“A Few Supplies for Your Life’s Knapsack”  
Address by Middlebury College Commencement Speaker Julia Alvarez ’71  
May 24, 2015

President Liebowitz, faculty, staff, trustees, and fellow honorary degree recipients, parents and family and friends, and most of all, Class of 2015:

When President Liebowitz called me several months ago to ask me if I would accept an honorary degree from Middlebury and give the commencement speech, I didn’t know what I was getting into.

You see, most times when you accept this kind of invitation in some far off place, months away, it fades from your memory. A week or two before, you begin to fret a little, you write your speech, you go deliver it, and then you leave town, and that’s the end of it.

But when you live right here in town for those several months, every time you fill your car with gas or go to the grocery store, someone comes up to you and says, “So you’re going to give the commencement speech.” And you’re reminded all over again of what you’d rather forget, especially in light of the fact that you don’t get to leave town after it’s over, but for some time afterwards, you’re going to hear about what you said.

Those fretful feelings have only increased on this podium surrounded by these amazing honorary degree recipients (Congratulations!) as well as by our staff and faculty (many of whom have been my teachers over the years whenever I needed to find out some bit of information for a book I was writing–Frank Winkler, about the stars; Roberto Veguez, with my Spanish accents and refranes; Karl Lindholm, teaching this Dominican all she knows about baseball; Tom Root, answering my many emails about the brain and speech development; Danielle Rougeau, Joy Pile, helping me hunt down information I’ve needed.)
I could spend the rest of my time thanking folks here. So I'll stop, but not before I underscore the importance of gratitude. It forces us to recognize that we are just a bead in the necklace of the generations or of an organization, and not always, even when we get the attention, the most important or the key string that holds it all together.

I'd much rather hear from any number of people gathered here. I'm reminded of a character in Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behavior* who prefers to be quiet because, he says, "I never learn anything from listening to myself." But you'll soon see that most of what I'm going to say to you today are things I've learned from other people.

I'm at a point in my life (65!) when I'm not more confident of my own achievements but every day more aware of how all that I am, all that I have managed to become has come about from the investment of so many people.

One of my favorite Native American tales tells of a woman who spends a lifetime reaching for the stars. Finally as an old woman she manages to touch a star, and Father Sky looks down at her and asks, “How did you get to be so tall?” And she answers, "I'm standing on a lot of shoulders."

Well, I am definitely standing on a lot of shoulders. Many of them a part of this institution, since I arrived here in 1969 as a transfer student, graduating in the class of 1971.

Fast forward, 44 years, and now it's you, sitting where I once sat. Congratulations, class of 2015!

It's been a long tough winter. Harsh subzero temperatures, a fire in a Weybridge Street apartment house filled with students; the heartbreaking loss of our colleague, Bob Prasch; our staff member, Kelly Boe; our student, Nathan Alexander.
"In a dark time," the poet Roethke wrote, "the eye begins to see." With each loss, our community began to see the things that really mattered, how best to take care of each other.

My words to you today come from that dark time, a time of seeing, a time of questioning: what can I give you today that might matter?

In the course of your years at the College many of you received care packages from home or from some doting grandparent. Maybe they were sent during a time of stress: exam time, flu season, a heartbreak; or maybe in celebration for your birthdays or a holiday in your faith or family tradition.

Well, today combines both a moment of celebration as you graduate from your alma mater, but also, I’m sure, a time of stress, as you set out from an academic structure which has harbored you most of your life, since kindergarten if not preschool. No person or commencement speaker can give you a roadmap for the journey that lies ahead. As the poet Machado wrote, Caminante no hay camino, el camino se hace al andar: Traveler, there is no path, the path is made by walking.

But I am now that old lady with stardust on her fingers, and I’ve learned a few things from being on this journey 44 years ahead of you. We have a saying in the Dominican Republic, Mas sabe en diablo por viejo que por diablo. The devil knows more because he’s old than because he’s the devil. So I’ve decided to put together a care package, or a better metaphor–given Middlebury’s hardy and outdoorsy reputation–some essential supplies to stick in your life’s knapsack as you set forth.

But I’m a storyteller. Instead of cookies I’ve baked or a sweater I’ve knitted or a big nice check, stories are my currency. So I’m going to pack into the next few minutes some stories I steer by which I hope you’ll find useful, too.
A word of caution, many of these are going to sound like Wisdom 101. I remind you of something Spike Lee once said in an interview: one of the great lessons in his life is that you can learn from people who are dumber than you. (By the way, let's put that in the knapsack for starters!)

These little stories might seem like clichés, but rather than apologize, let me give clichés a new spin: they're nothing but bits of language, nuggets of truth and advice that have gone viral in the past. A billion hits on "avoid them like the plague," and a cliché is born.

One of my favorite books is by the environmental activist, Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark.* (I should have put a copy of that book in each of your knapsacks.) In it, Solnit tells the story of a young protestor at a demonstration. He was asked by a reporter why he was risking getting arrested. The reporter was obviously after argument, so she could get another talking head to agree or disagree with the protestor's views. But the protestor simply replied: "I'm here because I have a soul."

The story seems an important one to share with you on your graduation day. Especially in light of the fact that we call the place we graduate from our alma mater, the mother of our soul. What do we mean by that? (Maybe religion majors already know, but I'm going to give it a broader definition, outside a specific faith or religious tradition.) The poet Keats called life, not college, "the vale of soul-making," and the way you make a soul is by giving yourself to what you love. If Middlebury has done its job as your alma mater, you already have started this process here. Maybe it wasn't described with this highfalutin talk, lest our donors, trustees, and faculty think we've gone back to our beginnings as a place to train young men for the ministry. But it is probably for me the single most important star I steer by: to become the larger version of myself—which is my definition of a soul—by giving myself wholeheartedly to what I love.
As you leave here, you're going to feel pressure to get a good job, get your career going, be a changemaker, but I’m telling you, first things first. Whatever you do, let it be something that at the end of the day, you can say: I do this because I have a soul. Every choice, ask yourself is this going to be a soul-making or a soul-selling choice? Don't settle for less. That’s what a life is for. Be what you long to be.

Making a soul is really the only sustainable choice: I love the quote by St. Thomas of the Gnostic Gospels: *If you bring forth what is inside you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is inside you what is inside you will destroy you.* That goes in the knapsack!

Being what you long to be might seem a simple choice. But it's not always clear which choices will lead to soul-making. Mayan weavers have a prayer they say before they start their weavings, done without a manual or set of instructions. "Grant me the intelligence and the patience to find the true pattern." Don’t just put that away in a zippered compartment in your knapsack. For the next year: take it out every morning, before you go for a job interview, before you start writing the great American novel, before you enter into your first solo classroom to teach a bunch of hormonal 9th graders: *Grant me the intelligence and the patience to find the true pattern.* And remember there are many kinds of intelligences, not just the academic kind rewarded in school. Sometimes what you will need is emotional intelligence, or body intelligence, or social intelligence. Intelligences you often learn about from people who are dumber than you.

In order to be what we long to be, we have to belong. So, community is vital. I know most of you found a community here at Middlebury. I’m not saying this place was perfect, by any means. No place is. As I learned when I was complaining to a local farmer about some unpleasant surprises living in a small town. He nodded. "When you set down roots there’s bound to be some worms in the soil."
Now that you're leaving Middlebury, how to find the right community for you, a place where you can belong? Use the soul-making litmus test again. You belong in a community where you can be what you long to be, a place that keeps reminding you that you have a soul.

By now I am worried that I've loaded your knapsack with heavy stuff: quotes from Keats and Machado, the Mayan weavers, the Gnostic gospels. You need something light to take with you. A good joke or at least a good rabbi story.

Some followers go to their rabbi.
"Rebbe," they ask, "what is heaven like?"
"In heaven," answers the rabbi,
"they sit at a table with delicacies and sumptuous treats of every kind.
The only problem is their arms do not bend."
"And what is hell like?"
"In hell they sit at a table with all sorts of treats and sumptuous delicacies of every kind.
The only problem is their arms do not bend."
"Then, Rebbe, what is the difference between heaven and hell?"
"Ah, my children," says the rabbi, "in Heaven they feed each other."

That's the best community: where you're nourished by others to bring forth what is inside you, and where you nourish others with what you bring forth. It's something Bill and I learned traveling in Haiti, the poorest country in the hemisphere, but in some ways, rich in the important things that belong in every First World knapsack, but we forget to make room for them in our glutted consumerism. What we found in rural Haiti was what I came to call the "basic investment plan of the poor:" You save what you have by sharing it. Whatever you have, instead of hoarding it, you cast your bread upon the waters. Next time, you're the one in need, you'll find your
waters breaded by those you once helped. It's also how we pay back what was given to us. As Toni Morrison writes, "The purpose of freedom is to free someone else."

So, I wish you a soulful life. May you find places where you can be what you long to be, and when you need an infusion of hope, or when you have an infusion of hope or cash to give, come back to your alma mater, remembering what our poet from the mountain said—slightly amended now by Alvarez—home is the place where, when you come back here, we want to take you in.

Class of 2015, again, may you have a soulful beautiful life, stardust on your fingers, bread on your waters!