom of another of my favorite writers. Khalil Gibran. Because he is the best. "You work that you may keep pace with the earth and the soul of the earth....when you work you are a flute through whose heart the whispering of the hours turns to music." "Work," the poet writes, "is love made visible."

Today may feel like an end, but it's also a beginning. Today the world stands before you. In fact, the hopes of villages, small towns, your communities, rest on your

shoulders. Don't be daunted. I know you will do amazing things. You have knowledge, friends, and a community you have built here. And as you pass through the Main Gate today, may you find joy in the journey and your purpose in the problems you solve, and "may you have life, and have it more abundantly." Good luck!