

CLASS OF 2006 - GRADUATION SPEECH

By: Mohamad Elfakhani

Representatives of His Excellency the President of Lebanon, His Excellency the Speaker of the House, and His Excellency the Prime Minister of Lebanon, Members of Parliament, Representatives of Major Political Parties, Parents, Grandparents, Families, and Friends, and in Particular, My Fellow Graduates of the Class of 2006.

Graduation day is here. The thought of departing from our beloved AUB is looming in our minds, as feelings of excitement and anxiety set the atmosphere. While eagerly predicting our futures, uncertainty besets our enthusiasm. Uncertainty of what the coming years will hold for us; who will we become, what we will be.

Impatience also fills the air, as we eagerly await the deep and echoing sound of our names resonating through the loud speaker; a declaration of proof that it is now time for us to march proudly up the stage to receive, from our respective Deans, the passports that will smooth the progress of our entry into the working world. Pride for some, relief for others, sadness for most; these are just a few of the emotions sharing a place in our consciousness today.

Today, we, the graduating class, as 136 classes before us, will go out into the world. This new world will no doubt take some time getting used to. A specializing resident doctor at AUH, also a former AUB graduate, half-jokingly told me a few months back that the last pleasant moment of his life was at his graduation ceremony and how it was all downhill from there.

This day will no doubt be one filled with a great deal of reflection. Most of you have probably already drifted off with your thoughts even as I speak to you now.

I recall coming across a piece of literature during my first few years at AUB, back when I still had the time to read, that had a resounding effect on me. The passage was a seemingly simple one, telling of an old man seated by a window on a rocking-chair he had owned since time immemorial, during a serene after-night vigil. He was reminiscing about all sorts of things, his family, relationships, adventures, his tragedies and joys. The night was not really different than any other night, but for this man, its events were startling. He was troubled by his inability to find a satisfying common thread of purpose in his life. He was not in search of some profound statement explaining the

meaning of his existence, but he only wanted to know what had kept him going for all those years, and was keeping him going today. What was he really striving for? The world is full of sadness, he reasoned, and the moments of happiness are short-lived, so what purpose or goal drove him to get out of bed every single morning?

The reason I found this passage so interesting was that I tried to imagine myself as this old man, reflecting on a life that has passed. I suppose sitting here today as graduating students, we represent life just beginning. In a sense, we are now waking from a life of dreams and aspirations, about to enter the real world, only to sit in our rocking chair, 40 or so years from, and reflect.

The Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore once related, "I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy." This statement, though probably meant in an all-together different context, I suppose is very relevant to our lives today. As graduating students, we may now face new challenges as we attempt to actualize our dreams developed over the last few years.

The greatest deeds for humanity often found their first breath of life in the mind of the wishful thinker. Much of the human experience across place and time can be described in terms of dreams; their creations, realizations, destructions, procrastinations. Some dreams are ephemeral, some long-lasting, but many would say that in their variations, dreams make the world go round. Certainly, each of the students graduating on this night has been dreaming since they were young. Here, at AUB, we are taught that dreams are not to be put on the shelf, and are not to be procrastinated or destroyed; they are not to be forgotten, and they are never too old to be lived. They must be part of our lives, a benchmark for our individual and collective progress; they must be consecrated as the agents of change. We now have the rest of our lives to live out these dreams.

In all societies, the hero epitomizes its people's cultural values and its conceptions of human perfection. In ancient Greek mythology, a man would *only* qualify to become a hero when a major obstacle or conflict came to afflict his own life or the lives of the loved ones around him. After mustering all of his resources - the support of his friends or family, employing his wisdom, and affirming his faith in himself - his determination would then lead him into battle with his enemy who represented an immoral threat to humanity. Only in the face of a difficulty or complication could human greatness have the chance of

meeting the criteria of heroism. In other words, a man is not a hero unless he is challenged. Of course, the socio-cultural circumstances of the Greco-Roman world precluded the entry of women into this status of heroism. Now, the concept of a hero has evolved into a purer form that transcends gender.

As we grow older however, we frequently realize, or are informed by the wiser, that we live in a cold and cynical world. It is the all-too-often told story of the passionate student who upon completing university is eager to finally put into practice the ideals his/her major/field professes to contribute to humanity, but is then struck with reality when it becomes obvious the world is too competitive and heartless for such romantic aspirations.

AUB does not fail to make us aware of these realities, and overcoming these challenges and obstacles we will face, will be key to our become heroes and thus living out our dreams. Perhaps how great we will live in the days following university is defined by how great our college days were. Service and dedication to society is as fulfilling as one makes it; and AUB teaches us that commitment and loyalty to humanity is of the most venerable ideals. AUB's greatest success lies in its ability to produce students who find inherent satisfaction in their careers.

Perhaps among the most important of aspirations we should never cease to strive for is that of firmly grasping our culture. It is a necessary, and even more so, it is a moral obligation that rests on the shoulders of the educated of the Arabs, and especially we, at the American University of Beirut, to take great pride in our cultural history and heritage and thus we must not be too absorbed by cultural penetrations of globalization. Indeed we have no need to be. Let us hold dearly what we have. We have nothing to be ashamed of, and nothing will hold us back except the weakness of our willpower. The Arabs were the leaders of scientific and philosophical thought for centuries. Historically, we were the most developed and advanced of civilizations. This university produces great minds every year who feel obliged to put their talent to use outside Lebanon.

Today, the issue of job availability is increasingly become a concern for AUB graduates. As more and more universities sprout around us, AUB faces further challenges in its quest to maintain its status as the "Harvard of the Middle East." AUB can and must play a pivotal role in the near future as a take-off base for brainstorming initiatives concerning expanding the labor market in Lebanon.

I, myself, will be leaving my beloved country of Lebanon in the next ten days though I don't want to; the sad reality for many students graduating today. Universities must generate students that are job producers rather than job seekers. This is the question that AUB must ask itself as it graduates another strong generation. Are we instilling in our students an entrepreneurial spirit?

Lebanon has a lot of problems and uncertainties hovering over its future, but we must look at things positively. We have been at a turning point over the last year in Lebanon's history, ever since the martyrdom of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. This should be more reason for us to seize the opportunity to rebuild our country from a clean slate, but to do so carefully. Indeed we have already seen positive developments. The Lebanese feel freer to voice their opinions; we have secured our autonomy and independence, and most importantly, the future leaders of Lebanon, the youth, are becoming increasingly empowered and involved with their country's future.

Over the last eight years that I have been a student here, I have seen AUB make enormous leaps on many fronts including information technology, student services, as well as basic infrastructure. In parallel, tuition at AUB has also progressively increased throughout the past years. We ask our administration that students should not furnish the entire bill for such large-scale improvements.

Speaking to you all today has been a great honor for me. I'll take this moment to congratulate each of the respective faculties separately. Congratulations to the graduating students of the School of Business, Graduates of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Graduates of the Faculty of Engineering, Graduates of the faculty of Health Sciences, Graduates of the Faculty of Agriculture, and most of all, Congratulations to my fellow Graduates of the Faculty of Medicine.

فأيه الاهل أبناءكم ملتزمين بمغامرة الحرية واعادة أعمار لبنان. هذا فضل يعود لعنايتكم المستمرة. فان انجازاتها هي بفضلكم ونحن مدينون لكم بطرق تتجاوز الوصف وكل ما نستطيع ان نفعله هو شكركم والتعبير عن امتناننا لتفهمكم وتضحيتكم.

على الرغم من أن بعض الشباب مُحِبِّين بعض الشيء، إلا أننا ندعوهم إلى التفاؤل بالمستقبل لأنه لا بُدَّ للعدالة أن تظهر ولا بُدَّ للحقيقة أن تنجلي كاملة، فلا شباب مع اليأس ولا يأس مع الشباب.

وفي النهاية أودّ توجيه تحية للرئيس الشهيد رفيق الحريري و الشهيد باسل فليحان ومن سبقهم ومن سيأتي بعدهم في سبيل حريتنا و بناء الدولة. مُستذكرا قول الرئيس الشهيد رفيق الحريري: " لبنان بلد لكل اللبنانيين نريد أن نعيش فيه مسلمين و مسيحيين بالتساوي و أنه لا أحد أكبر من الوطن لبنان "