



THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO

AUC Alumnae

Hind Wassef '92, '95 and Nadia Wassef '94, '96

Co-founders, Diwan Bookstore

Graduate Commencement Speakers

February 13, 2016

Hind and Nadia Wassef attended AUC in the 1990s, during which time they received both their bachelor's and, like many of our graduates here today, master's degrees from the University.

Hind was an active member of the New Woman Research Centre from 1990 to 1998, where she carried out research and awareness-raising projects on violence against women. In the late 1990s, Nadia also passionately engaged with women's rights groups in Egypt: the Female Genital Mutilation Task Force, the Women and Memory Forum, and the New Woman Research Centre. In 1999, Nadia returned to academia and received her second master's degree in social anthropology from the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies.

In 2001, Hind and Nadia teamed up to co-edit their bilingual book titled *Daughters of the Nile: Photographs of Egyptian Women's Movements, 1900 – 1960*, published by AUC Press. This was the first photographic documentation of Egyptian women's initiatives and empowerment.

Also in 2001, Hind and Nadia Wassef embarked on a new chapter in their lives, joining forces once more. They established Al-Sharq for Bookstores, the mother company that owns the Diwan Bookstore name and other distribution lines. On March 8, 2002 — International Women's Day — Diwan Bookstore opened its doors. It was the first bookstore in Egypt to sell books for children and adults in Arabic, English, French and German, in addition to having a café and multimedia section that stocks movies and music in Arabic and English.

In the last 15 years, the Wassef sisters have revolutionized cultural retail in Egypt, not only in turning Diwan Bookstore into a chain, but also in encouraging others to open bookstores and publishing houses.

In 2011, *TIME* magazine referred to Diwan Bookstore as “a welcome oasis,” and the Wassef sisters received the Veuve Clicquot Initiative for Economic Development Award. In 2013, they were presented with the Best Woman Entrepreneur Award by the American Chamber of Commerce's Middle East and North Africa Council. Most recently, in 2015, they were on the *Forbes Middle East* list of the 100 Most Powerful Arab Businesswomen for their efforts in showcasing culture.

Nadia Wassef '94, '96

It is an honour to be here and a privilege to share today with you. I would like to thank the President of the University and the University Cabinet for extending this generous invitation.

I would also like to offer each and every one of you my congratulations on the decision to go back to university and embrace the arduous process of getting your Masters Degree. This is not a decision that you took lightly given the pressures of day-to-day living, your families, your careers, and the surprises that life serves us—but you did it! And while the conclusion of a chapter brings with it a certain satisfaction, the start of the next is thrilling.

In trying to gather my thoughts for today I am overwhelmed by how much this institution has taught me over the years. First and foremost, I am grateful for the love of reading that AUC instilled in me. This love led to a lifelong relationship with books. Now is the time for my first confession: when you open a bookstore, and then over a decade, run what has become a chain, you realize that you don't actually get to read as much as you would've liked! You do read self help books about keeping calm, managing your time, but literature, the very thing that sustains your soul, doesn't quite make it on your list.

When I received my BA in literature, I was in awe of all that I had yet to learn and understand. And at the age of twenty I can look back and safely declare that I was an idiot. It was only five years after the creation of Diwan that I realized that I was doing as Voltaire prescribed: I was cultivating my own garden. Of course as an eighteen year old reading *Candide*, I couldn't possibly imagine how cultivating a garden was going to get me anywhere, since I really didn't like horticulture or the outdoors at all. But Diwan was my garden, was my corner of the world where I could elicit change, contribute, learn, and help others learn. Diwan became an integral part of my journey. I would like to urge you all to look at your lives as a journey. In this university I was made to read the story of Gilgamesh, the trials of Hayy Ibn Yagzan, and Cavafy's poem Ithaca. It begins with:

When you set out for Ithaca
ask that your way be long,

Given the traffic, we have this covered. But then it continues with:

Have Ithaka always in your mind.
Your arrival there is what you are destined for.
But don't in the least hurry the journey.
Better it last for years,
so that when you reach the island you are old,
rich with all you have gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to give you wealth.
Ithaka gave you a splendid journey.
Without her you would not have set out.
She hasn't anything else to give you.

As a graduate doing an MA in Literature, I was inspired by the late Cynthia Nelson, a professor of Anthropology who was writing the life story of Doria Shafik, an Egyptian feminist, who thanks to her and the efforts of countless women, lobbied for a woman's right to vote—which we got in 1956. I can never forget Ferial Ghazoul who introduced me to the Arabian Nights—her passion for literature. I urge you all to remember those who have inspired you and why they inspired you—whether in daily life or books or films. People who have disappointed you are also an inspiration: don't be that person!

I remember reading Virginia Woolf's *A Room Of One's Own* where she tackles the question as to why, historically, most literature was written by men and not women. She argues that "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." For my second confession today, based on my own experience, I would add to that: a full-time nanny! But this was a conscious decision: I wanted my daughters to live in a home where their mother worked and worked extremely hard at something she loved. This was the best lesson I could offer them.

And here is my advice to you: live deliberately. Decide on how you want to live, and do it consciously, don't do something because that is the done thing or that is how others around you do it. Exercise your right to examine and act—don't be another Sisyphus.

When Hind and I were thinking of starting Diwan, we discussed our ideas with others and we were told that while it was a noble cause, people don't really read and it was doomed to fail given that we had no business experience of any kind, and had just read a bunch of books. Well to us that seemed like the best reason to do something—just when someone tells you that you can't!

To the MBA graduates, here is a confession for you: for the first five years of Diwan's life, we didn't have a business plan, partly because it never occurred to us to write one. Then with the opening of multiple branches, we were forced to read a book about how to write a business plan, bring on a whole bunch of consultants, who had read similar books, and then we came up with our first business plan! Sometimes passion and commitment are just as important.

It wasn't all smooth sailing. There were plenty of mini disasters along the way. But a failure is only a failure if you manage to avoid learning from it. A mistake is a blessing—it's a lesson in how to succeed the next time you try. And the universe is very generous in the lessons that it offers us, we just have to be open to learning and the only way to do that is to make learning a habit. The very act of reading, a solitary activity, forces you to shut out the rest of the world and retreat into yourself and think. And only from there can clarity emerge.

I am reminded of Simone De Beauvoir's timeless quote: "One is not born a woman, but becomes one." I would add that one is not born a success, but rather becomes one, through conditioning—discipline, dedication, passion, hard work. There is one thing worse than giving up on a dream, and that is not having one at all! I've had many dreams and I have been lucky enough to fulfill some of them. In my 20s I was a feminist and saw everything through the lenses of gender. In my 30s I was referred to as an entrepreneur. And then the two categories started mixing. When I would get interviewed there was always a question about women in business, balancing my home life with my professional life, and the barriers to success because of being a woman. In my 40s I realize that I don't take labels well. Being a woman or a walrus can only be a factor if you choose to make it one and I have chosen to formulate my equation differently. I am interested in putting my best self forward, for my own sake and for that of my children.

Egypt, the world, whatever cluster you choose to align yourself to, needs innovation and integrity—a quality we must cherish internally and externally. Egypt demands your hard work and your dedication. Be just to it and to yourself. Yes we have problems, but problems are there to be embraced and reformulated. In the words of Taha Husayn:

... I see Egypt responding to my plea for ever greater efforts to banish ignorance from her midst and provide everyone—rich and poor, strong and weak, keen and dull, young and old—with his portion of knowledge. The delights of

learning will permeate their soul and its light will illuminate every dwelling from castle to hovel. A new life and a new energy will infuse Egypt and will turn her into a veritable paradise on earth.

Life and books can be the best of teachers: the liberal arts will do just that: they will liberate your mind and add justice to your soul—if you engage and let them.

There are so many things that I never imagined, and what is happening right now would be at the top of that list. I never really thought that when I would come back to visit my old university, it would be as a speaker at a commencement. I would like to thank my children, Zein and Layla, for inspiring me to be better and do better, and for allowing me to learn from them. To my father, who isn't here with us but kind of is, thank you for pushing me harder than I thought imaginable, for setting us very high standards, and for introducing me to the to do list—and while I rebelled every step of the way, I am today very grateful. I have spent the last twenty years plagued by my to do list and it has tortured and motivated me. Now I have a to be list instead. To Amr my husband, thank you for making me laugh and for making me cry. Thank you for always fighting for the things you believe in with such eloquence. And after years of calling me a nerd, thank you for going back to school and doing your MBA, and vindicating the nerd. To my mother, Faiza, you are fantastic. Thank you for being strong, stubborn, hilarious, and for always outdoing my expectations. Thank you to Hind for sharing the worst of times and the best of times, for being strong, and for being one of my heroines.

To all of you: thank you for giving me this moment. And to the graduating class of Spring 2016, please go and thank your parents for all they have done for you and continue to do—unasked.

I would like to leave you with a poem by Doria Shafik, from Larmes D'Isis entitled Thanksgiving:

I render thanks
Unto God
To have been born
In the land of mysteries,
To have grown up
In the shadow
Of the palms

To have lived
Within the arms
Of the desert
Guardian of secrets...
To have seen
The brilliance
Of the solar disk
And to have drunk
As a child
From the Nile
Sacred river.

Hind Wassef '92, '95

Members of the Faculty, Board of Trustees, President of the University, Graduate class of 2016 it is a great pleasure to be here with you today.

In thinking what I can possibly impart that might be new or valuable to you, I went into the few years when I was an MA student here at AUC which, my kids in the audience will be amused to know, was last century. And I can safely say that was the high point of my life. Little did I know I was stocking up on ideas and values that in retrospect I understand have completely formed my being and which I've tried to apply later on in life. My reading of French existentialism gave me the necessary conflict to never take life for granted. Live every minute as if it's your last. Hermann Hesse unraveled to me that identity is a kaleidoscope, with different facets of your character shining at different times. So never stop exploring who you are or can be. Joseph Conrad exploded colonialism into my brain. Marx explained like no other how the world moves as a pendulum from idea to opposite and then somewhere in the middle then all over again. Along the way some progress can be charted. But for me what is always at the heart of it, what exists independently of all other, is the idea.

As I grow older, I become more obsessed with ideas. But I find they are only able to take on a life when applied in the real world. What good is morality if you can't use it to create right in this world? What good is an education if it does not go even a few centimeters towards a higher caliber of human beings?

Your degrees have taught you to build buildings and roads, create wealth on stock markets, and carry out media campaigns. But they should have also given you integrity, spoken to the importance of sincerity in life, enhancing human dignity, otherwise, well, you won't have much to tell your children. Children live in their imagination, and when you tell them a story you can see they are living it in their mind, maybe adding bits and pieces maybe injecting themselves into it, all for the quest to find meaning and build their own ideals. As adults we lose some of that along the way. And if there is a nugget of wisdom to be had here it is that a life without imagination is a life without meaning.

We are the only animals on the planet capable of self-awareness, and with that comes the ability to attribute meaning to things. I am always asking what does this mean? And sometimes the answer is forthcoming, while at other times it is revealed a little later in life. The trick is to look out for it and to make the connection in order to reach understanding.

Diwan was created with a certain level of serendipity, but we realize later it was in fulfillment of a certain vision. Four people, a society hungry for stimulation, a community of readers, a community of writers, elements of the cosmos, hard work, and no plan whatsoever came together and went bang! We got up in the morning and worked sometimes through the night, we discussed, we argued, annoyed, enraged each other. But we were all completely aligned working in synchronicity, consumed by that inimitable idea that we felt we had all given birth to but that now completely possessed us. Sports players say they perform at their optimum when they set aside their conscious mind and get deep in the zone. That only happens when your mind, heart and body are all aligned and you are not sure which one is driving. We attribute thought to the mind but it is only capable of great things when it harnesses your spirit and your soul, when you go through life engulfed by a mission but when asked what that mission is your powers of elocution fail you because it is in many ways beyond language.

Each one of us drew on his/her own passions and poured them into our kindred project. I carefully composed the shelves of Diwan basically out of my graduate reading lists. I was recreating that rich formative environment for Cairo readers and was elated to see they lapped it up. I built it and they came. I reached out with the only tools I had and knew well and forged connections with people I would never have come to know had books and ideas not brought us together. And in that way the work was its own reward.

It was painful work. But then pain and meaning are interconnected. Think of the ancient hunter and the harrowing task of etching tools and killing animals for basic sustenance. The first writer and the anguish that must have accompanied writing entire volumes using a quill and your hand. It is that pain that moves you to innovate, to think, to invent, machinery and software to make your life easier. But paradoxically an easier existence makes for lazier, more complacent and in many ways less creative human beings. We have lost the fine art, and I would argue the necessary skill, of POSITIVE struggle. There is no substitute for the pain of wading through the entrails of your monster because that intimacy is where you derive power, where you gain knowledge and become the resource the destination the only person who can make it all work. Diwan was created with a great deal of pain. There was no blueprint for what we wanted to create in Egypt. Multi-lingual categorized retail and warehousing software for a modern bookstore was a mystery to our developer. A business permit from the authorities that involved the sale of books, toys, music,

film, cake and coffee almost made our accountant's world as he knew it crumble around him. Searching for the original version of the Thousand and One Nights, the translation of Bahaa Taher's Aunt Safiya and the Monastery at an obscure English publisher, single editions of writers of the Maghreb, the Sudan, the Arabian Peninsula was an exercise in detective work. Everything had to be broken down, dissected and reassembled, for no reason, other than unknowingly turning you into an expert at your game.

You are now at an inflection point. So many things are waiting to happen to you as you exit this room today. In constructing and telling the story, I urge you to be a few things. Be humble, everyone is equally weaving the tapestry of their lives and there is a lot to be learned from every one of those threads, should you choose to do so. Value criticism and opposition more than praise. Most of the time praise is simply flattery and the easy thing to say. Make choices and take responsibility for the outcome. Never duck out of a decision. Not having a choice is actually not having the courage to choose.

And above all Read. Read history, philosophy, literature. In our nation we suffer from long-term memory loss. We only engage with the few years preceding our current moment negating the thousands of years that have gone to make that blissfully unaware present. Be aware that you are yet another extension of so many lives visions dreams that have come before you. Make it one to be proud of.

Thank you and good luck!