

Address by Student Commencement Speaker Jennifer C. Johnston '14
May 25, 2014

Good morning everyone and thank you for joining us all in celebrating our Class of 2014. Thank you professors, faculty and staff, facilities, alums and family members from near and far, especially those who couldn't be here today in person, and to you students for remaining awake until now. We all have so much to celebrate and while this might not help with you sleepies out there...

I want us all to close our eyes and think back to our first week on this campus. No seriously, close 'em. Are you there? Good. Remember sitting in the wooden pews of Mead Chapel on one of the first nights, packed in with all 609 of us? Good. Are you sweating yet? Because I am. We all visited Mead that week, first for our Welcome Address and secondly for Voices of the Class.

We were welcomed by Middlebury College and told about the details of our class, about our demographics, our geography, our accomplishments shared via the ever-elusive common app. We were told the numbers, the facts and figures, the descriptive statistics of our class but honestly, the numbers did not mean much.

And then there was Voices. We had an hour, crammed in with an excitement and nervousness that brought numbers we had heard alive. No longer were we just data but we were real, stories, laughs, tears, voices. And not only that, we were that energy, vibe, and spunk that we each chose to share. We were chosen to be members of Middlebury's class of 2014, those unique individuals unified not only by intellectual curiosity, drive, and a desire to use phrases like social entrepreneurship, but also a desire to share. Sharing our voices was how and why we all showed up on that hot September week four years ago.

So we knew how to talk the talk, but could we walk the walk? As we walked out of Mead Chapel that evening, we began that personal journey towards understanding our place, our role, and our voice in this community.

And, in order to achieve this, we had to begin our four years with a few steps, but no longer could we think of ourselves as any one-man wolf pack. We were surrounded by a class of our own. It is believed that Aristotle would only discuss philosophy while walking and would have his pupils follow around him, his personal pack, as he believed the best thoughts came to him on these strolls with others. His school became known as peripatetics. And, as they walked, we walked these four years; we thought, we challenged, we philosophized, and we grew towards an understanding of our importance as individuals from different backgrounds and perspectives and as a whole coming together, growing greater than the sum of its parts.

Now, "peripatetic" is often used to mean wandering, meandering, or simply walking about from place to place. Sounds like anyone trying to find their way out of Ross. Throughout our four years here at Middlebury we have done our fare share of this, but every step of the way we have moved along the same beautiful paths throughout these 350-acres, our personal hundred acre woods. We have all chosen our own

personal route yet we have wandered, meandered, and walked these paths together. Come with me and let us take one last stroll throughout Middlebury, a victory lap if you will.

We arrived with Middkid blasting, were quickly acquainted with every corner of our 10 by 15 foot rooms, and possibly received the best head nod you have ever seen from the guy down the hall. Sup. We said goodbye to our parents, gave them a tissue to wipe a tear or two, sorry Dad, and headed out, often with the herd like mentality in which all freshman halls travelled.

Then, unless we knew the one exact thing we wanted to study from the very beginning, we began our liberal arts education, otherwise known as 'real life stumble upon.' We had periods of wandering, unsure of purpose and direction, unless we are talking about the b-line shuffle-run to bowls and cups in the dining halls.

Other times, we faced with seemingly imminent and limitless uncertainty, the question, what do I want to do? We carried on. And we carried on together. Even when paths diverged, Karen Holts, wielder of all power, would humble us with housing numbers and nothing created a harmonious symphony like the sounds heard when Bannerweb crashed on those early morning online gauntlets known as registration.

However, other times, we could move our stroll into a declarative walk, with a clear vision in mind. We strode to build another sustainable house, and we brought it across the country. We dared to challenge sexual assault on this campus, and we opened up the conversation. We wanted more news, we blogged on Middbeat. We won national and NESCAC championships and Quidditch World Cups. We fought for equality, justice, and change within our endowment and brought together students, faculty, administrators and trustees to take a deep dive into what we represent as members of the Middlebury Community. We endeavored to represent more voices and open a forum of dialogue, so we created JusTalks. But no matter what we do, Mother Nature never fails to come in with the best pump fake in the league each spring.

We left big tracks for those to follow and always did so with a diminishing carbon footprint.

Class of 2014, we *walked* around campus, not merely meandered. With great legs, amazing calves, beautiful people, and beautiful minds we learned that Proctor would tease us more with the stir-fry station than any Proctor crush could.

We shared not only the ascents up the hills but also the descents. We have all fallen along the way, whether metaphorically or finding no other method of transportation on Winter Carnival weekend but to slide all the way down Allen at the snow bowl. We have also said goodbyes, RIP Proctor cat and ADP.

These trips, trials, and tribulations only made us stronger and forced us to question the paths down which we were walking. Persevering and pushing forward,

continuing to go when the going got tough, powering through the literal storm on a walk to class were all things we faced together.

It was this togetherness that has paved more than the 16 miles of sidewalk on this campus. Whether you loved your four years here or are ready to leave, the times you shared while taking to the paths with others, the conversations you had had here with the people you have connected with will be some of, if not the most, stimulating and formative you will ever have. As peripatetics, we propelled ourselves and each other to the next steps.

The next step is one free of our defining numbers, our 8 digit ID numbers we memorized way back when. And just as those numbers have been wiped off our ID cards from the wear and replaced with memories, we too are covered in Middlebury.

But before we go spread that around, we are all about to make one last walk together. We all face this seemingly imminent and limitless uncertainty with once again the questions, what do I want to do? (Big dramatic pause.)

Aristotle found this answer and I believe we have too. Along his journey he found that ethics was a practical study, one with the purpose of becoming good and doing good rather than knowing for its own sake. We have set ourselves to deliberately achieve and consciously chose to do the best things. So my answer? I don't know but it will be something good.

Let us all close our eyes again, and think of this moment. No seriously, close 'em. Are you here? Good. Are you sweating yet? Because I am. Remember this. And in the case that you can't on memory alone, remember to first always take a selfie, speaking of which let us all take care of that now before we get to our next mission. Is it a good one? Great.

Remember all the steps you took to get here, remember all you shared. Remember your voice. Now, let us consciously put one foot in front of the other, unified by our mutual experiences, begin now and spread that Middlebury vibe that brought us here. Class of 2014, congratulations. Class of 2014, it is only just beginning. Class of 2014, share and do good, talk your talk and walk your walk. Thank you all so much, I could not think of better traveling companions.