

Transcript of Bassam Shakhashiri's Talk
UW Library Staff Appreciation Day

May 13, 2026

Good morning, everyone. To Chris, and Ian, and Erla, and all the organizers, I say thank you, and express appreciation. To everyone else, I say the very same thing that King Henry VIII said to each of his wives: "I won't keep you long."

11 days from today, on May 24th, I mark a very special anniversary. On May 24th, 1974, I was sworn in as a US citizen. I had to renounce my allegiance to my native Lebanon. I am proud to be an American. At the swearing-in ceremony presided over by Federal Judge James Doyle—the father of our former governor—he welcomed everyone and said several things. But what I remember mostly is what he said to me and to others. What he said to me, he said: "Enjoy your freedoms. Enjoy your freedoms." This was in 1974, a difficult time in the history of our country; you may remember this or have read about it. Now we face a more severe situation, and that's why it is crucial for all of us not only to enjoy the freedoms that we have, but to live as citizens of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, as citizens of the United States of America, and as citizens of the world.

It is crucial for all of us to contribute as you have been contributing—and that's why this appreciation day is organized. You know what? Every day is appreciation day for you. It is crucial for us to continue to live "The Wisconsin Idea" in the 21st century. We often look backwards and celebrate the accomplishments of the past. I urge you to simply glance in the rearview mirror, but look forward; for sure, the windshield is bigger than the rearview mirror. It's our own determination and convictions that have to be lived—not alone, but with each other.

The University of Wisconsin-Madison gave me tenure six years after I arrived here in 1970. My tenure appointment made everything that I do possible: here in Madison, in every corner of Wisconsin, across the country, and around the world. It gave me freedom and empowerment. I know about libraries; I know librarians. My first experience with a library was at the American University of Beirut when I was a freshman there before we came here. And then the Boston Public Library—have you been to the Boston Public Library? The New York Public Library? The Library of Congress? The Memorial Library?

Yes. And my vision is that libraries, and the people who are in the libraries, and the people who come to the libraries—especially in nowadays in the digital age—my vision is that we all learn, enjoy what we learn, but also connect properly with others in our communities. It's this connectivity that is crucial to the success of America and to the success of The Wisconsin Idea. UW-Madison is always said to be a great institution. You know, students

come and go, administrators come and go; the faculty and staff stay. The faculty and staff are the institution. And as such, we have an awesome responsibility that we enjoy, but along with that enjoyment comes the obligation to share.

You have a little piece of plastic and a bag in front of you—just know that you have it. You have a colorful sheet, back-to-back. Please take time—not now—to examine the words on this sheet. Words have meaning; if the meaning is not shared, then it is not possible to have a conversation. Try the experiment that is available to you using digital devices now when you want. One of my important messages today is for you—it's also for me, but not just for you. Ready? Pay attention. Pay attention.

You might say, "Pay attention to what?" Yes, please say that. Pay attention to what? You decide what to pay attention to. Those of you near the front, can you say out loud what the title of this book is? Out loud! "America, America!" Louder! "AMERICA, AMERICA!" Pay attention... to America.

I'll get it from this, John. Here's a little booklet; it's called American Trilogy. Does anyone recognize American Trilogy here? It is a product of the library system.

It's a collection of three documents: the Declaration of Independence, the US Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. I know the Bill of Rights is a part of it, but they're called out. Every year between May 24th and July 4th, I read this document. And as I said already, words have meaning, and the meaning has to be shared. It has to be shared in the 21st century and has to be the driving force for our citizenship at UW-Madison, for our citizenship of the State of Wisconsin, of the United States, and of the world. It's crucial that we pay attention to what these words are and the meaning of those words.

I'd like to also show you another book. This book is *Chemical Demonstrations*; it's published by the University of Wisconsin Press. And I'd like to open the book and read the... just something for you from there, okay? Here we go. [The book bursts into flames] It's not a real book. It's a flash book! It's the book cover, right? This is the actual book cover. It's Volume 5 in a book series called *Chemical Demonstrations: A Handbook for Teachers of Chemistry*, greatly enhanced by the contributions of Dr. Rodney Schreiner right here. Rodney was my second graduate student, and he's still here. In Madison! We like that Rodney's here. Rodney will be leading the breakout session after I finish here.

So, all right, now, we have all... you're paying attention, right? What do you see here? Just tell me out loud, what do you see? All I hear is mumble, mumble, mumble. I love that sound. You know why? Because everyone is free to express themselves the way they want. I can ask you a question and get everyone to give me the same answer. How many objects do you see between my two hands here? Six. So this is called a focusing question.

The other variety I use of questioning is called a probing question, for you and for everyone that you interact with, in person and electronically. To pay attention. So, I will always obey the safety regulations. I'm going to ask each one of you now to quietly be... to pretend to be the play-by-play radio announcer, describing to someone who's not with us what's going on. Not the TV announcer—the picture tells you almost everything, okay? This helps with the paying attention theme, right? So, what did I do? Do it quietly, right? You're reporting to someone, right? Paying attention takes time. We have six cylinders... where is my little card? Oh, I'm standing on it. Can you see the colors better now? Yes. So, I'll keep it up then.

Here is the transcript for the third video, formatted as a continuous narrative with headings and speaker labels removed:

Are you paying attention? Too many things happening at the same time? You can't slow them down, but you can pay attention. Do you see bubbles? What else do you see? Color change! I'm listening to you on the radio and all you're telling me you're seeing is color changes. What kind of color changes have you seen? How are you going to connect with me? Yep, we've got blue to yellow, we've got pink to clear. Six cylinders arranged in a special pattern? You're answering my focusing question again, but you're doing the sharing. This is what you do in the library, right? You share. And if you are not internally knowledgeable and convinced about what you're trying to share, you're going to do a lousy job. And if you do a lousy job, there will not be a fourth appreciation day!

Pouring boiling water... four liters... [The speaker pours boiling water into a container of liquid nitrogen, creating a massive cloud of vapor] Now I'm listening to you on your radio, I can't hear you! Oh, oh, oh, boiling water! Oh my goodness... yeah! Oh! Now let's turn out the lights, please. Turn out. Let's have the lights off. I want to see your faces. [The speaker performs experiments that create bright, colorful flashes of light in the darkened room] Don't feel sorry for me, I'm listening on the radio. What are you talking about?

What I've just tried to share with you is a commentary I'm developing about social media. Everything happens like that—very fast. And I'm paying attention to it, you're paying attention to it, but what do you retain and what do you recall? Each one of these experiments, to be meaningful, take time: to witness, to discuss, to ask questions. The second best sound I heard today was the "ooh, ahh." Now you're wondering what the first one is? You work on it. You try to figure it out.

We're all in this together. We have awesome responsibilities and we have fantastic opportunities at UW-Madison. Higher education is in great turmoil, not only here, but everywhere. And I want to share with you my mantra about what is happening here, elsewhere, around the world. Because that's my challenge. Here's my mantra: We are

allowing all this to happen. Did you hear me? We are allowing all this to happen. How can we do this as learned individuals? Learned groups? To allow this to happen... That's a very deep rhetorical question. I'd just like to say one more thing. I know some of the things that I said this morning are kind of heavy, right? Kind of? But please pay attention to them. Pretty please? Most of you, all of you, are going to be around a lot longer than I am going to be around. As I joke with people, I say to people when they ask me how old I am, I say I'm 68 and in October I'll be 78. Reference point? It's the time that we have. You're paying attention! It's the time that we have and what counts is what we do in the time that we have. Please make every moment of your life count. Thank you very much.

Jim Maynard who's sitting right here, stand up, Jim. He was a student in my class, he's our lecture demonstrator, and he prepared everything that you enjoyed up here, so give Jim a hand. And thank you for thanking me. The real way you can thank me is for each one of you to do good in the world. That's how you thank me.