

**President Fadlo R. Khuri**  
**Class of 2020 Commencement address**  
**October 8, 2021**

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, honored trustees, deans, faculty, staff, parents and families, and—most especially—Class of 2020, Welcome to your graduation.

Dear Graduating Class of 2020, Congratulations! You made it. It has certainly been a momentous journey.

What a difficult time you have endured. The last two years have been an extended Annus Horribilis, with forest fires; thawra; devaluation; national default for the first time in modern Lebanon’s history; the coronavirus; massive financial losses and deflation affecting AUB and all families in Lebanon; and of course the tragedy of one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in human history. But the resilience of AUB students and those who serve them has shone through.<sup>1</sup> You not only completed your degree requirements despite all you faced, but you came back from all over the world to be here together for YOUR GRADUATION! Congratulations! And Thank You!

Your final year at AUB was marked by disruption and difficulty, beginning with the thawra and ending with pandemic lockdowns. For most of the past 18 months, campus has been eerily quiet without the buzz of student activities and interaction until very recently. We share your disappointment at finishing your last year of university life –usually the best year for AUB students– in this manner. It is usually the year in which the friendships you have made through your college years are fortified. It is the year in which you engage most fully in campus life, be it through participating in student club activities, contributing to Outlook, organizing Outdoors, or exercising your right to elect and be elected as student representatives. A final year in which you indulge in experimenting with what you have learned at AUB one more time before you hit the road.

Yet in spite of it all, you adjusted, adapted, and persevered. You finished this phase of your academic journey at AUB. I wish you well. Today, you finally graduate in a manner different than that which you and we had imagined. But even though it is a year later, and not under the circumstances we would all have wished for you, you are graduating together, ready to join the battle against disease, poverty, plague, and injustice. You are ready.

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<sup>1</sup> Speech to Board on March 18, 2020

The world is still struggling to comprehend, much less contain the COVID-19 pandemic so far. The effects on the global economy have been especially devastating, as the greatest global recession since the Great Depression continues to accelerate. But while COVID-19 has stolen all the headlines, education, patient care, service and research continue apace in this brave new, Zoom and WebEx powered world.

The summer of 2019, as we were getting ready to launch your senior or terminal degree year at AUB, I re-read *The Plague*, a wonderful allegorical novel by the Nobel Laureate Albert Camus, who died young and is best known for his existential works. The book was published in 1947 and is considered one of the most important modern works of literature. Here is one memorable quote from the novel.<sup>2</sup>

"Everybody knows that pestilences have a way of recurring in the world, yet somehow we find it hard to believe in ones that crash down on our heads from a blue sky. There have been as many plagues as wars in history, yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise."<sup>3</sup>

I came of age as a physician and as a leader during the modern-day plague that was HIV. I worked side by side with nurses and doctors, young and old, to heal the suffering, to give them solace and support when we had no cure. Caring for those less fortunate is an honor, a humbling, overwhelming and inspiring matter all at once. The trust and love one receives from one's patients and colleagues are among the greatest gifts of all. But hope, hope can be ephemeral. We see hope wax and wane time and again in *The Plague*: "Many continued hoping that the epidemic would soon die out and they and their families be spared. Thus they felt under no obligation to make any change in their habits, as yet. Plague was an unwelcome visitant, bound to take its leave one day as unexpectedly as it had come."<sup>4</sup>

There have been far happier times, but the world seems to go in circles. As a child of the 1960's, I have fond recollections of a time when the world seemed somehow different, simultaneously full of hope, sadness, and mystery. While I have happy memories of my time in late 60's America, the deep divisions in America—on the Vietnam War, on civil rights, on race, ethnicity, and identity—never went away. Those times also created a sense in me of belonging to no particular group, but to all groups; of belonging in part to many worlds, perhaps all worlds, but never fully to any one world. This feeling has stayed with me and lies at the core of my easy acceptance of "the other," and of my lifelong rejection of stereotypes, demonization, and prejudices. You will

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<sup>2</sup> The Plague

<sup>3</sup> The Plague

<sup>4</sup> The Plague

leave AUB with that same disposition, having learned and lived the universal values of respect, empathy, and integrity.<sup>5</sup>

The American University of Beirut has an inclusiveness, an openness to the other, and transformational societal value that I have never seen matched. Today, much of the world is transfixed by the shattering injustice of what seems to be almost open murder of vulnerable minorities by the very authorities that are supposed to protect all from harm. Then, as now, blacks in America and Palestinians in Israel/Palestine could not feel a minimal amount of safety—especially for their young, male community members—not in their houses and not in their streets. With riots and their attendant violence, the most visceral and reactive of languages spill out and escalate. Dr. Martin Luther King, the American icon of civil rights, once said: “Certain conditions continue to exist in our society, which must be condemned as vigorously as we condemn riots. But in the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it that America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last few years. It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And as long as America postpones justice, we stand in the position of having these recurrences of violence and riots over and over again. Social justice and progress are the absolute guarantors of riot prevention.”<sup>6</sup>

America, Lebanon, and the world have failed to provide equal justice for all under the law. Police brutality, modern-day slavery in Kafala, the mistreatment of refugees and minorities, the strident, siren song of racism are all too prevalent. But there can and must be change for the better. To be a force for change, we must continue to learn from our own mistakes and implicit biases, to become more inclusive, self-critical, merciful, and accountable. To become wiser, we must learn from our past. AUB, while not perfect, has always been a propagator of social justice, of freedom, that great societal equalizer.

Unfortunately, we seem nowhere near realizing true self-determination for the peoples of the Global South, but we do see rays of hope. On October 17<sup>th</sup> 2019, the first genuine pan-Lebanese uprising since 1943 was triggered by continued government corruption, malfeasance and ineptitude, spreading from Beirut like wildfire across the country. That uprising, which so many of you participated in, provided hope for a better future. Now, rather than scenes of hope, we have watched events from Minneapolis, from Jerusalem, from Beirut and from Kabul, that give us pause. How can we move forward together, with equal justice and hope for a better tomorrow for all?

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<sup>5</sup> Déjà vu – By Fadlo Khuri

<sup>6</sup> Déjà vu – By Fadlo Khuri

Just as people across Lebanon have risen up and demanded change, so have people around the world. We can and must do better. We can and must fight for equal rights for all: black, white, Arab, Jew, gay, straight...“everyone means everyone.” There can indeed be no peace without justice. But persistence, the persistence of citizens and societies, especially the persistence of nurses and physicians, can make a difference, can give hope to the hopeless.

Camus’ *The Plague* ends with messages of hope: "Once the faintest stirring of hope became possible, the dominion of the plague was ended... What we learn in time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise."<sup>7</sup>

Yes, there are many more things to admire in women and men than to despise. You know that now. You have seen it every day in your training. And that simple fact, that fact gives you hope. You have done so much, learned so much, lost so much and gained a part of yourselves in your time at AUB. Most importantly, you have gained and given hope. Never surrender that hope, that feeling of being able to make a difference. If you can keep that hope alive, secure in your craft and sound in your conscience, you will be ready to change the world for the better.

Congratulations, AUB’s Class of 2020!

Stay healthy, stay well. We have missed you these long months and look forward to welcoming you back in the future, as alumni, to what will always be your campus. We will see you in better times, times when your leadership, service, wisdom and joy, will prove both transcendent and transformational.