

Graduate Commencement keynote speech: Donna Shalala

President Dorman, Trustees, members of the faculty, fellow honorees and fellow graduates and family.

It's a great honor to receive an honorary degree from the American University of Beirut. This is the most important university in the Middle East and one of the great world universities. It is not possible to go anywhere on this earth without meeting a proud AUB graduate. They are leaders in politics, healthcare, business, government and education.

On my way here today, I was thinking about one of Lebanon's greatest national treasures - cedar trees.

Cedars are part of our noble Phoenician heritage of shipbuilding and trade. There's a cedar on Lebanon's flag. And personally, I love the smell of cedar - because it reminds me of my Lebanese roots and my deep love for this magnificent country.

As I was thinking about the cedars of Lebanon, I couldn't help but think about my own country's great forestlands. There is none more beautiful than Yellowstone National Park. Let me tell you something about Yellowstone.

Almost 20 years ago, a terrible fire broke out in Yellowstone. Fed by high winds and a long period without rain, the forests of Yellowstone burned for weeks. Thousands of volunteers came to Yellowstone to fight the fires. Although these volunteers fought bravely, and at great personal risk, they had only limited success. Eventually the snows came, and the fires were put out. Still, many people feared that this great national park would not survive. But by the next spring, new plant life was already coming up through the ground. Wild and colorful flowers bloomed. Young trees replaced the old ones. And the vitality of Yellowstone proved itself to be eternal.

And so it is with the American University of Beirut - and all of Lebanon and the Middle East. You suffered through many difficult years of civil war. Your Arab Spring - the recent struggles -- too many lives lost -- across the Middle East -- now holds out the hope for more economic, social and political opportunity. I believe the vitality and spirit of Lebanon and the Middle East is as eternal as the forests of Yellowstone. Life springs from the ashes - and the future is born again.

I mentioned my Lebanese heritage. My grandparents left Lebanon at the turn of the century - and headed for America. My grandfather Shalala told me he left to avoid being recruited - involuntarily - into the Turkish army, and for the opportunity and economic promise of America. He arrived in New York with only a few dollars in his pocket.

They brought their Lebanese culture, cuisine, and spirit with them. I grew up in the large Lebanese- American community in Cleveland, Ohio. I was surrounded by family and friends who re-created for me the Lebanese community my grandparents knew when they were young.

This is not my first visit to this university. I first came in 1963 – almost 50 years ago. I came from Iran - where I was serving as a United States Peace Corps volunteer - to join AUB faculty to teach English as a second language to teachers in an UNRWA refugee camp in Sidon. I can remember to this day - the first time I walked across the AUB campus. It was exciting and beautiful.

My father loved the work of Lebanese poet, Kahlil Gibran, who once said, "The only way to help yourself is to help others." Those words echoed the words of President Kennedy - who died the year I came here to teach - when he said, "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country."

My generation of American leaders listened to both the Lebanese poet and the American President. We listened. We learned. And we did our best to follow. You must too.

Young people across the Middle East have shown unbelievable strength of character in challenging the status quo. The faculty here never abandoned their sacred duty to educate and enlighten - your doctors and nurses kept your magnificent hospital open to patients - no matter what dangers they faced each day. This university is like a special kind of birthday candle that is sold in the United States - and perhaps here, as well. You think you've blown it out - but it immediately comes back to life. The fire of education at the American University of Beirut is like that. It also refuses to go out. The fact is, this is a great private university serving the public interest, and a great beacon lighting this city, this nation, this region and the world.

As I drove here from the airport, I saw a booming city. A city of new buildings - with more on the way. A city that is still the jewel of this nation and the Middle East. A country with an energetic people. A country of hope and opportunity, where this century will bring prosperity - and we all pray -- peace.

But a 21st century vision for Lebanon and the Middle East will not arrive on its own. It has already taken too many lives. It will take the leadership of the graduates of the American University of Beirut. It will test the commitment and the character of this generation of young people.

I did not come here with simple answers to the challenges you face. That would be arrogant. But I know universities and their role in economic development - and the preparation of a workforce and leaders for the 21st Century.

What can this generation of AUB graduates - do to make a successful passage in this century? How does the Middle East secure again its rightful place as a world leader in commerce, education, art - and of particular interest to me - health and science? On these questions I have some thoughts.

What now distinguishes the United States from almost every place else on earth is our firm commitment to build a nation using the skills of all our people. That means men and women. African-Americans, Latinos and Arab-Americans. Young and old. Rich and poor. Urban and rural. We strive to tap into the talents of everyone.

Call these talents the building blocks of nationhood. I don't mean roads, and bridges, hospitals and new office towers. I mean those who will construct a new world. Men and women -- their minds, bodies and spirits. So if I may, allow me to seize this opportunity to give back to the land of my grandparents, and offer three challenges to the newest AUB graduates.

Three challenges involving the mind, body and spirit.

First -- the challenge of the mind -- is to never stop learning.

After food, shelter and family, learning is a basic human hunger and requirement. It's the water of progress, the key to everything we want for ourselves, our nations and our world. This ancient value made this region the cradle of civilization. But centuries ago, learning was a luxury reserved for the few. Today it's a survival skill for all.

In this Age of Democracy, you need learning to be better, more informed citizens.

In this Age of Change - when half of all scientific knowledge will be obsolete in a decade - you need constant learning to adapt to change, to stay ahead of change, to harness change.

In this Information Age, you need learning to pull knowledge from the raging river of data flowing over the Internet and bouncing off of satellites.

In this Computer Age, you need computer learning to join the electronic web of nations, systems and people -- where isolation is impossible, and where we're all citizens of the world.

In this Golden Age of Science, you need learning to seize the opportunity to achieve new breakthroughs, and apply them to better people's lives.

Finally, in this Age of Globalization, you need learning to leap over the old boundaries of culture, tradition, religion and geography to embrace the world and its wealth of diversity. You must see diversity as strength.

That is the story of AUB.

Here, you learn how to learn. Earn a respect for learning. And develop a yearn to learn, throughout your lives.

That leads to my second challenge today -- a challenge of the body: Respect the gift of health.

There's an old Arab proverb that says, "Where there's health there's hope, and where there's hope there's everything."

That's true whether we sit in the shadow of the cedars of Lebanon or the pines of Yellowstone National Park. It goes without saying that nations cannot hope to rebuild themselves, or sustain themselves, or improve themselves, without a healthy population. Health is the beginning of effective social and economic development. And the beginning of good health is preventing bad health.

All of us who work in medicine/nursing, public health or scientific research also have a special role to play in any effort to ensure a healthy population.

That leads me to my third challenge today -- a challenge of the spirit -- captured in another Kahlil Gibran's maxim, "It is well to give when asked, but it is better to give unasked, through understanding."

This challenge is about who we are. About building a love for ourselves, for our community and for world peace.

Finding our common humanity and solving our problems together is not a dilemma for any one of us, it is a dilemma for all of us. Peace. Prosperity. Brotherhood and sisterhood. These will come - as Kahlil Gibran said - through understanding. By all of us working to make ourselves more tolerant, more educated, more open-minded, more compassionate.

When these become the qualities that mark our spirits - our spirits will become the tools with which we can build or rebuild great nations.

What constitutes national greatness is a resilient spirit.

We see it here in the promising minds and lives of AUB graduates.

And you certainly see the great spirit in the diversity of cultures, traditions and religions here in Lebanon and around the Middle East.

It is this spirit of tolerance that your first President of AUB, Dr. Daniel Bliss, dreamed about.

So my final challenge today is to carry forward the spirit of AUB in whatever you do and wherever you go.

I say that particularly to the newest graduates of AUB. Because remember, when you leave here, you will enter a world where you will no longer be judged by your grades, but by your character. By the promises you keep, and the changes you shape. By the love you give and the help you repay. By the examples you set, and the challenges you meet. By your guts and your heart.

These are the standards by which we will judge each AUB graduate -- no matter what profession or dream you choose.

At the end of World War II, as President Harry Truman reflected on all of the men and women who struggled, sacrificed, prayed and perished to free the world of tyranny and terror, Truman settled an age-old question: He said, "Individuals make history and not the other way around. Progress occurs when courageous, skillful leaders seize the opportunity to change things for the better."

The spirit of the Arab Spring will thrive if it learns from history.

The young people of the Middle East are leading the way.



They have learned at the beginning of the 21st century they must be their own messengers of change – honoring the past while having the compassion, sacrifice and endurance to re-write the future.

I wish for you the best of everything – and that all your dreams come true.

I wish you compassion, sacrifice and endurance.

I wish you good health, great friendships, and love.

I wish you uncomfortable but exciting lives.

Congratulations and God speed. Thank you.