My greatest lesson in tolerance came in installments: every Monday afternoon during the spring semester of 2003 in a classroom in Nicely Hall, among a mere 10 students. Most important, the lesson came as a result of the presence of one distinct person.

A man of great aptitude yet of unusually petite stature, complete with the quirks I unjustly expected him to have, he almost skipped into the class in his sneakers, with a little gym bag on his back. He proceeded to do the usual: introduce himself, and then ask us to. He did, unsurprisingly, add a little twist to this, asking us, for a reason still beyond me, to lie twice during our introductions, and to later tell the rest what those lies were. Already showing, or possibly striving to confirm, that he was somewhat unconventional, I felt that taking this course was not only going to educate me, but also expand my ever so limited horizons. I was yet to discover why. At that point I was already guilty of typecasting.

He was a homosexual, and I knew this before I registered for the course from reading samples of his unique and eclectic writing. Despite that fact that I really couldn’t afford to take yet another elective, something told me that taking a course with a gay writer would really pay off.

He constantly went on about how he was weirder than your average-- and different of course-- saying that he embraced this weirdness rather than reject it or feel ashamed. What really marked this first class was that I instantly knew I would never truly deem him peculiar, yet unconsciously believed I could study him almost as if he was going to be my source of inspiration all the same. It was because he believed he was weird when I was convinced that he was quite normal, that I found his presence stimulating. Did he think he was weird because he was different? Was he really different? He was to be my muse—not the authors of the texts I was meant to use as my source of learning.

I later came to the full realization that he fascinated me not because he was gay, but because he embodied all the characteristics of a normal person despite this, as well as the fact that he had numerous books published and received quite a bit of recognition. He had wonderful ways of criticizing our writing, even after our strenuous endeavors to be as different as he so self-assuredly claimed he was. He once energetically screamed out the word ‘awful’ when I finished reading aloud a short story that I had worked on for hours, printed and edited several times, and was quite proud of. Yes, this relentlessness distinguished him as a person.

But in actual fact, he stuttered and he stumbled like the rest of us. When he gave a lecture in front of some one hundred and fifty people, his coyness and often
failed attempts at being humorous captivated me. I was not listening to his discourse on ‘Engagement and Detachment’ with enough attention, as I was more concerned with how he carried himself, and how self conscious he evidently was.

We got into many disagreements over a great deal of issues, but, interestingly enough I can’t really remember more than one of these tiffs. I merely recall how he seemed to listen to me more and more every time I had something to say, no matter how disapproving it might have been. As each class went by, I felt as if he knew me, somehow, not as the girl who became quickly discontent and who took some degree of pleasure in criticizing, but more as someone who was striving to discover her own beliefs, and who was unwilling to admit that she was as much a learner as she was a master. In some distant, strange manner, I was learning to truly view this man as a professor and not simply as a homosexual, just as he had from the beginning, viewed me as a student and not as a rebel without a cause. In one way or another I managed to sideline this individual’s personal life, as tempting as it was to constantly acknowledge and refer to it, and listen to him not only as a teacher, but also as a mentor.

He once again established that he was weird in our final and most informal discussion, which I later learned was his way of bidding us farewell. Being the feisty one I was, frustrated with his constant claims of queerness, I ambiguously told him that ‘we were all weird,’ in an attempt not to belittle him but to equate us all. At that point, when he seemed reluctant to accept this bold claim, I realized even he was guilty of some degree of typecasting. Maybe he thought we weren’t weird enough—we were just regular university students with not much to distinguish us from other students, let alone anyone else. However, it was then that I comprehended that by virtue of our mere presence among one another, we were all connected somehow. Despite the fact that most of us can not immediately relate to those around them, we are all, in fact, inextricably tied.

Admittedly some people told me to not take the course-- to not subject myself to a member of a community that should simply have no place in Lebanon, or the Arab world at that. But, this man’s presence as a visiting professor in AUB embodied a larger implication that I eventually became aware of-- it gave concrete proof that Beirut was once again up and running—as it always was and always will remain. “Everything seemed possible in Beirut then-- every kind of person, every idea and identity:” the words of Edward Said still ring true, some thirty years after he first spoke them. This single person’s teaching in AUB made everything possible in Beirut, and I realized this then more than ever.

People have yet to realize that despite the fact that this is a liberal, diverse institution, tolerance of this sort is extremely hard to achieve, simply because we have all become so accustomed to forming our own definitions of the word.
Many tolerate Palestinians because they are an oppressed people. Many tolerate Americans because most of them really have no power over the actions of their government. Many tolerate Jews because they are people of the book. And some tolerate gays because homosexuality is believed by many to be biological. But despite this acknowledgement of tolerance, we have yet to witness all Arabs, by default, respecting a random Jew they meet, or all conservatives, respecting a homosexual they haven’t even met. What we all must realize is that we should not tolerate because of one reason or another. We must tolerate because as rational beings, we have the ability to do so.

Respect and tolerance, many might say, are one and the same. I beg to differ. It would not be a stretch to say that many tolerate homosexuals, yet do not respect them. Some might say hello to someone in a wheelchair, yet not bend a little to shake their hand.

However interconnected respect and tolerance may seem, they differ to a great extent. Where tolerance should be unconditional, respect is conditional, and requires the personal determination and relativity that tolerance should lack. Ideally, one should learn to respect with time and diligence—not free of personal opinion—yet be able to tolerate regardless of respect. To tolerate is to fully acknowledge one’s presence, not to be okay (or not okay) with someone because of some preconceived notion. To respect, however, is to esteem and admire an individual or group of individuals. It is because of this – that respect can only follow tolerance – that we must tolerate all beings, if not for the sake of being rational, for the sake of giving all the equal opportunity to earn respect, a trait that cannot be matched. This is why tolerance is the linchpin of my essay.

There was a reason why he continually asserted that he was weird. We must all ask ourselves the basis behind why he, I, and so many hidden others, felt he was out of the ordinary. We cannot address these reasons until we admit to ourselves that there is an underlying sociological problem here: one that needs major attention.

Despite this immense yet hidden hitch in the socialization of hundreds of thousands of people in this part of the world, institutions such as AUB hinder its growth. After my experience with the professor I spoke of, I now know that to move forward is to tolerate: to recognize diverse individuals or groups that hold nonconformist opinions or simply opinions that are different from my own. AUB has, in a roundabout yet miraculous way, taught me that come what may--tolerance is the true key to universal respect.