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FM Interim Dean's Commencement Address
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“AUB in thee we glory, make us True & Brave”. Although this call is taken for granted while singing the anthem of the alma mater, I wonder how many have stopped to reflect on the strong message this verse carries. Its words are inherently uplifting and have been a source of pride to all alumni across all ages but under today’s pressures, they carry stronger bearing. The pursuit of truth has perplexed civilizations, religions, cultures, philosophers, writers, and individuals. The proposed paths by these various groups have differed but almost all converge on one notion that this pursuit is a lifelong journey that matures over time to the extent you, as an individual, is willing to nurture it. Jalal ad-Din Rumi recognized the big challenge of this path; he insightfully and intelligently stated, “the truth was a mirror in the hands of God. It fell and broke into pieces. Everybody took a piece and looked into it, and thought they had the truth”. This is reflective of the devastating conflict that is ripping our beloved country apart today. Each party claims to hold the truth within its grasp but the real collective one remains elusive because of obliterating blindness. Rumi proceeds to admit that “Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself.” Centuries earlier, Buddha came to the same conclusion, “A man who conquers himself is greater than one who conquers a thousand men in battle.” Therefore, as you get ready to undertake this lifelong journey, proclaim your willingness to start by changing yourself and bringing down compromising barriers in order to secure joyous internal tranquility. We, as healers entrusted with reducing human suffering, are indeed blessed by our profession, like no other, in achieving, and in an amazing way the ultimate objective of a self-fulfilling peacefulness of mind and soul. Can anyone amongst you think of a more gratifying feeling when you make an accurate diagnosis, or offer an appropriate treatment or accomplish a scientific breakthrough that contributes to the recovery of good health, the saving of a human life, or advancement of science? As you press on in this path, what is required is to pursue new knowledge, scientific or otherwise, with an open curious but yet a critical mind, to explore new horizons with zeal but yet with thoughtful wisdom, and to bring genuine contentment to yourself and the largest number of others not with condescending view but with a loving caring heart and thoughtful mind.

Next, I turn to bravery which is defined as the quality or state of having or showing mental or moral strength to face danger, fear, or difficulty. What we witnessed within the past year, be it the devastating COVID-19 pandemic, the catastrophic Beirut port explosion, and the crashing economy and the on-going collapse of the country’s monetary system pose unparalleled fears except may be for those witnessed in traditional open battle fields. Bravery is simply overcoming such fears in the way you conduct yourself. Nelson Mandela describes it eloquently by describing his personal experience in fighting apartheid: “I learned that courage was not the absence of fear but the triumph over it. The brave man is not who does not feel afraid, but who conquers that fear.” Rampant deaths because of COVID-19 pandemic rekindled the ugly memories of the Black Death that devastated the world ages ago. Our local experience with COVID-19 was horrifying but here again the history will register the solid bravery of dedicated

women and men, like you, as heroes of the day who stood up to the disaster, upheld the Hippocratic oath and did not abandon the pandemic scene out of fear. Going through the experience of the past 15 months makes you a unique group of graduates that will carry this special experience for the rest of your lives.

Tomorrow will bring to you yet another life experience so as you step into it, arm yourself with the following seven attributes of bravery: 1. Always stand up for what's right, even if you are standing alone. Cornelius Van Dyck, one of the founding fathers of the Medical Department of the Syrian Protestant College walked out of the College in 1882 in protest of the Board of Managers decision to terminate a faculty member for daring to bring up on campus Darwin's novel theory of evolution. Blocking new knowledge and preventing the academic freedom of expression to deliberate an innovative thought were utterly unacceptable to the highly regarded evangelist missionary and the professor of internal medicine and pathology who strongly believed in science as a legitimate path for advancement. 2. Uphold your morals and do not succumb to peer pressure. Today we live in a world where materialistic temptations and corruption have compromised and tarnished the social and ethical values that guide our lives and our profession. 3. Exhibit kindness in everything you do and to all those around you, family, friends, patients and coworkers. Taking care of patients requires patience, compassion, and kindness 4. Take responsibility for your life and the decisions you make. Pause periodically to assess where you went right and where you went wrong. This self-assessment with accountability is indeed a sign of bravery. 5. Know when to say "No". Have the courage to declare it against a non-convincing work project, overburdening task, a request by a hypocrite or a wolf dressed in a lamb's skin, or even a friendship. 6. Know when to seek help. The practice of the medical profession and the pursuit of scientific discovery are very challenging so seeking help, when necessary, is a sign of courage rather than incompetency or inaptitude. 7. See your ideas and plans to the end. Bravery and steadfastness are a guarantee to overrun hurdles, overcome obstacles, and remove challenges to open widely the path for success.

Despite the dark days we are experiencing today, I take this opportunity to reaffirm the commitment of the Faculty of Medicine and all its members to quality and community oriented medical education the same way it has been since its inception in 1867. During its long illustrious history, this institution has been no stranger to serious calamities, conflicts, and wars and invariably each time it emerged stronger in its bravery to carry on with its mission and the pursuit of truth.

To conclude; from now on, anytime you recall the anthem of the alma mater, think for a moment to what extent you have been true and brave to yourself, to the people and loved ones around you and to the profession you are about to serve for the rest of your life in the pursuit of happiness, self-contentment and internal tranquility. Congratulations to the Class of 2021.