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Statements of the Director General

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[American University in Cairo \(AUC\)](#)

Statement To Commencement Ceremony At American University in Cairo (AUC) **by IAEA Director General Dr. Mohamed ElBaradei**

As I was on my way from the palace of the King of Norway to the Oslo city hall to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, I found myself reminiscing about my life - the twists and turns it had taken, and the lessons I had learned along the way.

1. Keep thinking and learning, and use your opportunities:

I remembered that I was a very curious child. I liked to explore and discover. My mother used to lament that once I got a new toy, I would break it to pieces in no time. To me that made perfect sense - how else would I learn how things worked?

I was known to ask questions that often got me into trouble with my parents. Both at school and university, I hated rote learning and the often boring subjects that were part of the curriculum. I knew I had to go through it, but (like I'm sure you are feeling today) I was quite relieved when it was over.



So when I started my graduate work at New York University, I was baffled one Friday afternoon to be handed a so-called "take-home" exam! I was told that I had all the books in the world to consult over the weekend before I handed in my answers Monday morning.

It gradually dawned on me then, and I came to realize to my great relief - that education is not really about how much they try to cram into your head. It is about developing the intellectual skills to be able to keep on learning about yourself and the world you live in.

Our education provides us with some knowledge and the tools to think, and we should thank our professors for that. But I have news for you: the major part of what you learn will come after your formal education.

The philosopher Mortimer Adler put it well when he said that, "No one can be fully educated in school, no matter how long the schooling or how good it is." This is because - he went on to say, "The purpose of learning is growth, and our minds, unlike our bodies, can continue growing as we continue to live." This could not be more true in my case.

So the first point I would make to you is this: Keep thinking and learning. You may be closing the door on the university classroom, but you are about to enter the biggest classroom of all: the "real world". Life is like an extended take-home exam. You have many references at your disposal, but ultimately you will need to turn in your answers. And the questions are tough. How should I live my life? What values will I uphold? Where do I want to make a contribution?

In New York, where I was posted as a junior diplomat, a whole new world was there for me, and I was ready with an open mind to take it all in. I decided to take time off to do a doctoral degree, taking advantage of a scholarship I had earned while doing my Master's part time. This was against the advice of my "wise" colleagues and friends, who could not for the life of them understand why I should leave the easy life of the foreign service and go back to living in a dorm on a shoe string budget.

Along with my studies, I immersed myself fully in the "new world", trying to learn and understand as much as I could about the many things I was not exposed to in Egypt. I got myself a cheap subscription to the opera, went to baseball games, learned about modern art - which became one of my passions - and more importantly was eager to get to know and understand the many different people that inhabited this melting pot of a city. In short, I honed my skills, and broadened my experience.

Perhaps one important lesson I learned from this time is that there is no ultimate truth, no black or white, but mostly a vast grey area that continues to evolve, as we keep trying to understand the world and ourselves. Maybe the only ultimate truth is that we are all part of one human family with shared core values. We should all be proud of our roots, our identity and culture, but we should always remember that our hopes, our fears, our sense of justice and our longing for freedom are common to us all. What unites us is much more than what divides us. And the sooner we realize this, the better off we are.

Everyone gets an opportunity at least once in a lifetime, but when an opportunity knocks on your door you have to be ready.

And my first opportunity came a few years after I had returned to Egypt, and then gone on to Geneva - this time as a mid-level diplomat - when I went to my office one morning to find a letter from one of my former professors in New York, offering me an exciting job with the United Nations. Professors could be useful after all! This was the start of 25 years of international civil service, the career in which I continue today.

2. Live your own life, and take joy in it:

I have no doubt that your parents and professors have made it clear that they are the reservoir of wisdom and good advice, and that you should listen to them. And you should.

But ultimately, you must listen to your inner voice. Being different, creative, dissident or in the minority is sometimes painful. But that is what distinguishes a thinking human being from a member in a herd of sheep. You should assert yourself, express your views and live your life, and not anybody else's.

You should retain the curiosity, excitement and spontaneity of your childhood. You should continue to be a grownup child. You have one life and it is yours to live. And above all, you should have the courage to express your own convictions and beliefs and follow your conscience. If you do that you may lose a few battles, but you will win the war.

My late father, the President of the Egyptian Bar Association, was harassed in 1961 when, in the midst of the most repressive era in modern Egyptian history, he dared to call for democracy and a free press - as he believed deeply that freedom is our hope and our salvation. I too have gone through difficult times in recent years, when I had to speak truth to power on matters of war and peace.

But at the end of the day, sticking to principles pays off. Stamps were issued to commemorate my father, and to recognize my work, and I am also receiving a Doctorate of Laws degree here today.

But beyond this recognition, the biggest pay-off in sticking to your principles is the deep satisfaction that you have been true to yourself.

My mind now goes back to the time when I met this amazing fresh AUC graduate with whom I have been sharing my life for the last 30 years. I remember the modest apartment my wife Aida and I had in Falaki Street, not far from your university, at the beginning of our marriage. One of our main goals in life at that time was to get a bigger apartment to accommodate our newborn daughter, Laila, and our huge dog, Daniel - and more importantly, to earn more money than the 76 Egyptian Pounds per month I was taking home as Third Secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

But as you grow older - more "mature" would be the politically correct word - you realize that once you have achieved a decent standard of living, material acquisitions add little to your happiness or sense of fulfillment. It is the non-material aspects that bring meaning and value to your life: the joy of bringing a smile to a child's face, helping a sick person, taking a walk on the beach or sharing a moment with a friend. I am not telling you to give up your dream of having a fancy car or a nice home - but I am telling you that this alone is not the road to happiness.

3. Be proud of your heritage, and have trust in yourself:

Egypt is a land of ample opportunity. The opportunity both to achieve your personal dreams and to fulfill your social responsibility, with the satisfaction that comes from both. Being in one of the country's best learning institutions, you have a head start and are in a unique position to make a difference. But with that privilege comes responsibility. Whatever career you choose to pursue, I would ask you to be engaged in the future of our country.

Egypt needs you now more than at any time before - your skills, your energy and your contribution. The 2005 United Nations Human Development Report, which ranks countries according to their level of human development, ranks Egypt as number 119 out of 177 countries. This is because our illiteracy rate continues to be at 44%, and our standard of living and life expectancy continue to be below average. Moreover, 50% of our society - women, as well as minorities - remain completely marginalized in political life.

Given this situation, you have a choice to make: you can choose to live in isolation as part of the ghetto of the privileged, or you can choose to be genuinely engaged in building a fair, inclusive and dynamic society.

Egyptians are creative and resourceful, with a deep sense of humanity. Put them in the right environment, and they will excel. Working to improve the conditions of life for your fellow citizens is therefore the smartest investment you can make in your future and the future of this country.

Few peoples on earth have contributed so much to civilization. Egypt is credited with developing the earliest known alphabet. Egypt was the birthplace of the earliest monotheistic religion in human history. The scientific method of understanding the natural world can be traced back to Egypt. In ancient Egyptian culture, women were equal to men, both as a matter of law and in practice - and some of them went on to be queens and pharaohs.

This is a legacy that should give us a good deal of pride and inspiration. Egypt is now going through a critical period of transition: from autocracy to a nascent democracy - from a repressive society based on conformity and exclusion to a free society based on diversity and inclusion. As young people, it is you who can make a difference and move this country forward. You can do this through working hard to ensure that everyone enjoys the freedoms they are entitled to. The freedom to speak. The freedom to worship. The freedom from fear. And the freedom from want.

With freedom comes good governance, respect for human rights, economic prosperity and social solidarity. Freedom brings out the best in you, and the best in you will take you to where you want to go.

So my messages to you today are simple. Keep thinking and learning. Be ready for opportunity when it comes. Treat others with the understanding that we are all part of one human family. Live your own life, and take joy in it. Be proud of your heritage. And engage fully in the future of our country.

God bless you all.

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