

The Ties that Bind
2022 Commencement Address
President Fadlo R. Khuri
June 2022

Trustees, Faculty, Staff, Families and especially Students of The American University of Beirut's graduating Class of 2022,

Welcome to your long-awaited graduation. For several years, you have embraced the shining landmarks and walked the shaded paths of this iconic institution. You graduate today with your parents seated behind you on this magnificent Green Field, the first class since the summer of 2019 to have that privilege. You receive your degrees alongside five magnificent women and men who have helped make the world better, the first honorary doctorates that AUB has awarded since that haunting day 3 years ago, when all things seemed possible, before Lebanon descended into chaos and the world sank into an unforgiving pandemic that cost upwards of 15 million lives. Most of you will now leave AUB, but as I will point out to you this evening, AUB will never truly leave you.

To complete your studies, most of you have drunk many a cup of coffee. It is the way of generations before and hence. One last cup of coffee before you go, as Bob Dylan so memorably sang.

“Your breath is sweet
Your eyes are like two jewels in the sky
Your back is straight, your hair is smooth
On the pillow where you lie
I don't sense affection
Nor no gratitude or love
Your loyalty is not to me but to the stars above”

Many of you, our students, will leave Lebanon and AUB within the next few months in pursuit of your academic or professional ambitions, building on the strong foundations you formed here at this campus and in this country. Some of you will look back on these years with the sense of weariness, perhaps even bitterness for this country, your recent experience echoing that view Dylan had of his mysterious lover,

“I don't sense affection
Nor no gratitude or love
Your loyalty is not to me but to the stars above”

Others will feel an even more profound sense of loss, a lament or Ritha'. I know of no greater lament than Al-Rindi's bittersweet cry for the loss of many of Andalusia's greatest cities to the Spanish Reconquista, written expressly for the 13th century fall of Seville. In his epic lament,

"إِكْلَى شَيءٍ إِذَا مَا تَمَّ نُقْصَانُ
فَلَا يُعَزَّرُ بِطَيْبِ الْعَيْشِ إِنْسَانُ
هِيَ الْأُمُورُ كَمَا شَاهَدْتُهَا دَوْلُ
مَنْ سَرَّهُ زَمَنُ سَاعَتِهِ أَزْمَانُ..."

Just this last month, we witnessed yet another tragic moment of cruelty, the murder of the iconic Palestinian journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, an attempt to further embitter and alienate a people under siege. This is one of the latest (and unfortunately not the last) of many brutal attacks on journalists and activists, including in Ukraine and many other countries, as well as in our beloved Lebanon. As lines from the Game of Thrones memorably state, "The Night is dark, and full of terror." Art imitates life, even in its grimmest, cruelest, most alienating moments.

Let us pause for a moment to consider that there are more to your ties to AUB, indeed to your home countries, Lebanon among them, than that expressed through two bittersweet poetic symphonies, written some 700 years apart. In doing so, let us pass briefly over some of the many things that you have had the opportunity and the privilege to witness and accomplish over your time at AUB.

Prior to the summer of 2019, almost all students graduating from the American University of Beirut had an opportunity to spend at least three years on this magnificent campus. While this was denied to many of you for almost two years, the collective efforts of physicians, public health specialists, nurses, students, faculty, staff, trustees and administration, led to the vaccination of 99.7% of our AUB community, and also of their families, alumni, and underprivileged individuals across the country. The American University of Beirut Medical Center rallied to treat the highest number of critically ill patients with COVID-19 in Lebanon, and to heal and treat over 1000 victims of the August 4, 2020 Beirut blast. Students, faculty, staff and alumni have excelled, winning numerous awards and accolades, including this academic year two of the most prestigious prizes: the Nobel Prize in Medicine to Ardem Patapoutian, the Kavli Prize in Neuroscience to Huda Zoghbi, and Silver Lion at the Venice Biennale to Ali Cherri.

In the six- and one-half years since I challenged all of us at AUB to become more intellectually accomplished than we are economically elite, we have almost trebled the number of students obtaining an AUB education on full scholarships, with almost a quarter of our community

enjoying that privilege this last academic year, the highest number on record for fifty years. In the Lebanese parliamentary elections of May 15, 2022, seven AUB faculty members with diverse backgrounds from four faculties stood as candidates, all seven conducting themselves with courage, integrity and equipoise. In five years since restoring tenure to AUB for the first time in 33 years, 200 faculty members have earned this vital protection of academic excellence.

Most importantly, you, our students continue to excel, academically and professionally. You have revived student life on campus since your return on October 1st. You receive and grasp opportunities for a better tomorrow. You contest student elections, hold music concerts, win the most competitive prizes in international sports competitions and global Model United Nations contests. A stunning 85% of our medical graduates match at highly competitive residency programs in the United States at the first two times of asking, our graduates continue to get into the best firms, masters and PhD programs in the world, to win prizes for innovation and for courage. As I told last year's class and I repeat to you, you are our good news for the world, our hope for the better days to come.

The ties that bind you to AUB and to your home countries are far more tensile than you might imagine. I am confident you will remain attached to this, your campus, and will return with an enhanced ability to transform lives. I know this from personal experience as, many years ago, I also dreamed of a return to AUB and to Lebanon. But I was determined to return only when I could make a difference.

Forty-one years ago, I left the American University of Beirut under the din of unrelenting bombing that marked the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Nine years later, I took my new bride Lamya Tannous for our honeymoon in Andalusia. It was in Andalusia where I discovered that the Arabic culture—whose loss Al Rindi lamented—had long taken root. That culture was and remains indisputably and proudly present when we visited modern day Spain, some 724 years after the fall of Seville.

Al Rindi's words offer more than a lament. They are also a reminder to the masters of the moment that time is ephemeral, that, as the Reverend Martin Luther King stated in 1968 at the National Cathedral in Washington DC just a few weeks before he was assassinated:

“The arc of the moral universe bends towards justice.” For many of you, that curve may be imperceptible, but I am confident that you will learn over time that this arc indeed bends inexorably toward Justice.

King's statement, often misquoted, was an expression of Christian faith, and it is vital to acknowledge that justice on earth does not occur absent effort. We must all contribute,

meaningfully and constantly, to bending the arc of that moral universe in the direction of social and environmental justice. You, our students, have been empowered to do great good during your voyage through this most impactful and unique university. You have been taught well and counseled wisely, but you have also formed your own identities, scaled your own peaks, and climbed out of your own valleys. This experience will embolden you and serve you well in the challenging times to come. And the challenges, as we have seen over the last several years, will most definitely come.

Anne Brontë, although lesser known than her sisters Charlotte and Emily, published two novels in her short life. In *Agnes Grey*, she speaks to the oppression and isolation many young women faced in the 19th century but also about human resilience:

“The ties that bind us to life are tougher than you imagine, or than anyone can who has not felt how roughly they may be pulled without breaking.”

You and your families – indeed all of us living in Lebanon these past few years – have often felt near the breaking point. But by sticking together and sticking up for each other, by holding fast to the “ties that bind,” we can weather any storm.

Undoubtedly, you will face further challenges in your life, but do not think for a moment that you will face them alone. Along with your families, loved ones, and friends with whom you have embraced this voyage, you have built deep and binding ties to the American University of Beirut and its community, both here and abroad. Some 72,000 alumni and legions of friends and allies of this university await, ready to help you forge your own personal paths. They too savor the ties that bind.

As you leave this place where you have struggled, fought, loved, lost and won, know that you are part of something greater than yourselves, something vital that you can help make even greater. Know that being an alumnus of the American University of Beirut binds you permanently to an institution that stretches from its eternal home in Beirut, to its new campus in Pafos, Cyprus, to all the countries and regions we serve and impact in the Levant, Arabia, Africa, Europe, America and beyond. It binds you to a band of likeminded, determined, sisters and brothers, determined to work and sacrifice in the name of excellence, both for its own sake and for the greater good.

Congratulations to you all, AUB class of 2022!