

Middlebury College Student Commencement Speech
May 29, 2022
Roni Lezama '22 and Om Gokhale '22

Roni: Hi, my name is Roni.

Om: And my name is Om.

Roni: You might be wondering why there are two of us up here. About 3 weeks ago, Om and I received an email from the Office of Student Affairs telling us that we were this year's finalists for giving the commencement speech. We've known each other a while and, when we saw each other's names on the email, we immediately sat down to talk.

Om: After a long conversation, reading our respective speeches, reflecting and remembering, we finally came to the conclusion that neither one of us on, on our own, ... is tall enough to reach the podium. And so we'd need to stand on each other's shoulders to have a chance.

Roni: That said, we wrote this speech together and it's an immense honor to be here. First, congratulations to the class of 2022. We've come a long way. Do you remember your first week at Middlebury?

Om: For me, it was first-year orientation. 2018. I remember the square dance, right here on the lawn! And that week of late summer nights, and cricket chirps, and unexpected rain showers, and going to convocation in the chapel up the hill. Glorious business.

But I also remember feeling uncertain. It is hard to be new. Before so many of you became my dearest friends, you were strangers. I did not know your names. I did not yet know I was going to love you, and I did not yet know I was going to love it here.

Then, about 1,460 days passed. And I learned. We learned—each other's names, and other knowledge relevant to a Middlebury College education. The colors of a Knoll sunset. That maple leaves, in fall, turn those same colors. How to jump into cold water. How to slip on ice in front of a tour group and retain your dignity. How the world gets quieter when it snows.

Four years later, and now what I don't know is: how to say goodbye. Uncertainty is a funny emotion. It can sit on your shoulder during magical times of your life—your first weeks of college, or your last—and try to convince you that something is not quite complete about the present.

It whispers in your ears, sentences that begin with 'what if' or 'I wish.' Maybe these past few months, you've heard it whisper: I'm glad to be graduating college, but what if I

didn't make the most of it? Or: I wish I knew what I was doing next, or whether I was doing the right thing next, or if I am becoming the person I am supposed to be.

Not yet knowing—feeling a little unsure. It's an emotion that can make an appearance even when things are going well. Even when you are in the right place. Looking back to my first-year self and his uncertainty, I would tell him that he was in the right place. I'd tell him that his doubt was not a bad omen. That there are kind people and hard classes here, and that he would one day be utterly enchanted by both.

Doubt is a symptom of being alive. But it is tempting to try to cure it. To try to answer all our questions, to search for peace behind the next accomplishment. I'll be content, we say to ourselves—right after I finish this essay. Or get that job, or find an apartment, or graduate, or save the world, after we settle the uncertainty that's next, even though there will always be something that's next.

Four years of playing whack-a-mole with our doubts has gotten a lot of us here, to graduation. Some of us are in a well-earned state of bliss. Some of us aren't. Maybe some of us are hungover. But I think we are all beginning to understand that doubt doesn't really get solved. Maybe, it's not meant to be.

What does it look like to embrace not knowing? To acknowledge the cosmic rarity of life feeling settled, even on days like this one? To sink into the uncertainty of the present, to hear the questions that you don't yet have answers to, and still choose to be here, now?

Roni: One of the great things about having a liberal arts degree, and the hard sell for so many parents, is the uncertainty of what you're going to do with your studies. Studying at a place like Middlebury is the exact place where you might be in the middle of an existential crisis and then remember, I took a class on this in college! One of those classes for me was "Cities of Hope and Despair," taught by Professor Trinh Tran.

Early in the class, we read the work of the late author and activist bell hooks, titled, "Toward a Worldwide Culture of Love."

hooks suggests that when life appears uncertain and difficult... love is a source of a radical presence—that love is the medium through which we can work with what we have, where we are.

Professor Tran read this quote from the text aloud to the class: "Fundamentally, the practice of love begins with acceptance—the recognition that wherever we are is the appropriate place to practice, that the present moment is the appropriate time. But for so many of us our longing to love and be loved has always been about a time to come, a space in the future when it will just happen, when our hungry hearts will finally be fed, when we will find love."

hooks put it best. To wait for a time to come. To say that the best version of our life, and our most loving, peaceful self, has been waiting behind this milestone or the next one.

But the truth is, your life is *not* any less complete in moments of uncertainty than it is when you have all the things we *want*. Today is an important day, and is an appropriate time to practice love, to express gratitude, to be here, now. But the other days can be too.

Saying all this, especially talking about the power of not postponing our love, I'll admit that I have struggled to embrace it at times. One of my biggest regrets during my past four years was failing to communicate that appreciation for one of the most endlessly endearing and empathetic people I have ever met.

In the summer of 2021, my friend Miguel Sanchez-Tortoledo, class of 2023, passed away due to cancer—and I remember hearing the news of his passing. I was uncertain of what Middlebury would be without him, and uncertain of the ways to honor him and his unwavering love to his friends, family, and community.

It is people like Miguel that have lived with radical love. That have known that the present is the appropriate moment to heal, and protect, and cherish. He embodied the ability to accept the world at its most imperfect and uncertain, and choose to care for it anyways.

Looking back at that moment, all I wanted was to tell him “I love you,” and that Middlebury truly does love him too.

But it is our habit to wait. For when things are a little less hectic. For moments and celebrations like this one. For some perfect, poetic time.

But as hooks said, “For so many of us our longing to love and be loved has always been about a time to come”

But I ask *you*, class of 2022, what if every day could be that time? What if certainty and perfection were not prerequisites to loving wholly, and living fully?

Om: That is to say, confidence, conviction are great feelings, but you are allowed to have the other ones too. Notice uncertainty as it sits on your shoulder from time to time. Answer its questions by hugging a friend. By thanking a professor. By telling your family you love them. Your task is not to solve your doubt. But rather, make a friend of it. To laugh with it if you can. To make room in your heart for the unknown and the in-between, the mundane and the floundering, for imperfect goodbyes. Uncertainty in these moments is not a sign of some failure to embody your best self, but instead a realization of your humanity. It is an act of grace to embrace it—to embrace the shadows of your unknowing and imperfection, and through it all, love relentlessly.

Roni: Professor Tran sent me a message right before graduating and her words at the end of the note are some that I think you all need to hear. I tell you: Class of 2022, you have all the talent and heart to do good in the world. Go forth and shine.

Om: We do not know when we will see you next. But we do know that the world is brighter with you in it. We do know that you will continue to care deeply and accomplish great feats of kindness.

Roni: Along the way, may you feel loved, and capable of loving. Thank you...

Om: ...and congratulations.