

Undergraduate Commencement keynote speech: Wadad Kadi

Members of the graduating class of 2012:

What a privilege it is, what a delight, to be able to tell you all at once:

Congratulations! Or, as we say in Arabic, *mabrouk wa alf mabrouk!* You have finally come to the end of a long road: you have worked hard; you have sacrificed much for the sake of your studies; and you have overcome innumerable obstacles on the way. Now, all you want is to receive your diplomas, hold them close to your hearts, and then go out to celebrate with family and friends. I, therefore, will not detain you for too long; I will just leave you with three thoughts that I hope you will find as meaningful as I did: the graduates' debt to society; the imperative of leadership; and the issue I feel very passionately about: books!

(1) The first thought is that, although this day marks the end of a journey for you, it is most certainly the beginning of another, for which reason it is aptly called a "commencement." The differences between the two stages are numerous, the most obvious of which is that, now that you have your degrees, you will be able to land good jobs, earn your own livelihood, become independent of others, and look straight into the future for charting the course that you want your life to take. While this vision is both appropriate and legitimate, I would like to inject into it a notion that gives it a slightly different twist.

Briefly, this notion rests on the belief that, although individuals are to be credited with whatever achievements they attain, many more entities have contributed to the realization of these achievements than the individuals' efforts and hard work. Most of these entities are identifiable, albeit unquantifiable, and they essentially boil down to *society*: the individuals, groups, and institutions that surround the individuals as they strive to reach a goal, supporting them in multifarious ways. You yourselves, I am sure, remember how in the past four years some people prepared your meals; others served you coffee when you wanted to socialize; others covered your expenses; a guard protected your building; an employee of the municipality cleaned your street; a doctor attended to your ailments; the university's staff showed you the ropes; its librarians carried your books from the stacks; its faculty gave you lectures, trained your minds, and guided you to opportunities in your

fields; and the university overall opened up for you even more opportunities that realize your potential beyond your fields. And all of these are merely examples. What does one do with such support one has received when one reaches a milestone in one's life? Well, I think it is not enough that one should duly admit that society has played a part in one's success, but one must genuinely believe that one has a debt to society, which, like all debts, one must pay back. How one does that varies with what skills one has accumulated: one may serve in the public or private sphere, teach in a variety of forums, do volunteer work of various kinds, or create opportunities especially for people less fortunate than oneself. But no matter what we do, we should keep in mind that our engagement with society is a must. Seen from this perspective, I would characterize the past four years of your lives as years of *taking*, and the coming years as years of *giving* -- to society. So do look to the future and to building successful careers, but don't forget your societies. It is a trust, an *amana*, as we say in Arabic, that all of us must always carry.

(2) But as I reflect further on you, on us, as graduates of the finest institution of higher learning in the Arab world, I cannot help thinking that we actually are not only bound to serve our societies; we should be leaders in them. This is the second thought I would like to share with you. For, your admission to and graduation from AUB means two basic things: that you are among the best minds in your respective societies; and that you have received in the past four years an education of the highest standards, one that promotes intellectual curiosity, disciplined analysis, critical thinking, independent judgment, scholarly integrity, and the aspiration to excellence – all of which constitute the fabric of what leadership is all about. AUB, furthermore, has been able to accomplish, and to impart to its students, since its inception, something more subtle though not less important: a unique balance between belonging to the region with its specific, multi-layered heritage, and propagating an open, comprehensive, forward-looking approach to education, one in which the mind can explore things freely and create something new out of them. And this, too, constitutes the fabric of what leadership is all about, allowing one to be anchored in the region while at the same time ready to discover new horizons anywhere, then to show others the contours of those horizons – i.e. to lead them. It is, thus, not surprising that AUB has been a cradle of leadership in the Arab world,

with scores of its graduates, for over a century, leading the way in politics and diplomacy, scholarship and science, education and journalism, business and finance, and in the various professions that are essential for progress in modern society.

And now, the time has come for you to follow in the footsteps of the previous generations of AUB-graduate leaders, since AUB has allowed you, like them, to be simultaneously anchored firmly in this region and free to shape the fruits of liberal education in its most excellent form. As such, you represent some of the most privileged people in your societies; and, as I said before, you will have to pay your debt back to society, but you are also capable of leading in it as well.

Now, you might say that leadership is arduous, cumbersome, and indeed undesirable today, given the enormous problems and seemingly infinite difficulties this region is facing. While this is true, remember that every generation of leaders that preceded you faced enormous problems too, and yet they did not give up -- and if they succeeded, so can you. Besides, leadership is needed -- and it shines -- especially in times of hardship, when challenges abound -- and there is no question that the Arab Spring poses huge challenges in the region -- but it holds great hope too. And then there is the big question: if you do not take up positions of leadership, who is going to? Your societies are calling upon you to lead, and the need in them for fresh, enlightened, and bold leadership is so dire that I cannot see how you can turn a deaf ear to their calls. Indeed, it looks to me that you almost have no choice but to lead, and lead you must at least try.

(3) The third and last thought with which I would like to leave you revolves around books; on the surface, it seems as if it is unrelated to what I have just been saying, but it really is not, since not only has the university made books your companions in the past four years, but books are intimately connected with the Middle East in which AUB is anchored. This is a region that witnessed the dawn of human civilization several millennia ago, in the Nile valley, in Mesopotamia, and on the coast of the Mediterranean, including Lebanon's, and that gave the world the alphabet and guided mankind to reading and writing. The latest incarnation of this civilization, the subject which I study, is the Arab-Islamic civilization, in which seeking knowledge, or *talab al-'ilm*, is an unequivocal cornerstone, and the love of books an unmistakable hallmark.

I would like thus to use this opportunity to encourage you as strongly as possible to retain books – in any format -- as your constant companions after graduation, indeed for the rest of your lives, for the modern tools of quick, restive access to information do not replace them, nor can they provide one with the wisdom, inspiration, and joy that books can. In order to persuade you, let me cite the chant in praise of the book

composed by al-Jahiz, the towering ninth-century Arabic prose writer and scholar, in one of his books:

A book, if you consider, is something that prolongs your pleasure, sharpens your mind, loosens your tongue, lends agility to your fingers and emphasis to your words, gladdens your mind, and fills your heart. . . . Moreover, have you ever seen a garden that can go into a man’s sleeve, an orchard you can take on your lap, a speaker who can speak of the dead and yet be the interpreter of the living? Where else will you find a companion who sleeps only when you are asleep, and speaks only when you wish him to? . . . To my mind, there is no pleasanter neighbor, no more fair-minded friend, no more amenable companion, no more dutiful teacher, no comrade more perfect... than a book

Of all this lovely hymn, I find the portrayal of the book as “a garden that can go into a man’s sleeve” and “an orchard you can take on your lap” almost prescient, indeed more fitting of today’s small tablets filled with hundreds of e-books than of the bulky tomes that books were before the advent of printing, when al-Jahiz was writing. So here you have a concrete proof of the incomparable value of books!

In conclusion, I would summarize what I said by calling upon you to be engaged citizens, committed leaders, and avid readers. I wish you bright futures, and once again congratulate you on a job well done.