

LCN Awards Dinner Ceremony 2008  
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I

It is indeed a great honor to be invited by the Lebanese Collegiate Network at its inaugural meeting to share some thoughts about the purpose of education, and the responsibility of those of us who have had the privilege to receive, as all of you are doing, a first class education. I wish especially to express my gratitude to Mr. Julien Chemali, your Vice President of Events, and Dr. Marwan Charrouf, our distinguished sponsor for the 2008 scholarship award.

I recognize that we represent here in this gathering the diversity that is the chief characteristic of Lebanese society — for Lebanon is a nation born of many cultures, religions, and ethnicities; it is also a nation whose sons have, since the dawn of history, peacefully traveled the world for commerce and trade. Lebanon is also a nation that has enriched the world with the contribution of many Lebanese who became themselves, immigrants in various lands. And indeed this gathering here today represents many faiths and traditions that all originate from a diversity of nations and civilizations.

Lebanon has been the crossroads of great civilizations that have interacted and established Lebanon as a center for knowledge and enlightenment. It is your country that is mentioned as no other in the Holy Bible, and sung as no other by the great poets of Islam. It is your country that remained a bastion of free thought and of great learning during the ruthless and despotic Ottoman Empire.

It was Lebanon during that despotic rule that kept alive the holy language of the Qur'an, the traditions of Arabic classical literature, as well as translations into Arabic of the great works of the classical literature of Greece and Rome.

Many of you here tonight will have to answer the question asked by John F. Kennedy, which was inspired by the words of Kahlil Gibran: "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." In fact, the whole purpose of education, whether it is received in Lebanon or abroad, is to be of service, not only to one's own people, but to the whole of humanity.

The diversity that separates us is the very diversity that unites us. In fact, any discussion of diversity in whatever context must begin and end with the theme of unity. For diversity without unity, harmony, and spirit ultimately ends in chaos, conflict, and bigotry, while unity is impossible if it is not founded on the principles of justice and equity. At the same time, it is essential to emphasize that any approach to the principle of "unity in diversity" must be holistic. It begins with self-knowledge and develops into a collective consciousness that eventually leads to that unity which is the hallmark of all endeavors designed to serve the best interests of one's country as well as of our ever-shrinking world. In the words of Ameen Rihani:

Remove those banners above your head – speaking of sects and factions – and erase from the tablet of your heart what your predecessors have inscribed therein of prejudice or envy. Purify, my brother, the tablet within yourself and erase from it all traces of defilement. Be thou none other than thyself and inscribe upon this tablet the beautiful, sweet words: Liberty, Truth, Love, Beauty; and be a true human being.

II

In the very brief time that is allotted to me this evening, may I beg your indulgence and be allowed to remind you of the great heritage which has been bequeathed unto you as the children of Lebanon. In fact, it is a unique heritage in every sense of the word. You are the trustees of the noble Lebanese heritage and you should exert every opportunity to become the true servant of your country and its

chosen voice. You should remember the words of your great predecessors, who not only taught how to achieve unity and reconciliation in Lebanon, but have also inspired the world with their message of justice, unity, and peace. Almost 100 years ago, Ameen Rihani expressed as a leader of thought what his duty was towards Lebanon. In *The Book of Khalid*, published in 1911, he declared in a voice to be heard by all his countrymen:

Our country is just beginning to speak; I am her chosen voice, I feel that  
if I do not respond, if I do not come to her, she will be dumb for ever...

Every single one of you, my friends, therefore, is charged with the responsibility to speak for your country, but with one voice. And while preserving the great traditions of the past, the love of liberty, democracy, equality, and respect for the other, you must begin to develop a new frame of mind so that you can move into the future and deal with the challenges of modernity, globalization, and the creation of a sustainable world.

### III

The earliest inhabitants of Lebanon were great merchants, and from the shores of your great country sailed not mighty warriors to conquer the world, but great educators who invented the alphabet and brought civilization to the far reaches of the then known world. Hence, Byblos where the alphabet was invented became known as the city of the book. Generation after generation of men and women in ancient times developed knowledge and progressed as a result of this great invention.

It was your country that became the university and the school, and the training center in all aspects of education for the entire Arab world. As a result, the Lebanese distinguish themselves in every field of human endeavor: in medicine, in engineering, and in commerce to name a few. They made enormous contributions to the welfare and development of the entire Arab world. As great entrepreneurs, they introduced into the life of remote peoples in different lands, both in Africa and in South America, a taste of their cherished food – itself symbolizing the ingenuity, the zest, and the creative genius of Lebanon.

It was your country at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that created what is known as the Renaissance in Arabic Literature. The contribution made by the Lebanese authors and writers of *Arrabitah al-Qalamiyya*, which was based here in the United States, in New York, inspired and fanned into flame the imagination of the entire Arab world.

It was your country that provided the Arab world with its free press, first early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and it was the remarkable achievement of your country that the first woman ever to be the chief editor of a newspaper, both in the East and in the West, was May Ziadeh who emigrated to Egypt and, with other distinguished Lebanese, created the main instruments of culture and education in the Arab world such as the periodical *Al-Hilal* and the other newspapers established by your fellow countrymen.

It is your country as well, although small in its size, which has been great in its influence – a country that, unlike any other country in the world, speaks in three different languages: Arabic, English, and French. The contribution made by the Lebanese in these three languages is not local, but of international significance. Just to name a few: Ameen Rihani, Kahlil Gibran, and Mikhail Naimy in English; George Shehadeh, Camille Abusuwan, and Amin Maalouf today in French; while in Arabic a host of poets from your country sparked a romantic movement unknown before in the annals of Arabic literature. Too many are the names of the men and women of Lebanon who made enormous contributions and led the way in the fields of poetry, the novel, drama, the essay, literary criticism, translation, and journalism.

It was your country that gave the world the gift of a special kind of music through the heavenly voice of Fairouz and the powerful songs of Wadih al-Safi; in the field of composition, the Rahbani brothers

and Marcel Khalife; and in the classical realm the distinguished work of Walid Gholmieh. What we must all remember is that these poets, writers, artists, and musicians expressed themselves as Lebanese and never as the representatives of a group, of a party, or of a faction. They gave voice to the conscience of their nation and went beyond the ephemeral divisions that separate group from group, or community from community.

Out of all the countries of the region, it was Lebanon that became the refuge, the haven, and the protector of every persecuted group. It was an asylum for all those free in spirit, open-minded, and desirous of a noble and dignified life, and today it is the home to at least 23 different religious groups and denominations. Lebanon has the good fortune of being a country of minorities who, when they are united, have the power of the greatest majority in the world.

My dear friends, how fortunate must every one of you feel to be connected with Lebanon. Kahlil Gibran expressed that sense of pride and joy and beauty which Lebanon inspires in every heart that loves her by saying:

If Lebanon were not my homeland, then I would choose Lebanon as my homeland.

Your country is worthy of your loyalty and your steadfast allegiance. Remember the ancient cedars from which mighty emperors and great kings built their temples. Remember also the ancient cities of Tyre and Sidon, the beacons of civilization in ancient times, and never forget the lofty columns of Baalbeck which stand for all time as a testimony for man's aspirations to what is greater and more sublime than himself. Remember the myriad streams, rivulets, and waterfalls. And remember how in the background to your beautiful Lebanon, leaning against God's shoulder the awe-inspiring mountains of Sannin and Fam el Mizab dominate both sea and sky. These are scenes that fire the mind of every Lebanese, and they have remained to a very great extent untouched by the forces which are robbing many a land of its countryside. How can you forget your experiences, early or late, among the mountains, hills, streams, waterfalls, and little copses where the real teacher becomes nature itself, and life becomes man's school? Everything in the heart of what is real Lebanon reveals a message. The mist, the cloud, the earth, the sky, the snow, the flower, the tree send forth a powerful feeling emphasizing the sanctity of life.

You have been blessed because God has bestowed upon you a beautiful and wonderful gift: your Lebanon. Be grateful, cherish it, promote its interests, protect its unity, enhance its influence, and live a noble life that will honor your great country.

#### IV

As I said, the cedar area and its neighborhood were rich with historical and legendary associations but as a reminder that life has its difficulties, and that we should do our best to overcome these difficulties, this same arena has been the battlefield for mythic gods and fighting men. Let us not forget that Lebanon has been enriched by its experience of the civilizations that touched its shores: the Phoenicians, the ancient Egyptians, the Chaldeans, the Assyrians, the Greeks, the Romans, and the Arabs.

On Lebanon's sacred soil the East and the West, the pagan and the monotheistic, the ancient and the modern, the past and the present come together to remind us that without unity, there can be no survival.

The world today faces enormous threats and dangers: the massive production of arms and nuclear weapons; overpopulation; the shortage of food supplies; scarcity of water and sources of energy; the degradation of the environment and the warnings of ecological disaster; the spread of epidemics and uncontrollable diseases; the widening gap between the rich and the poor; the decline in public and private morality; and finally, the need for a complete re-structuring of outdated educational systems

throughout the world in order to meet the demands of a society that has changed and changed rapidly, and can no longer wait for us to act. These are issues that face your country, as they face every other country in the world. Therefore, each one of us has the responsibility to prepare oneself in such a manner as to be capable of serving one's country to the best of his or her ability, and to create the maximum unity possible. In this way, we can make a real contribution to that long-awaited dream of the seers and poets throughout history, namely world unity and universal peace.

Let me end with this quote from Kahlil Gibran, for nothing but the unity of the spirit, through love and respect, can bring us all closer to each other. It is a call for all of us to come together and to sing one song, the song of Lebanon:

You are my brother and I love you. I love you worshipping in your church, kneeling in your temple, and praying in your mosque. You and I and all our children are of one religion, for the varied paths of religion are but the fingers of the loving hand of the Supreme Being, extended to all, offering completeness of spirit to all those anxious to receive it.