

Commencement Exercises 2015
May 30, 2015

President Peter Dorman

Graduates of the Class of 2015,

This is a very special day full of excitement and anticipation, for you and your families; and it is also mingled with a touch of poignancy and sadness, on account of classmates you whom have befriended and whom you may not see again for a long time. So, as you sit here politely—and with impatience for the passing out of the diplomas—I would ask you only to pause for a few moments and take note of this particular moment in time as it passes us by. Today is a moment when the past meets the future.

The past is easier to reflect on. You know very well where you have come from, and why you enrolled at AUB. First and foremost, your parents probably wanted you here: they are deeply invested in your future and your happiness. I hope you came willingly and happily! But now a new phase of life opens up for you, and after all, the real purpose of a degree is to certify young men and women in specialties that meet the demands of the marketplace outside these campus walls. You have expectations and plans that we all hope will lead to long and successful careers.

But the future is more difficult to anticipate. With the galloping pace of technology, communication, and globalized economies, it is ever more likely that graduates these days will spend their lives not in a single career, or with the same company, but they will hold different jobs that will challenge them in different ways. It is harder to predict where the future will take you in your life journeys. You may have a degree in one field but will probably discover applications in another. The galloping pace of modern life is not a new phenomenon.

Almost 80 years ago, in 1937, the French poet and philosopher, Paul Valéry, observed:

L'avenir est comme le reste: il n'est plus ce qu'il était.

“The future is like everything else: it is no longer what it used to be. By that I mean we can no longer think of it with any confidence in our predictions.”

Nonetheless, tonight is the point at which your life journeys begin. Especially in the context of today's troubled Middle East, the greatest strength of AUB lies not just in its unsurpassed professional training. It is AUB's commitment to a broad-based education, in which students are exposed to the ways the human mind seeks after knowledge in many different fields of inquiry. This is the liberal arts foundation—which by itself offers no guarantee of a specific career, but—instead—offers possibilities for many.

In fact, you didn't sign up to major in the liberal arts—no one does. But it crept up on you nonetheless.

For example, you know that the natural and social sciences are grounded in a methodology that is evidence-based and evidence-driven. Scientific method is grounded in stated hypotheses that can be demonstrated or disproved through experiments. Results must be repeatable multiple times to establish proof. And the scientific method is hugely rewarding and measurable.

Year after year, knowledge demonstrably grows, along with humankind's technical capabilities. The 20th century alone has seen the development of space flight and atomic power, the theory of relativity, the discovery of DNA, the validation of the theory of evolution, and *in vitro* fertilization. Last year alone, the existence of the Higgs boson was proved, an elementary particle whose existence was hypothesized almost fifty years ago, lending credence to the Standard Model of particle physics. Shortly after, a little-known instructor at the University of New Hampshire in Durham provided a conclusive argument proving the "twin prime conjecture" in mathematics, which may have been first put forward by Euclid of Alexandria, who lived in Egypt around 300 BC. It appears we waited 23 centuries for that proof to appear.

Just as vital, from your studies at AUB you also understand that advances in science raise other questions that touch on ethical assumptions and social behavior. The way we live, or choose to live, is always impacted by new advances in technology and science that alter our perception of the world.

Our species hasn't done so well in this respect. The greatest disasters of the 20th century include two devastating world wars, dozens of regional conflicts, genocide, persistent poverty, and extremist ideological movements. These may be defined as failures of the humanistic sphere, failures that have been aggravated by deep chasms of willful misunderstanding and closed minds that we cannot seem to eradicate, as well as prejudice based on the characterization of groups of people as the untouchable "other." Current events close to home in the Arab world—but elsewhere in the world, and I certainly include the United States—give us daily examples of these failures. The future is unpredictable and complex in ways we don't fully comprehend.

These festering problems of human relationships are centuries old, and they are immune to scientific proofs. There is no upward path of progress that we can happily trace: these problems require the painful relearning of old lessons by every generation. By its very nature, humanistic inquiry asks big questions that have no definitive answers, or rather have multiple correct answers. Every generation must supply its own, made more difficult by the advances in technology that accompany them. The world is a rapidly changing place, and the future isn't what it used to be.

But I am encouraged by the thought that all of you graduates have the ability to conduct simultaneous conversations about both calculus and the Epic of Gilgamesh, a span of artistry and science that covers roughly 4000 years of human history and achievement.

That is why we are convened today on the Green Field: in recognition that you are not just graduates of Engineering, or Arts and Sciences, or Business, or Nursing. You are shortly to become alumni of AUB, with abilities and gifts that bind you together in common knowledge and experience, and that far exceed the narrow definitions of your degree.

Your depth and breadth of understanding in the very different approaches of both science and the humanities, I believe, encompass the richness and true value of an AUB degree. But another component is Lebanon itself.

As most of you know, I was born at the American University Hospital and spent my childhood in this country. My father grew up in a sort of post-Victorian tradition. He was deeply interested in every aspect of the natural world, and he involved all of us in his pursuits. Our family would pass every summer in the town of Shemlan, and we would spend hours collecting plant samples and pressing them, mounting them on sheets of paper and labeling them by their common and Latin names. We would seek out banks of colored sandstone and fill glass bottles in different patterns of red, orange, white, and purple sand. By night we would scan the heavens with a telescope and memorize the names of stars and constellations—many of which have Arabic names. My father knew where we could find hillsides where loose shale would mark the location of fossils lifted millennia ago from the sea bed, and we would hunt for sharks' teeth, the hardest fossil of all to find.

He would take us to visit Nahr el Kalb, just south of Jounieh, where the river pours out into the sea below a rocky headland that blocks the coastal path. In ancient times, a narrow path was the only access around the headland, and passing armies carved successive records of their conquests in the bedrock. The earliest stela at Nahr el Kalb belongs to Ramesses II, carved over 32 centuries ago, the next is that of Esarhaddon of Assyria, some 500 years later, then Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, followed by Greeks and Romans, the Ottomans, and Napoleon III, leading all the way up to the independence of Lebanon. In this country biology, geology, and human history are literally carved in the land.

AUB is an indelible part of Lebanon and has a specific sense of place in each of us here present. Lebanon is a trilingual civilization, fluent in Arabic, English, and French, that looks both East and West. Thanks to this diversity, it is culturally and historically more advantaged in terms of its size than almost any country in the world. Lebanon has its challenges to be sure, but we all partake of its unique heritage.

After Commencement this evening, you will have a chance to reflect on your years at AUB by the challenges that made you grow, by those classmates you hold dear, by those teachers who inspired you—and by your own connection to Lebanon. Perhaps, in years to come, you will find that part of your own history has been carved into this land as well. Along with you, I will also be reflecting on my years as president of AUB and a son of Lebanon, grateful for having known so many of you gathered here tonight, in the sure knowledge that your personal journeys will lead you to enriching and rewarding joys. For tonight is a moment when the past meets the future, for all of us.

Yogi Berra, former great baseball manager of the New York Yankees and author of the unwitting *bon mot*, once said:

“If you don't know where you are going, you might wind up someplace else.”

These days, even if you do think you know where you are going, you may wind up somewhere else. The world has become a fluid and entrepreneurial and infinitely varied workplace. Are you ready for it?

I believe you are. As you depart from the Green Field tonight, I extend you my warmest congratulations and wishes for a life of true abundance, as promised over AUB's Main Gate, in the fullest and broadest sense of that word.