

## SIGNIFICANT LIFE QUESTIONS FOR THE SATURDAY FORUM

- 1) One of the most significant things we do in life is to learn. However, not all learning is equal or equally significant. Besides, some of the learning we engage in is by our own choice; some is not. Some learning experiences serve a mere utilitarian purpose. By contrast, other learning events—they may be as long as a lifetime or as ephemeral as a split second—determine who we are, what we will have become, what we will be remembered for, and, perhaps more importantly, how we impact the world around us. So, here is the question:

**What has been one (or, if you wish, more) of such life defining learning experiences for you? Write them down, describe them, tell us what it is that made them so significant, and also what the most important conditions were for such learning to occur.**

- 2) The scientific pursuit—or more generally, the application of the scientific mindset—if conceived in ways relevant to *our* world with its dauntingly complex problems of planetary concern, should help us appreciate reality at different, interrelated levels of complexity. The *Andante con moto* from Schubert's piano trio in E-flat major, which I have chosen as 'inspirational music' for this session, is among a variety of musical experiences that impacted my own life. I was moved when recently I read in Denis Noble's (2008) little book *The music of life: Biology beyond the genome* (Oxford University Press) that the same piece of music belongs to his favorites. Noble reflects on his experience of listening to that same trio. "I put the CD into my player and lay down on the sofa. As the music entered the slow movement, I cried." He then asks: "What caused me to cry?" Imagining that he had not been alone in his room but instead had been visited by alien intelligent life, silicon-based rather than carbon-based, he wonders how such aliens would have investigated the relationship between his listening to the music and his subsequent emotional reaction.

**Suppose you had been one of those aliens (which may not be too difficult to imagine, because aren't we often alien to the emotional experiences of our fellow human beings?) and suppose you would have asked yourself the same question. What would you have done to satisfy your thirst for understanding? Reflecting on how you would have gone about finding answers to such questions, what does it tell you about how we must try to understand life's important questions?**

- 3) The Egyptian novelist and Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz wrote a book called *Sugar Street*. It's the last novel of the so-called *Cairo trilogy*. One of the characters in *Sugar Street* expresses himself as follows regarding the importance for the scientific mindset to be part and parcel of every person's integrated mental makeup.

*Literature is one of the greatest tools of liberation, but it can also be employed for reactionary ends. So watch your step. From the mosque university of al-Azhar and from the Dar al-Ulum teachers college have come a sickening type of literature that has left generations of Egyptians with rigid minds and broken spirits. But no matter what, science is the foundation of modern life... Don't be surprised that a man who is considered a literary figure should tell you this frankly. We must study the sciences and absorb the scientific mentality. A person who doesn't know science is not a citizen of the twentieth century, even if he is a genius. Artists too must learn their share of science... Science must take the place that prophecy and religion had in the ancient world.*

The quoted affirmation is embedded in a wider dialogue that explores the role of religion in Egyptian society. However, its import, as possibly recognized by the committee members who voted to attribute the Nobel Prize for literature to Mahfouz, is not restricted to Egypt, I think. **If you agree, what are your own thoughts, based on your experience and related to your own societal context, about this quote? If you don't agree, what alternative statement would you wish to formulate and how would you defend it?**