

Mounzer Tabbarah
Student Commencement Speech
September 4, 2021

I want you all, as you're sitting here in your caps and gowns, to close your eyes and look back on your first day here at AUB. Think about walking in through those big metal doors on Main Gate, the only gate of which you knew the name. Think about how you were silently scanning the busy campus, trying to determine who was a first year and who wasn't, who was going through the same experience as you and who wasn't. Think about how you asked that group of friends where the Nicely building was. Think about that person who sat next to you on that first day of classes, who later on became one of the most important elements of your life.

Now, think about how much has changed. Think about how much you learned. Think about how you're a completely different person now. But our journey, although rewarding, has been way tougher than any of us had imagined it to be. I mean – I don't know about you, but today feels more like the end of a battle rather than a celebration.

In preparation for today, I read some commencement speeches from previous years, and it was often mentioned how challenging the AUB journey was. But the last two years have set a completely new bar. On the educational level, we started off with, what we then thought, was a tough life on campus. We tried to balance between courses, extracurriculars, and personal lives. And just when we got the hang of it, Covid came along. We had to learn and adapt to everything anew as every single thing in our lives turned online.

Now on the socio-economical level, huh, "حدث ولا حرج"! A never-ending cascade of unfortunate events. We kept going through a revolution that challenged the corrupted Lebanese status quo; a pandemic that put the whole world on a pause; a global recession that presented the worst job market for our graduating class; one of the worst economic crises since the 1850s; one of the most powerful explosions in the world; a fuel crisis; an electricity crisis; a health crisis. But we kept going. And here we are today.

Lebanon is often compared to the legend of the phoenix, a bird that rises through its own ashes to live anew. But like all metaphors, this one is also incomplete; for each time the phoenix rises, like us, it carries another wound. The metaphor always focused on the end goal rather than the process of reaching it. Our wounds are a major factor of our journeys. And it is through learning how to deal with them that we can someday look back on our healed scars and be capable of saying that they helped us become the best version of ourselves. The version of ourselves that will one day change the world.

Yes. That's right. We do have the capacity to change the world. We already did so. I want you to remember the clean-up campaigns in Gemmayze and Karantina and Bourj Hamoud on the 5th and 6th and 7th. I want you to remember how we asked for justice on the 8th. I want you to remember the dozens of initiatives that sprouted from students sitting on these very chairs in front of me. Initiatives that provided shelter, medicine, food, and all other forms of relief to those most vulnerable in our community.

But neither our journeys of learning nor that of healing were walked alone. We all had guardian angels watching over us, every step of the way. Sometimes in silence, sometimes very loudly, and more often

than not, interrupting our zoom classes to tell us that lunch is ready. I would therefore like to interrupt my speech to thank my parents, my brother, my friends, and all of your families and friends, for the hope, trust, and passion they have put into each and every one of us.

My favorite author, Brandon Sanderson, wrote in one of his books: "The most important step a person can take is always the next one." A good number of our friends have already taken their next step abroad and couldn't attend the ceremony with us today. A greater number will be following them soon. So, to every parent helping a son or daughter pack their bags, to every sibling being separated from their brother or sister, and to every person going to the farewells of a best friend after best friend, I assure you that this step they took will be the foundation of their success and of the change they will make.

And to the Graduating class of 2021, I cannot wait to see where your next steps will lead you, and I cannot wait to see how you will change the world.