

Convocation address, September 7, 2008
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Good afternoon!

On behalf of my faculty, staff, and administrative colleagues, it is my pleasure to say 'Greetings' and welcome to Middlebury. Over the past few days, I've noticed some clear changes in the air. Mornings have been a bit crisper; trees here and there are taking on their fall colors; students are walking around campus with ice strapped to their shins, knees, and shoulders, and the past two weeks have been filled with the steady bustle of arrivals, orientation, and preparations for the fall semester. The ceremonial beginning to a new academic year is Convocation, and it is customary at Middlebury for Convocation to be a celebration of learning within the spirit of the liberal arts and sciences.

My more esteemed colleagues who have had the honor of delivering the Convocation address in previous years were able to draw on their various disciplinary backgrounds to offer eloquent words that inspired students and energized them for the semester and year to come. Colleagues in Political Science could reference Aristotle drawing connections between his ideas of politics, ethics and liberal education. Still others in Art History or American Studies may have described works of art or literature that conveyed a particular message. Were I to follow a similar approach and draw on my own research expertise, I might fill the next 10 minutes with a discussion of the nuances of spatial autocorrelation and geographically weighted regression. If I really got rolling, I might even include a map showing segregation in Chicago followed by a table with summary statistics and standard error values. I know that first year orientation is quite exhausting, so I'll leave any further discussion of spatial statistics to the classroom. While I'll spare you a lecture on spatial statistics, I would like to offer a few

thoughts on Middlebury and liberal education from a geographic perspective.

As a geographer, I frequently find myself answering the “airplane” question. And it goes something like this. I’ve just finished putting my shoes back on, filling my water bottle, stowing all my fluids that are housed in containers less than the critical 3 oz. threshold, and I’ve finally settled into my seat hoping for some quiet time on the flight to wherever I’m headed. The person next to me sits down and strikes up a polite conversation with the typical questions. Going out or coming home? Where are you from? What do you do? When I say that I’m a professor at Middlebury College, they typically follow that response with, “Oh, what language do you teach?” It is only after I tell them that I teach geography that the airplane question comes. And the question comes something like this. “Oh? I didn’t know they still taught geography at the college level, but I do love volcanoes.” This is when I’ve learned to simply respond by saying, “I hope you enjoy your flight” and opening my book. Across America, geography is poorly understood as simply memorizing states and capitals. But, there is a richness to college level geography that most people are unaware of, and I want to draw out two key geographical themes in my remarks today.

Geographers study many things, but two concepts that are frequently invoked within contemporary geographic scholarship are PLACE and MOBILITY. Let’s take place first. Place is an intriguing concept, and I like to define place as “space with meanings attached to it.” For example, you can locate an object in space – Nichols house, where I live, is at 44 degrees 0 minutes 51 seconds north and 71 degrees 10 minutes and 31 seconds west. This space becomes place when we infuse it with meanings. Or, this house becomes a home when I associate some emotion and memory to this location. My youngest son learned to walk in the upstairs hall; last week we hosted the Atwater residential life staff for a dinner and competitive whiffleball game; this is where we

were living when my oldest son started kindergarten. These emotions and memories associated with Nichols house transform the more sterile space into a meaningful place ... a meaningful place for me. My wife Michelle will certainly share some of these same experiences and emotions, but there will be other unique aspects of Nichols house for her, so her understanding of this place will have some common areas of overlap with my own, but there will also be her own elements of this place particular to her. So the meanings attached to place can be both shared and individual.

Well, now it is rather obvious how the geographic concept of place can be connected to Middlebury. Middlebury is a very special place, and over the next four years and beyond, you will have both individual and collective experiences that will bring meaning to Middlebury. You'll meet new people. Listen to new music. You may work at the organic garden. Become the concert mistress. Win a national championship. You may get your first "C." You may share a room with someone for the first time. You might meet the person you are going to marry. You may be away from home for the first time. You might catch your first brook trout on a dry fly. All of these experiences will bring meanings to this place for you as a group, but also for you as an individual because no two sets of Middlebury experiences will be the same. But we can't forget, that at the core of Middlebury's place identity is learning. Middlebury is a place of learning in both an academic sense as well as a personal sense, and this brings me to the second geographical concept that I'd like to invoke – that of mobility.

My own research focuses on migration from the city to the countryside, and I've been greatly influenced by a group of European scholars who have theorized the intersection between these concepts of place and mobility within the context of urban to rural migration. Of particular interest to me in my own work (and this is relevant to my point today) are the increased levels of mobility enjoyed by some segments of society, and the ways in

which this increased mobility brings opens new opportunities to enjoy different places. Marc Mormont describes this as follows: “The relationship between the individual and space is defined less in terms of belonging to a particular space than in terms of opportunities enjoyed by individuals participating in a variety of networks.” He goes on to argue that “degrees of mobility and quality of places frequented would today doubtless be a good indicator of a group’s social position.” The way I see this, Mormont is arguing that certain elite groups of people are connected to many different places through their enhanced mobility. Or, in other words, the higher one’s social position, the greater their ability to move through different places. An annual rhythm for the social elite may include skiing at their house in Jackson Hole, a trip to their flat in London followed by a weekend of sailing from their beach house on Martha’s Vineyard. This mobility is enabled by one’s social class, and in addition, this mobility has become one of the distinguishing features of one’s social class. It is a very privileged position to be able to move so freely from place to place, and here is where I want to draw a connection between Middlebury as a place of learning, an alternative perspective on ‘elite’ status, and the relationships with mobility.

Well, you have all demonstrated a certain degree of spatial mobility in your decision to ‘migrate’ to Middlebury, and you will undoubtedly have your own unique experiences of and in this place. But remember, at the core of Middlebury’s place identity is learning. Middlebury is a place of learning, so on a more micro-scale, you can also view your academic career as a journey, or an exciting opportunity for intellectual migration through the many different academic places housed within Middlebury’s curriculum. Furthermore, while the class of 2012 is drawn from many different social classes, Middlebury students – especially first year students sitting on the threshold of their undergraduate careers – are all members of a very privileged group, in that you can move freely

across Middlebury's curricular landscape and experience its many different intellectual places. Going back to Mormont, recall that mobility is an indicator of social status, and all of you have essentially unlimited intellectual mobility at this stage of your Middlebury careers. In that regard, you are an intellectual elite, but only in the extent that you take advantage of our robust curriculum. I cringe each time I hear a first-year student announce proudly "I'm an econ major" or "I don't do sciences." If social class is reflected by movement through physical landscape, then intellectual class can be reflected by movement through Middlebury's curricular landscape. And these students claiming early on to be econ majors and not doing sciences have really cast themselves as an intellectual underclass. An immobile group stuck in a place with little opportunity for escape.

I encourage each member of the class of 2012 to take advantage of this unique mobility that presents itself to you because in doing so, you will truly capture to the fullest extent possible the value of a liberal arts education. And here is where I'd like to bring my comments full circle back to the notion of place as space infused with meaning. An individual's experience of place cannot happen in a vacuum. Rather, one's experiences of a place are inevitably influenced by many things, including the meanings and understandings you attach to other places where you have lived, worked, or traveled. For example, I cannot describe my understandings of Middlebury that have developed over the past nine years without drawing on my own undergraduate experiences at a similar liberal arts institution in New England. In other words, my past experiences of place influence my current and future experiences of place. Now, if you'll allow me to extend the metaphor between physical and intellectual landscapes just a bit longer, we can get to what I feel is at the core of a liberal arts education. As you travel widely across the many intellectual landscapes housed here in this special place of learning, you will inevitably bring with you the meanings and understandings gained

from your earlier travels into other areas of the curriculum. Your understandings of history will be influenced by what you have learned in French classes. Studies of urban geography will be shaped by your understandings of ecology, and your interpretation of the hit series “The Wire” will build upon your first-year seminar in sociology.

So, if there is one message I’d like to impart to you this afternoon, it’s to celebrate the fact that you are an elite group with ample opportunities to migrate across our curriculum. Think of your next four years as a migration to many exotic intellectual places knowing that these travels will forever change you. Don’t allow yourselves to become stuck as a member of an intellectual underclass. Rather, just as we find travel to Auckland, Santiago, Madrid, or Cairo incredibly exciting, I hope you find similar excitement exploring the unique places of learning housed here at Middlebury. Venture into film, computer science, art history, religion, chemistry, dance, and maybe even geography. Hey, even I, a social scientist with an admitted “statistical fetish” became quite engaged in our recent discussions of war poetry. I urge you, take advantage of your elite status. I’m envious of the journey you are about to embark upon, and I wish you all safe and fulfilling travels.

Bon voyage!