



Golden Door Speech

President Joseph E. Aoun

Northeastern University
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Good evening, it is a special honor for me to be here with you.

Alex and Rahmattulah, who are here tonight, came to this country as refugees and became clients of the Institute.

They gave me the following advice about my remarks.

"Talk about your journey," they said. "It will show people that if you can do it, we can do it, too."

I have heard their powerful stories, and they moved me deeply.

My own journey began in Lebanon.

I was raised in a bilingual family.

I sang in French and played games in Lebanese.

Even my dreams were bilingual.

My homeland was a beautiful quilt of cultures and religions.

But by the time I was in college, the patchwork had frayed.

Six months before the civil war, I went to France to pursue my studies.

I left the familiar streets of Beirut for the boulevards of Paris.

I felt at ease in France—the culture and language were my own.

But the people were unknown to me, and the music of their accents sounded in a different key.

I was a migrant, cut off from my home by a civil war that lasted decades.

I had no choice but to settle into my studies.

Eventually, I reached a level where I could teach.

Learning and teaching, at ease in a life of libraries and lectures, I thought that my journey had come to an end.

As is often the case with journeys, they take unexpected turns.

I discovered the field of modern linguistics and wanted to come to MIT to study with the people who shaped it.

But the road presented an obstacle.

My Arabic was immaculate. My French impeccable. And my English ... incoherent.

In English, my thoughts raced past my vocabulary, leaving my sentences reeling in confusion.

I remember sitting by the river in Paris, trying to read one of Noam Chomsky's linguistics books.

The words on the page were a meaningless scramble.

Frustrated, I nearly threw the book in the Seine!

I almost quit.

I was ready to give up on my American dream before it even began.

But I had friends and mentors who had gone before me to MIT, to America.

They told me I could succeed.

When my faith wavered, they gave me belief.

They just couldn't give me fluency in English.

Bidding farewell to my family, my community, my second home, I boarded a flight for Boston.

At first, I failed to understand ninety percent of what anyone said to me.

I understood just enough to feel helpless, severed from everything I knew.

I found myself on the other side of the language barrier.

Beyond language, I faced an unknown landscape, a new culture with different norms.

I nearly quit again.

I should never have left Paris.

Then one day, one of my professors, Ken Hale, organized a workshop around me.

It was about the formal structure of Arabic—a language that was very much my own.

During that workshop, I was no longer a student with a foreign accent.

I was a teacher.

I was a peer.

That gave me the confidence to explain, to reason, and to write in English.

I wrestled English words and syntax into submission.

But I didn't master the accent, as you can hear.

My teachers and classmates liberated me from my own self-doubt.

In this new community of equals, I felt empowered.

I was free from the constraints of authority and seniority that I carried like baggage from the past.

For Thanksgiving, one of my professors, Morris Halle, invited me to join his family at their home in Newton.

I finally felt a sense of belonging.

I felt it again when my roommate, Amy Weinberg, extended a similar invitation to join her family in Brookline.

I ended up having two holiday dinners on the same day and ate leftover turkey for weeks.

When my own family joined me here for a visit, Noam Chomsky himself came over to put together a crib for my infant son, Karim.

Community was the scaffolding on which I overcame my obstacles.

After my PhD, I returned to France to ponder, with my wife Zeina, whether to settle there or move to America.

Morris Halle came to stay with us in Paris.

He wanted to convince me—and more importantly, my wife—that America should be our home.

Morris himself had emigrated to the United States.

He urged us to become immigrants once more.

The next stage of our journey took us to the West Coast.

Another community welcomed us, helping us establish yet another home.

In Los Angeles, in one of life's wonderful reversals, my sons attended to my American education.

Their schooling became my schooling.

With them, I played baseball and sang "Old MacDonald."

Mr. Rogers and Big Bird became our neighbors.

Our family traditions grew to include backyard barbecues and fireworks on the Fourth of July.

My dreams were no longer just bilingual.

Now I also dreamed in English.

In 2006, I returned to Boston and joined Northeastern.

When I met Mayor Menino, he encouraged me to get to know my new community.

I asked him, "Who knows Boston the best?"

He said, "Of course, I do."

That Saturday, from seven in the morning to seven at night, he introduced me to every neighborhood in Boston.

Roxbury, Mission Hill, Fenway, Jamaica Plain, the South End, the Back Bay—he showed me the whole of Boston's marvelous mosaic.

They welcomed me as a new Bostonian.

The Northeastern community adopted my wife and me as their own.

Guides, mentors, friends, they made all the difference. And that's what the Institute does.

Here, my wife and I are no longer migrants on a journey, but immigrants with a lasting home.

I stand here tonight as the sum of these welcomes and adoptions.

My life is a consequence of kindness.

I'm reminded of this every time I walk through campus and see a student newly arrived.

She may have come from Cambridge or as far away as Cape Town.

But now she belongs here at Northeastern.

This continual influx of faces, minds, and dreams gives our university community its vitality.

Welcoming new people and ideas is the essence of learning.

I have now shared with you my story of immigration.

Each one of us has a similar story to tell.

Each one of us is, in some way, an immigrant.

For immigration is displacement.

Intellectually, culturally, or physically, every one of us has experienced what it means to feel displaced.

Immigration is discovery.

It's learning a new culture, a new language, a new landscape.

It opens new geographies in our minds.

Immigration is reinvention.

It adds hyphens to our identities.

It re-creates ourselves.

Immigration, above all, is communal.

We cannot make the journey alone.

Every immigrant needs the support of a community.

That is why we are here tonight.

For this is not my celebration.

Tonight, you are honoring my family and every person who shaped, impacted, and supported me on my journey.

You are honoring our Northeastern community, and all communities that embrace the immigrant and the stranger.

And you are honoring the women and men who have taken the brave journey that has brought them here tonight.

I would like to ask all the clients of the Institute to join me on the stage.

I am proud and humbled to share this journey with you. Please join me in recognizing them.