

**American University of Central Asia Commencement Address,
Saturday, June 3rd 2023:**

Once You Know, You Become Responsible!

By Professor Karim-Aly S. Kassam, PhD

Thank you for your warm and thoughtful introduction, Dr. Nurgul Ukueva!

Mr. Naimanbaev of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic; Madame Coulter, Deputy Chief of Mission of the US Embassy; representatives of the embassies of Hungary, Pakistan, and Turkiye; representatives of the US Department of State; representatives of the US- Central Asia Education Foundation; Mr. Lakhdhir, Chair of the Board of Trustees and members of the AUCA Board of Trustees; Professor Becker, President of AUCA; Parents, Graduates, and other distinguished guests, I am deeply honored to be here to share with you this commencement address.

First and foremost, to you the graduating Class of 2023 and your families, congratulations! Or as it is said here, in Kyrgyzstan: *Kuttuktaym!*

There is more reason to celebrate because this is the thirtieth anniversary of the American University of Central Asia. This is a significant and impressive milestone because this University is a shining beacon in all of Central Asia. Your teachers and the administration also need to be acknowledged for their contributions.

As I look upon you, the graduates, I see the best that Central Asia has to offer to its peoples, to our planet, and to the future of humanity. You are intellectually accomplished and have benefited from the privilege of an education that many people around the world desperately want and need.

Among you is immense diversity! You not only represent Kyrgyzstan, but also diverse nations ranging from Afghanistan to Uzbekistan. Included among you are students from China, Kazakhstan, Korea, Pakistan, the Russian Federation, Syria, Tajikistan, and Ukraine. Furthermore, from within these countries you represent different ethnicities and many religious interpretations. Moreover, today women comprise a larger proportion of students at AUCA. Your diversity is a strength.

You may have learned that long before the European Union, long before the North American Free Trade Agreement, and long before the Belt and

Road Initiative, your ancestors created the Silk Roads and the Silk Route. This was more than a trade and transportation network. These lands, where you come from, celebrated and embraced differences. Your ancestors traded not only goods but, more importantly, ideas. They also created peaceful, pluralistic societies, and magnificently contributed to human civilization. It was a network of ideas and principles which recognized the humanity in peoples that looked different from each other, spoke a variety of languages, practiced different faiths, and yet had something to share with each other! This is your intellectual and cultural history.

There is also something profoundly unique about this graduating class that is different than any of the past graduates of AUCA and your ancestors. Specifically, your education was significantly impacted by the Global Covid-19 Pandemic. You will always be different because you had to adapt to dramatic worldwide change. This, too, is a strength, and it will serve you very well in the future. While Covid-19 took many lives – including the people we loved, it has also given us important insights into ourselves as human beings. This learning is embodied within you individually and as a group.

The Pandemic forced us to reflect upon life itself and our priorities. For those of us who value education, we were compelled to ask two questions: What is the purpose of knowledge and how does knowledge contribute to our self-worth?

The overarching lesson of Covid-19 is understanding the role of knowledge. In our society, no matter where you live on the planet, the financial systems value the individual who has the most resources, who has accumulated the most capital. That is the person they value. But in our shared world, especially in the world of learning, it is the opposite. We see the value of a person when they share their insight and knowledge with others. The more they share, the more we see their value as a human being! Instead of the impulses of greed and accumulation, knowledge, at its core, originates with the principles of openness and giving. It is about rigorous search and then sharing the results of that journey with everyone. It is not about the taking! Let me explain this, through our lived experience of Covid-19.

The first lesson was at the very beginning when we did not even know it was a pandemic. Dr. Li Wenliang, a Chinese ophthalmologist discretely reported the SARS Corona Virus 2 to his colleagues. His government persecuted him for telling the truth; and ultimately, he succumbed to the

virus and died. His knowledge and advocacy, however, saved the lives of many because he alerted the world to this new danger. Through him, we are reminded about the value of knowledge and its responsibilities. Throughout the Pandemic, we learned that we need to invest in the study of all fields whether they be the biological, physical, and social sciences or the humanities. We needed all this knowledge to assist in addressing this global threat.

Second, we saw the value of normal hardworking human beings – the ones that society does not normally notice or prioritize. We saw the value of first responders, nurses, doctors, and the entire emergency care and medical field. We saw the value of small farmers and herders for the survival of our food system, because the supply of good nutritive food was running out. Suddenly, we realized how much we needed truck drivers, grocery store and sanitary workers, people who are usually ignored and valued less in our societies. We saw the value of the artists, musicians, comedians, and actors, people who keep us in touch with our inner life and our vitality.

Third, at the beginning of the Pandemic, it seemed as if authoritarian governance structures, which limited the freedom of their people, were better suited to responding to the virus. For example, in my own country,

such local governance structures had to adjust and become more flexible and open to the needs of all its citizens. Over the course of the Pandemic, governments that were more effective tended to respect their peoples and the culture of education as a whole. We realized we needed good leadership. Leaders who will not hide the inconvenient truths, but instead who quickly share and explain it to their communities as they gained new information. These societies were the ones that were able to rapidly produce the most effective vaccines. It is important that we understand that the foundational knowledge that resulted in the most effective vaccine was the result of the hard work of a scientist who was female. Her name is Dr. Katalin Karikó. She, along with her family, had to leave their native country and move to work in a part of the world where her research was more valued and supported. This example shows us that an open society, which values education, respects all scholars, irrespective of their gender, because it is important for the wellbeing of all of humanity. We also learned that one person alone does not have and cannot find all the answers. The work must be cooperative, building on the foundations of many scholars across time, across cultures, and across ideological orientations. Diversity and difference matter! Openness and sharing are inherent to co-creation of knowledge.

Finally, the virus and its effects taught us that rapid and effective cultural change is possible. This means that we, as humanity, can change our behaviors quickly when needed so that we not only protect our own lives, but the lives of others who are more vulnerable. For example, the reason why we wore masks was not only to protect ourselves, but to protect the vulnerable such as the immune compromised and the elderly. No matter how much money you had, at the beginning of the Pandemic, you were still vulnerable and dependent on the kindness, generosity, and thoughtfulness of others. This same collective and collaborative frame of mind must be embraced and supported in order to solve other complex global problems like climate change, war, and social injustices.

Take a moment and reflect upon the power that you now have individually and collectively at your fingertips, because of your education. Individually, you have acquired knowledge and training in a specific discipline; and collectively, you have gained a diverse international network of friends who will potentially stay with you all your life. Together you bring different knowledges into conversation and practical application. Through this collective diversity, you are part of a complex network of relationships that can change the world because of the connections you made with one another.

We, as scholars, do not need a gun or a tank. We have knowledge. This is our weapon of choice! Conventional weapons instill fear. But they do not convince people. We can convince people with the use of reason and compassion to act ethically and thoughtfully. With our knowledge, we can instill hope for a better future, engender mutual respect between each other, and express the love of life.

Learning and intellectual pursuit is also at the core of my belief system. Those of you coming from a Muslim background may be reminded of the first verse that was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him! In *Surat Iqra*, for the first time, the Prophet had communication from his Creator. This verse urges him to: Read, read in the name of his Lord, Who created humanity from a single cell, Who taught by the pen, and Who taught humanity that which it knew not! This is the first message of Islam. It is not about good or bad, rich or poor, man or woman, Arab or non-Arab, Muslim or non-Muslim...It is firmly about the search for knowledge, and the intellect. Whether or not you identify as Muslim, all of you here are participants in this great tradition, because you have chosen to devote yourself to learning and insight! And you did so even under the most difficult conditions of the Pandemic.

At times like graduation and transition, the old like say to the young: “You are the future”. I think about this slightly differently. To me, you are simultaneously the past, the present and the future! The indigenous peoples of my homeland speak about thinking in terms of “seven generations”. This does not mean looking into the future for seven generations. That is biologically impossible to achieve, because our brains do not have that capability. Rather, if you place yourself in the middle, at the fourth generation, then you can reflect upon the past - to your parents, grandparents, and great grandparents; and then, with that hindsight, you gaze into the future - to your children, your grandchildren, and your great grandchildren. This is both biologically and intellectually possible. You give meaning to time itself – because you have the ability to put right the past; therefore, change the present; and create a new future. Embodied in you are the seven generations! Again, you are at once: reconciling the past, transforming the present, and reimagining the future.

The famous scholar, Thomas Kuhn, who studied the *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, found that paradigm shifts did not come from old experts. They came from the young who were from different disciplines and backgrounds. They were the ones who helped change ways of thinking and knowing. They brought about new ideas and theories. Just like we

were able to achieve cultural change during the Pandemic. You are the ones who can change paradigms that no longer work for our societies in the twenty-first century.

After 38 years of scholarship, my advice to you is: Don't live in a "Self-Centered Universe". Instead, seek to have a consciousness that is a "Universe-Centered Self". Remember, your strength comes from being connected to the multiplicity of your colleagues with whom you have studied and the diverse communities from which you have come. In Central Asia, as in every other part of our small planet, diversity is strength, not a weakness.

How many of you are aware of the works of French philosopher and historian, Voltaire? How many of you are fans of Spiderman? Something you may not know is that the same quote is attributed to both Voltaire and to "Spiderman's" Uncle Ben. They both are purported to have said: "With great power, comes great responsibility!" Regardless of who said it first, I believe it to be true. Responsibility to act is incumbent upon those who have knowledge and wisdom to share. "Once you know, you become responsible". You are responsible for creating positive change in the world. We salute you both for your accomplishment and for the future stewardship of this knowledge.

But be humble enough to remember that the power of knowledge is a grace, *barakat*, it is like rain, it falls on everyone, but we have to have the wisdom to open our minds and hearts in order to receive it. Walk with humility and gratitude as you go forward.

May you and your families be blessed with good health and happiness!
May you experience continued success in your future endeavors! May
Peace be upon you!

Thank you!