

Learning how to fly without a safety net
Opening Ceremony 2015-16
Dr. Fadlo R. Khuri

Good afternoon. And welcome to AUB. My name is Fadlo Raja Khuri, and it is my pleasure and privilege to start my service as the 16th President of this most vital and vibrant institution of higher learning. I wanted to talk to you today about developing and nurturing a culture that allows for the pursuit of excellence without the constraints of fear of failure - a culture of high risk, high reward scholarship and education, where well intentioned mistakes are informative and treated with guidance, understanding and affirmation.

The award winning novel, *Let the Great World Spin*, by Colum McCann, tells the tales of several citizens of New York City simultaneously from various perspectives. It includes the real life story of the tight rope walk by Philippe Petit on 7 August, 1974, a death defying, and scarcely believable journey between the ultimately tragic twin towers. He violated at least a dozen well considered and well intentioned safety laws but they were all dropped in exchange for his high wire performance in front of children a few weeks later. The book itself has other far more somber tones, and a deeply rooted "on solid ground" antithesis to Petit's soaring act.

And yet every character is a study unfinished, a study in insight, a study in hope. As one of them says: "Good days, they come around the oddest corners."

McCann's book won virtually every major prize other than the Pulitzer. It is worth noting that his view "from the ground" is every bit as gripping as that from the air. Petit's career took off as he became a master of many previously un-mastered fields, and he moved to New York where he still lives. As a boy of not quite 11, living in a Lebanon and an AUB that seemed not far removed from idyllic, I was not sure what to make of this high wire act. Why had Petit done what he did? What did he hope to accomplish? Was he mad or brave? Or both? In 1986, while I was at Columbia, I saw him take his by now universally famous high wire act to the Lincoln Center for the reopening of the Statue of Liberty. I still could not be sure whether he was madman or maestro.

In 1982, I had a similar experience in a scientific vein. The first class I signed up for at Yale on transferring from AUB was Introduction to Genetics, taught by a slight, quiet and eminently approachable man named Sidney Altman. Dr. Altman, it emerged, was once something of a pariah in the scientific community, everywhere but at Yale. His magnum opus or his crime, depending on one's point of view, was that he discovered that the RNA component of the Ribonuclease P protein complex, had catalytic functions previously considered inconceivable. Unfortunately for Dr. Altman, it was unverifiable by others at the time. His teaching load increased, and the gracious Dr. Altman was more or less ostracized in the broader scientific community, but he was certainly well liked and respected at Yale. This course of events continued until something miraculous happened. Like the aerial artist, Philippe Petit, Altman was a scientific high wire artist whose work was subsequently confirmed in the early 1980s by a Japanese research group. All of a sudden, Sid the pariah became a tenured professor at Yale, Chair of the Biology Department and Dean of Yale College. Before the decade was over, the reluctant professor had won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry. More curiosity. More out of the box behavior. Another figure once considered mad (or at least crooked), was now a celebrated hero.

So what are the things that Philippe Petit and Sidney Altman had in common? Fluency in the French language certainly, but that couldn't be it, surely. Good parenting? Clear in Altman's case, as he speaks

about learning the value of the work ethic from his immigrant parents, but not so much in Petit's. He was expelled from as many as 5 schools growing up. At any rate, many of us have the fortune to have been parented well and we don't climb across the top of tall buildings nor do we shatter existing scientific paradigms. There was something innate in each of them, but there was also something about the societies where their greatest gifts were celebrated and not denigrated and where their greatest accomplishments were achieved. Let's look a little more closely.

I started by telling you that Philippe Petit was not arrested nor thrown in jail. Unlike his adolescence in France, in New York, Petit was celebrated and instead, his term was commuted to service to children. He in fact decided to live in New York for the rest of his life where his feats are memorialized now in movies and novellas as well as in the wonderful book that I cited. Sidney Altman was treated as a revered and respected member of the Yale community. He was not a pariah at Yale. He was happy and open, and when the floodgates broke open and his shocking impudence in challenging scientific convention was proven correct, he had nary a detractor across Yale's gleaming towers. Yes, they both soared above us mortals because they were brilliant, and had much of the stuff of genius, but also because the greater community rallied around them in their moments of greatness rather than judge them for their presumed folly.

In late 1999, as my first major scientific project at MD Anderson continued to gain pace, it showed that my data were increasingly and irreversibly refuting my initial scientific hypothesis. A major developmental gene and its protein product that were important mediators of cellular maturation and homeostasis (biological equilibrium) were demonstrated to be converted during the carcinogenic process to effectors of cancer progression and metastasis. The more data we gathered, the more certain we were. Of course our first instinct was, we had to be wrong! But on a smaller scale, the support that I had from my colleagues and mentors meant that I was willing to accept this alternate hypothesis. The absence of finger-pointing or a culture of blame made it easy for me on a much smaller scale as it had previously for both Altman and Petit.

What does that have to do with you or with the challenges we face today? How can an aerial artist, a geneticist, and the cultures that enabled and celebrated unconventional genius apply to AUB, a great university faced with a paralyzed officialdom, and amidst a region torn asunder by all-consuming strife, one absent any clear moral compass? What could an aerial artist possibly have to do with the price of bread in Beirut, or solutions to permanently remove our garbage from our streets?

In the midst of all of this, and for us at AUB, I believe the answer is relatively straightforward. Both Petit and Altman were fortunate in that they had many role models in their lives and in their careers. Both cite their many influences and they do so repeatedly. They remark on the influence of others in their ability to think freely and clearly, and to experiment boldly in an uninhibited fashion. These are exactly the qualities our students look to from us as a society of scholars, as faculty, staff, alumni and trustees. They are looking for role models. They are looking for risk takers without judgment. They are looking to us to learn how to fly without a safety net. After all, this is where they will learn to spread their own wings, hopefully without fear of reprisal or of corrugating judgment, as we did when we were ourselves students both here and elsewhere.

In reading and researching the book, *Let the Great World Spin*, I was curious about the title. It had a ring to it, and something about that phrase had a haunting familiarity. I decided to look up the origin of the title and then it all came back to me. The line is from one of Alfred Lord Tennyson's more masterful but less widely known works, *Locksley Hall*.

"Not in vain, the distance beacons. Forward, forward let us range,
Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change"

This powerful poem, written in 1835 by a young Tennyson, still mourning the loss of his closest friend and companion from his college years at Cambridge, Arthur Hallam, traces the emotional journey of a soldier from the Orient.

"Here at least, where nature sickens, nothing. Ah, for some retreat
Deep in yonder shining Orient, where my life began to beat"

Why a soldier from the Orient, I wondered? An Arab? One of us? Tennyson's son, I soon discovered, stated that the poem itself was inspired by Al Mu'allaqat, the unforgettable pre-Islamic poetry highlighted by the matchless poet-prince Umro' Al-Qais, whose songs of loss and love had rekindled my own love of poetry and inspired me to write lyrics and form my band on returning from the U.S. in 1977. Umro' Al-Qais created a poetic genre all his own. He too learned how to fly without a net, but that net was torn from him by the murder of his father by the rival clan Banu Assad. In his case, genius emerged as a result of exigency, the far less preferable path.

قفنا نيك من ذكرى حبيب ومنزل بسقط اللوى بين الدخول فحومل

Of course, as my friend and longtime counselor, Dr. Makhluif Haddadin, Dean of Scientists and Poets alike at AUB, informs me, some orientalist consider Umro' Al-Qais as the greatest of all Arab poets. I wondered if Alfred Lord Tennyson was referring in Locksley Hall to Umro' Al-Qais

بكي صاحبي لما رأى الدرب دونه وأيقن انا لاحقين بقيصرا
فقلت له لا تيك عينك إنما نحاول ملكا او نموت فنعدرا

This is in reference to Umro' Al-Qais addressing his lamenting companion on the road to the present Golan heights, Houran as mentioned, trying to regain his kingdom by soliciting the help of the Byzantine Emperor.

My sisters and brothers, in the course of the coming year, working with our magnificent students, who have come here from more than 60 different countries in order to learn how to fly without a safety net, I ask you to consider the two paths to this form of counter-culture, convention defying genius. A culture of countenance and support versus circumstances of exigency and extremism. I know that you will devote your own remarkable energies to harness the former and counter the latter. Because I genuinely believe that in this oasis of collaboration, of collegiality and of creativity, lay the kernels of the next great geneticist, the next great poet, or high wire artist. Or engineer, nutritionist, architect, physician or business leader. And all they need is to be encouraged to learn to fly without a safety net. Because we will catch them. You will catch them. After all, was that not the purpose of the Founding Father of AUB, Daniel Bliss, when he sought like his successors that the sons and daughters of the Orient, "would have life, and have it more abundantly?" It was not social mobility alone that they thought of when divining this most memorable of phrases, but rather intellectual and creative mobility. It is that which our students crave, and it is that very same mobility that comes with intellectual abundance that our students seek. That is what in the end our mission is, to help develop today and tomorrow's Petits and Altmans, that they may contribute to a society of tolerance and progressive thought. In order to do that

we face a tall order. We must in fact embody those ideals, in order to embolden our youth to provide tomorrow's solutions today, in a society, in a country and in a world that is crying out for those solutions urgently, peacefully but urgently.

So go forth and reach someone, a student, a colleague, a friend, and become their safety net while they learn how to fly at AUB. Do it with tolerance and patience, and yes, without fear, as we are all privileged to live in an environment where the most unconventional and seemingly illogical thought can flourish and change the way we think and indeed do business today. As you do so, pause to reflect upon how fortunate and empowered we all are in the Academy. We must help create transformative opportunities for our students, never forgetting our charge to create a society where not only the people within these hallowed halls, but one day, all citizens of the world "May have life, and have it more abundantly." Thank you for your patience and now, go forth and teach someone how to fly without a safety net.

<http://www.aub.edu.lb/president/Documents/opening-2015.pdf>