December, 2015

To the Members of the Middlebury College Class of 2019.5 and our transfer and exchange students,

We are writing to you as Commons Heads, the faculty representatives of the commons system. In this role, we work alongside students to cultivate your intellectual interests and more fully integrate what might be called the “academic and intellectual life” of students with their residential lives; we extend the learning environment beyond the classroom into dinner conversations or late night discussions on your hall.

One aspect of that integration is the campus-wide Common Reading: a shared experience among all incoming students. During orientation, we will gather together in small groups—students and residential life staff along with other faculty, staff, and upper class students—for a discussion based on the enclosed book, *A Chant to Soothe Wild Elephants: A Memoir* (2008) by Jaed Coffin.

At the age of 21, Jaed Muncharoen Coffin, a half-Thai American man who grew up in Brunswick, Maine, went to his mother's native village of Panomsarakram, Thailand to train as a Buddhist monk. He spent a rain season at a temple, receiving alms in the streets in saffron robes; bathing in the canals; learning to meditate in a mountaintop hut; and falling in love. *A Chant to Soothe Wild Elephants: A Memoir* recounts that experience.

We have chosen Jaed Coffin’s *Memoir* for a variety of reasons. Among them, it is an engaging and well-written story that will stimulate rich opportunities for meaningful and engaging discussions during orientation. The book also touches on notions of displacement, identity, and belonging—experiences that are often part of the transition to college. The author will be visiting Middlebury College in March.

During orientation, each of the small discussion groups will have a designated facilitator who will initiate the discussion. However, as you read the text this winter, we encourage you to record questions and reflections that you might want to share. Is there an element of the story that you find intriguing or puzzling? We look forward to hearing your thoughts and responses to such questions when we meet in February. This will be one of many such opportunities for shared intellectual exchanges—both in and outside the classroom—which will mark your academic and personal journey at Middlebury College, and especially in the Commons, your residential community. Until then, we wish you all the best and we look forward to welcoming you to Middlebury later in the winter!

Sincerely,
Your Faculty Commons Heads
Sandra Carletti, Atwater Commons
Roman Graf, Brainerd Commons
Matthew Dickerson, Cook Commons
Pavlos Sfyroeras and Maria Hatjigeorgiou, Ross Commons
Jonathan Miller-Lane, Wonnacott Commons