

Universal College of Aley Graduation

Address by President Peter Dorman

Aley, Lebanon

July 1, 2009

Distinguished guests, faculty of the Universal College of Aley, graduating students, and parents of the Class of 2009: I wish to express my appreciation for the pleasure and honor of being invited to address you on what is a most important and exciting moment in your lives. It is a moment when you graduating students will be entering the world on a new footing, and a number of you will be traveling abroad and living away from your families for the first time. The real purpose of this ceremony is to acknowledge your achievements, to mark your next steps on the road to independence as young adults, and of course to award you the diplomas you have worked so hard to achieve. The only real obstacle is that there are usually invited speakers, to whom you have to listen politely—and, as I seem to be the only person standing between you and graduation, I will speak as briefly as possible.

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This day is full of excitement and anticipation, for you and your families; mingled perhaps with a touch of sadness, because of classmates with whom you have made fast friendships, and whom you may not see again for a long time. So, as you wait here—with some impatience for the passing out of the diplomas—I would ask you only to pause and realize that this day, and this moment, is a time of passage; it will always be a threshold in your lives and in your careers. So it is appropriate to consider what this school, and this town of Aley, and the mountains of Lebanon, have meant to you.

As many of you know, I was born in Beirut and spent my childhood in Lebanon, mostly in the city, in the shadow of these lovely hills. For me, this country holds a whole treasure of memories, both good and forgettable—as it must for anyone who has spent the years of kindergarten through 9th grade in the same place. I know that the Universal College of Aley also holds many treasured memories for you as well.

In my view, all of you are most fortunate in having gone to school in Aley, among the mountains that have given birth to so many famous Lebanese statesmen, scientists, and poets.

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This municipality is quite familiar to me, as well, though it is not the restful resort town I remember. When I was a child, we often used to drive up from Ras Beirut through Aley in an American station wagon, on the way to a house my family owned in the village of Shemlan, where we would spend the summer. We did much of our shopping in neighboring Souq el-Gharb. But these hills, overlooking the sea and the airport, were not just places to escape from the humidity of Beirut: they were places to have adventures. It was during those summers that we, as Americans, began to understand the connection the Lebanese have to their land and its natural beauties.

My father, who grew up in a sort of late Victorian tradition, was interested in every aspect of the natural world, and he involved all of us in his own pursuits. We would spend hours each summer collecting plant samples and pressing them until they dried out, mounting them on sheets of paper and carefully labeling them by their common and Latin names. We would seek out banks of colored sandstone and fill glass bottles in different patterns of red, orange, white, and purple sand. By night we would scan the heavens with a small telescope and memorize the names of stars and constellations—so many of which have Arabic names. My father knew hillsides where loose shale would mark the location of fossils, and we would all hunt for sharks' teeth, the hardest fossil of all to find.

One of my father's loves was archaeology. One surprising afternoon he brought us down to the bottom of our property in Shemlan, where there was a Roman sarcophagus cut into the bedrock, and we conducted a simple excavation, looking hopefully for any human remains—we found a single iron nail from the coffin. He would take us to visit Nahr el Kalb, just south of Jounieh, where the river pours out into the sea below a rocky headland that blocks the coastal path. In ancient times, a narrow path was the only access around the headland, and passing armies had carved successive records of their conquests in the bedrock. The earliest stela at Nahr el Kalb belongs to Ramesses II, the next is that of Esarhaddon of Assyria, some 500 years later, then Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, followed by Greeks and Romans, leading all the way up to the independence of Lebanon. In this country history is literally carved in the land. I have found, in the intervening years, that my own history is carved in the land.

That earlier time, four decades ago, was full of a certain naïve optimism on the part of most Americans in their ability to enjoy their own influence in the world overseas. That optimism came to a crashing halt two months after I left Beirut to attend school in the United States, in the fall of 1963, with the assassination of John F. Kennedy, shortly to be followed by the escalation of war in Vietnam and the rise of the civil rights movement, all of which fundamentally changed that country.

If we fast-forward to the present day, we are no longer the same world. The United States has lived through eight years of recent trauma, some of it self-imposed, and Americans, sadly, no longer arrive in large numbers in Beirut. I hope that will change. In the interim, Lebanon has also survived a horrific civil conflict. What has not changed is the land, and the mountains, and the scenic beauty. In my view, you graduates of the Universal College of Aley are enormously fortunate to have come of age in this magical and maddening country, and you are vastly more privileged than most Americans of your peer group.

Lebanon is, at the very least, a trilingual civilization that looks both East and West, fluent in Arabic, English, and French. Thanks to its diversity, it is culturally and historically more advantaged in terms of its size than almost any country in the world. For that matter, perhaps we can say it is culturally and historically more burdened as well.

Nonetheless, after graduation you will have a chance to define your years at Aley by the challenges that made you grow, by those classmates you hold dear, by those teachers who inspired you--and by your own connection to the land. Perhaps, in years to come, you will find that part of your own history has been carved into this land as well. There is none finer in the world.

I have mentioned the importance of considering the “moment we are now in,” on this graduation day of 2009. Together with your own private thoughts and memories of UCA, as you leave this fine school, let us also contemplate the prospect of a new national unity government in Lebanon, together with the remarkable speech by President Obama in Cairo just one month ago, which heralds a long overdue change in the American stance toward the Middle East. We all hope fervently for a more open dialogue that will lead to bridges of understanding, both east and west, but the future--for the moment--remains in suspension. As for all you new Aley graduates, who are soon to be eligible voters, whether in Lebanon or

elsewhere--how will your voices make a difference to that hopeful new dynamic? I am confident you will speak out loud and clear.

I wish you the joy of future years and trust that your quests in life for stability and fulfillment will be rewarded in equal measure. And most especially, I offer you the heartiest congratulations, to you--and to your families celebrating with you--on this memorable graduation day.