

BRUMMANA HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION, 30 JUNE

Dear Dr Khoury, teaching staff, families and above all, graduating students. Thank you for inviting me today. And first of all, Mabrouk to all today's graduates!

So I'm asking for just 12 minutes of your time. That's the penalty for graduating: an old guy like me gets to give a graduation speech and tell you a few lessons in life. Although I'm not sure I will surpass what you have heard from other speakers this evening.

So why listen to me? I've been a civil servant for 27 years... and finally became British ambassador here 2 years ago. The rewards of this career have been fantastic. I don't mean financially. I gave up a couple of well-paid and prestigious professions to become a diplomat. I won't tell you which - your parents may not forgive me.

Anyway, true to the convention of stuffy guests invited to events like these, I want to mention 2 or 3 things I have found in my nearly 51 years which I think might be useful to you.

My first rule is, be ambitious for yourself. I went to an average French lycée in Brazil. It was no Brummana High School or Eton College. It had no graduation ceremony, no school song, and no Model United Nations. But it did teach me to work hard, particularly after repeating a year when I was 14! And so after my baccalaureate, and feeling I had nothing to lose, I had a shot at the entrance exam for Oxford University, as you know one of the best in the world. It was actually the first exam I took in English. Afterwards, Oxford called me at my parents' apartment in Rio to invite me to interview. Hearing an English woman on the other end of the phone, I thought the college secretary was my grandmother. After I had got over calling her "granny" a couple of times, I basically said no. I had other plans by then. Luckily, the people at Oxford knew better, and insisted I come over to see them.

Long story short, I got offered a place, and in due course won a couple of scholarships and a first class degree. The point about a good university degree is this: freedom. You can take a little time to

find what you really want to do with your life. As I said, I had a couple of false starts. It took me a while to work out my priorities. Like many people, perhaps many of you, at first all I wanted was a prestigious job that paid the bills. But then I realized that you're going to work for perhaps 40 years, perhaps more, for at least 45 weeks a year. Do the math! That's 1800 weeks, or 9000+ days. So you'd better enjoy it. In my first real job I was so bored I had to find a quiet corner to sleep most days: I literally couldn't stay awake.

So the first rule about ambition is don't just think about the money. Think about the interest you have in the job, and the difference you want to make. After all, your school's motto is "I serve".

My second rule would be: when you know what you want, really go for it. But in a clever way. Unless you are effortlessly brilliant - not my case - have a look around at the people who are succeeding, or not, as the case may be. When I was at Oxford, I noticed that most people slacked off in their second year: there were no exams, so why bother, right? I decided not to fall into that trap. My contemporaries maybe had a more fun-filled second year. So? My final year was a great deal more relaxed, less revision, and less worry than theirs.

Then, when I eventually decided I wanted to be a diplomat, it took 18 months to get through the selection process. Except at the end of it I was told I had got a place in the Home Civil Service, not the harder-to-get-into Diplomatic Service, which had 25 places for 3,500 candidates (it's even more competitive nowadays). I can't remember exactly why, but I thought there was something wrong here. I challenged the decision - only to be told there had been an administrative mistake! As I say, persistence pays off, and rarely has a down side.

So, first rule: be ambitious for yourself. Second rule: don't give up. I need a third rule, so I'll go with something I was told in my first days in the Diplomatic Service. We young recruits went to meet the head of the Diplomatic Service, Lord Wright. In his 19th century office, full of ticking clocks and oil-paintings of long-past naval battles and exotic colonial outposts, he said to us only one thing which I can still remember: "always tell the truth".

So that's rule number three: tell the truth.

Well, that sounds lame, right?

But it's worth thinking about for a moment. What he meant was that inside the Diplomatic Service, we should tell the truth to each other. When reporting events as an ambassador, it's always tempting to talk up a positive result and your own role in delivering it. But that can mislead decision-makers in London, both on the local situation, and on our leverage to influence it. Second, I think "always tell the truth" meant tell the truth to the boss: if his or her idea is a bad one, then tell truth to power. Don't just say what they want to hear. I'm thinking of the 2003 invasion of Iraq... as subsequent enquiries have shown, there were many ways in which the "truth" was neither properly explained to the powerful, nor advice truthfully given. Telling the truth matters in real life: in diplomacy, and I suspect in most serious occupations. Because the truth has a bite in the tail if you ignore it.

There's another way "tell the truth" is important. It's how, and how hard, we try to "tell" what the truth is in this age of fake news. I would fail miserably if I tried to explain to you how social media, Google searches and use of the internet can simply reinforce your pre-existing views and prejudices: because you know it already.

So what I'm saying is this: if you don't make the effort to "tell" what the truth is, someone else will tell you the "truth" they want you to believe. And I can assure you, they are not doing that to help build you a better future, but to build themselves a better one, on your back.

I would just like to bring in an observation about Lebanon in this matter of the "truth". Lebanon has perhaps more different "truths" per head of population than any country on earth. Starting with the 18 different confessions, each with their own infallible "truth". Then the different versions of history - of the Civil War, of Syria's or Israel's or Iran's role here, of the French mandate or of the Ottoman years. Then the criss-crossing prejudices, feuds or resentments between or

even within different groups, common in any society but here sharpened by the difficult history Lebanon has been through.

This splintering of the “truth” is perhaps Lebanon’s greatest challenge. I believe that a new generation, that can “tell the truth” in both senses of the phrase, can heal Lebanon’s divides.

Before I finish, a shameless plug, or actually a fantastic opportunity for you.

You may be only now starting your bachelors’ degrees. But as I said a moment ago, life – and finding out what you want to do in it – is a journey. You may find a time when you are mid-career, and you need a career break, a change or a boost. Please remember the UK when you do, and consider applying to the Chevening Scholarships programme. It’s a prestigious award, fully funded by the UK government to pursue a one-year master’s degree at any UK university, and is offered to young leaders.

The point is, explore all your options.

So to recap my three tips:

Be ambitious, cleverly. Don’t give up. And find your truth

Because you have great potential. Lebanon has great potential.

And I believe that what unites the Lebanese is stronger than what divides you.

Thank you.