

Բարև ձեզ: Ես շատ ուրախ եմ որ այսօր ձեզ հետ եմ այս հասուն կտրիքով

Thank you President Karin Markides, AUA Executive Team, Board Members, Rectors, Ambassadors, and government officials, faculty, and especially the graduates of 2022 and their friends and families, thank you for having me here.

I have never visited AUA before. But reading a little bit about you I found out that The Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU), The University of California, and The US National Academy of Sciences all have played major roles in the history of establishing the AUA, and some of these organizations continue to collaborate with you. These are the very same groups that have played critical roles in my life and career.

I was born in Beirut, Lebanon, and grew up during the civil war there. During these difficult times, our lives were centered around AGBU. My siblings Houry, Ara, and I all went to AGBU schools (where my Mom was a teacher and later a principal), and I played basketball, tennis, and ping pong at the AGBU sports club. So, they kept us out of trouble, and gave us the most important gift of all: solid early education!

When I was 18 years old, I left my parents, friends, and the only city I had known and moved to Los Angeles, California. The University of California (first at Los Angeles, then San Francisco) played a very important role in the next phase of my education and career. We weren't financially well off, and these state schools provided me with excellent education. I am forever grateful for these opportunities.

Lastly, as I started becoming more established as a research scientist in biomedical sciences, I was elected a fellow of the The National Academy of Sciences in the US. The NAS is a wonderful institution, made up of top scientists. But what really makes them special is that they work tirelessly to advise governments within and outside America to make sure that scientific thinking are used to tackle societies' problems.

So, as you can see, we have a lot in common. The same organizations have shaped us, at the University level as well as the individual level. I believe that education and the scientific method is very important, and that support for education is local as well as global. Just as it should be!

Now that we know each other a little bit better, what do I tell you today on this special day? I know it's traditional to give advice in a speech like this, and I've spent some time reflecting recently on what I wish I'd known 26 years ago when I graduated from Caltech with a PhD. But I will caveat it all with a disclaimer upfront: While my advice is more often sought these days than before the Nobel prize, please realize the Nobel is awarded for a discovery in a specific area of science, and while you might want to heed my advice in sensory Neuroscience, my life-advice might be something you approach with some skepticism.

People often equate receiving such Prizes as the *ultimate* measuring stick for success. And they might want me to tell you that if you work hard enough you will also be very successful. Indeed! if I found success, you can certainly too. However, external validation like awards are only one version of success, and I encourage you to be deliberate in how you *internally* characterize success, because it will inform the paths you choose to take or forego. For me, success means loving what you do and trying your very best at it. I often tell my son Luca that he should choose a career that he loves the process of – in other words, one where he loves the day-to-day work. Any recognition or external validation will come naturally if you take this approach, but even if it *never* came, it wouldn't matter, because you are already fulfilled. And when you love what you do, you don't sweat the small stuff. There is no setback large enough to stop you from doing what you love!

Another thing – even if you know what success looks like, you will still inevitably feel uncertainty about your future or your place in the world or your purpose, and that's perfectly okay. I certainly felt this way many times, as a graduate student and sometimes even afterwards. I wondered if being a researcher was really the path for me. It's easy to view these feelings as uncomfortable or as indicators of failure, but I think that the ambiguous is actually very beautiful. Scientists will be the first to tell you: without the unknown, we wouldn't have curiosity, discovery, or wonder. So, I would encourage you to embrace the moments when you feel unsure and tackle them directly as they lead you to the path forward.

At this point, some of you might also be wondering: outside of seeking your own joy, how can you make the most impact on humanity? As Horace Mann said: "Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity." Although I wouldn't go as far as to say people should die in shame, he makes a good point about another aspect of success. I won't claim to have the answer, but what I can offer is this: in my experience, there is magic at the intersection of thinking *big* and thinking *practically*. Let me elaborate. I had the privilege of being trained by a great scientist and a world class mountain climber, Louis Reichardt. In Lou's climbing career, he tackled the biggest of them all, Mt. Everest, and did it on a new route (never attempted before). As you can imagine, his science mirrored that attitude: go for the really big questions, but only with the technical tools and preparation that put success within reach. One is not enough without the other. It's a tough balance between ambition and practicality, but one I aim for all the time. So, go for Everest, but with realistic planning and the best gear. And this does not apply to questions of science and mountaineering alone. Ask yourself what your country or community needs, and then ask how *you* can contribute to this problem? The intersection of *your* big thinking and thinking *practically* is where *your* victory for humanity lies. If you're looking to maximize your positive impact, this mindset is a great place to start.

And on the topic of positive impact, here's the last thought I'll leave you with: I think that people like me should be asking *you graduates* for advice more often than we do! Your bright minds are critical and valuable – you shouldn't be afraid to speak up and provide your unique perspective, especially in a room full of people who may have more experience than you. Your generation are the ones leading the way to correct things like unfair policies or rules, and the

lack of diversity, representation, and access that have long affected society at large. Have faith in yourself and your voice.

So, decades from now, you might not remember who gave your commencement speech, just like I don't recall who spoke at my graduation ceremony 26 years ago. that's ok! But maybe you'll remember to seek what brings you joy, to embrace uncertainty, to think big, and to value your own perspective. And, of course, to cherish the time you've spent at AUA, this wonderful place of learning and discovery and wonder. Thank you, and congratulations again to the graduates of 2022.