

## Convocation Address, Fall 2015

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Welcome to Middlebury. Please take out that book of translations we gave you and follow along as I begin to describe to you the world in which you are entering. We intend them to be “books of wisdom” that you can take with you. I am going to start where we usually end: the benediction. You will hear American author Toni Morrison’s words at the end of this Convocation, but they also serve as a fitting introduction. Morrison tells us: “Dreaming is not the activity of the sleeping brain, but rather the activity of an awake and alert one. Not idle, wishful speculation, but engaged, directed daytime vision. About entrance into another space.”

Welcome to the place of dreaming awake. You all have dreamt Middlebury. And you have done so powerfully. You were so effective in your dreaming about Middlebury that you have landed here, in this space. And you were so awake and alert that you did everything right to get here. You have entered into another space—and it happens to be the place about which you dreamt. I hope it looks and feels the same way you dreamt it.

Perhaps you are anxious right now. You are looking left and you are looking right. You may be thinking, “I wonder how many of these people have done amazing things?” You may wonder if you’re worthy, because someone casually happened to mention this morning that they were an opera singer. Or that they already knew two languages and were a varsity athlete. Or they designed a new

solar-powered boat. And the worse thing was they were really nice about it. Or perhaps you are unbelievably impatient to get started right now. So much so that all this orientation and syllabus sharing and training is getting annoying. “Seriously guys?” you are thinking. “I get the good intentions, folks, but let’s just dive in.”

Yes, you might be anxious. You might be feeling inadequate. You might be impatient. In each case, however, you are no longer dreaming awake. You are no longer alert and directed, but you are distracted by your wish, your longing to be somewhere or something else than here, being what you are. I wish I were a singer or a musician. Why can’t I learn languages? I’m not an environmentalist. I am completely uncoordinated. Do I belong here?

As your new president, I am going to ask you: How long will you dwell there in distraction, focused on what you are not, instead of getting on with the glorious business of being who you are? Sitting here in the pews in Mead Chapel, you are the same person we admitted last spring: the person who might be an uncoordinated non-environmentalist, non-language learner, non-opera singer. We admitted you. The person who dreamed Middlebury and who has come here to dream other dreams. To dream themselves awake.

But dreaming awake means keeping yourself awake. Keeping yourself aware of all the opportunity that is around you and keeping yourself healthy at the same time.

At Middlebury, you will have a wealth of people to support you in that effort: Commons heads, Commons deans, JCs, RHAs, the faculty who teach you in first-year seminars, librarians, coaches, faculty who teach you in your other courses, people whom you happen to meet on campus. And they will help you develop the wisdom of staying awake. At Middlebury, we are going to ask you to become wise.

The readings we just heard are all about that wisdom, that paying attention, that dreaming awake. They are all by thinkers from the ages—secular texts, religious texts, philosophical texts, Western texts, Eastern texts. They are voices from all eras, and from all over the world. All of them are engaged in the same effort we have undertaken at Middlebury: the development of wisdom.

In our common reading for this service, we hear first a challenge from ancient Greece: the tragic playwright Euripides from the 5th century BCE. He tells us straightforwardly that “Intellect is not wisdom.” We agree with this. Make no mistake: at Middlebury, you will be all about intellect. You will be challenged to master material more than you ever have before. And there will be days when you will feel that meeting such an intellectual challenge is enough. But once you have done that, we will not simply let you rest on those laurels. Intellect is not wisdom. At Middlebury we will challenge you to take the next step, to understand the role of that knowledge in the world, and how it has shaped human hearts and minds over centuries.

Ask the librarians at Davis Library, who recently spent long hours cataloguing the papers of a single abolitionist family in Vermont. Our librarians hung in there with a huge cataloguing project because the role of a single family taking an ethical stand wasn't just a matter of intellectual interest. Their work mattered to the whole world of people who might want to combat modern-day practices in human trafficking. Their work mattered to all the students who wanted to learn from the ethical example of the past.

Shantideva, a Buddhist writer from 8th-century India and a teacher at Nalanda University, asks us to be mindful before we begin a task. He tells us, "I will reflect upon these words on mindfulness / And lightly rise to what is to be done." At Middlebury, we will ask you to pay attention, to be mindful, and to reflect on the purposes of your own education. Mindfulness is part of being aware of what you are doing—not just following a well-traveled route or a rote course of study. It means taking the time to observe your own situation and those around you before you make a judgment. Some people call this slow learning. We call it better learning. Just ask Julia John '15, one of the several students on the first nature-writing course in Alaska, as she attempted to describe the allure and the treachery of hiking near the Matanuska Glacier in Alaska. No way to go through that task but slowly, carefully, and paying full attention.

And what is more, like Shantideva, at Middlebury we will ask you to carry your work lightly. That doesn't mean that you don't take your work seriously. It

means that you understand the power of trying many times and in many different ways. At Middlebury you will learn that trying twice, trying three times, even four or five times, is part of the equation. Just ask the students at the Potomac Theater Project in New York City. They have built a major theater company over the past 30 years with Middlebury College that is the only collaboration of its kind between equity actors and college learners. But they did it not in the blink of an eye, but by trying two, three, four times. With the public. With the College. First in Washington, D.C. And now at its home in New York City.

The author of Proverbs, possibly going as far back as the 10th century BCE, tells us that “Wisdom’s value in trade is better than silver, her yield, greater than gold.” The Quran too, from 7th-century Arabia, which you will hear in a little bit, reminds us of something similar: “That whoever has wisdom has been given much good.” At Middlebury we will challenge you, like the verses in Proverbs, and like the words of the Quran, to think of the wisdom that you gain here as more valuable than gold or silver. Those reminders mean that, if you get a great internship or a fabulous high paying job when you graduate, and you think you have accomplished what you need to, then you will not be wise. And we will not have done our job as educators. If we *have* done our job well, then you will see that true wisdom is found in seeking a deeper and richer life, not just one that focuses entirely on material ends. Hildegard of Bingen understood this when she wrote, “Wisdom grasps all things.” She was a writer, composer, philosopher, and natural historian, whose impoverished, cloistered life did not prevent her

from seeing the breadth of mind and wealth of experience that wisdom can bring.

Just ask the planters and sowers at the Middlebury College organic farm, who don't grow their crops for a profit, but rather to support the local economy, to deepen a sense of place, and to create a source of local food for Middlebury College and the town. This kind of wisdom gives the Middlebury farm staff members the resilience to try different agricultural experiments, and to build new stoves and different kinds of shelters for plants and people. All of that work is happening there right now.

You will also hear soon from the early 2nd-century New Testament author James, who speaks about wisdom as being "peaceable" and "open to persuasion." At Middlebury we will challenge you to be receptive to argument. That, too, is a great quality of wisdom. If you are open to others' points of view, you will not only be able to reason and address major social issues alone but also alongside of other people. This is a real skill, and when you learn it you will know the value of others' arguments and become willing to respect them. At Middlebury we don't think about arguments as entirely of our own making, or as an index of how smart we are. Rather, we view arguments as moments where people are thinking their best thoughts together. If you are willing to be open to others' arguments, you will have the support of others around you because they know you are willing to listen to them. That, too, will help us become a better community together. Just ask the debate team, now ranked in the top 5 percent

of all debate teams in the nation. They tour both nationally and internationally now and say that they are successful because of the enthusiasm of the younger students—first-years and second-year Febs, who joined their ranks. Those younger people would now be you folks. Due to those younger classes joining the team, it has tripled in size from 10 to 30 and is now the largest team in NESCAC.

Finally, you will listen to the Bhagavad Gita, from 2nd-century BCE India. That text introduces the idea that wisdom is grounded in trust. “With wisdom as the highest goal, controlled the sense, and filled with trust, one reaches wisdom.” At Middlebury, we will also challenge you to trust. You will need to trust that, as you begin this adventure called a college education, even if the outcome of your efforts is not what you think it should have been, you will eventually understand what the meaning of your work is. You will find your place. And you will need to trust that there will be people around you to help you do this. Just ask the students who were part of the Solar Decathlon in 2013, who literally built their own place to dwell, and trusted that they could do this together. They were interested in reconnecting people with the community around them while at the same time focusing on economic, social, and environmental sustainability. So InSite was born. It is a house that balances public and private spaces, but is completely sustainable in all those three ways. Middlebury students literally made a home for themselves. But in doing so, they had to trust their advisors, trust their instincts, and trust that this award-winning house could be reintegrated back into the Middlebury community. And that trust has paid off;

two students live there each year—selected through a rigorous application process.

And a final note about what you will learn here at Middlebury: being wise means being resilient. What do I mean by this? Resilience is one of those words that we think we know, but we don't necessarily stop to reflect upon. Resilience is about bouncing back from adversity, but it also refers to the ability of an object to return to its original shape after being stretched out of proportion—as might happen in a crisis or time of trauma. Resilience in both those forms is essential in a diverse learning community. You are awake and resilient when you know your own shape and know that you can find it again. You are awake and resilient when you have the courage to learn and make mistakes and find your shape again after the worst thing that could happen happens. Resilience means finding your own shape, and staying in shape, in body, mind, and spirit.

Let me tell you a final story that is about resilience, and remaining awake, in body, mind, and spirit. I just learned it this past Saturday. It is about the annual Kelly Brush Century Ride, hosted by Middlebury. Middlebury student Kelly Brush, Class of 2008, sustained a spinal cord injury while competing for the Middlebury College alpine ski team in 2006 as a sophomore. Instead of giving up and resigning herself to a life of immobility, she continued to ski with the team from her new perspective of a wheelchair, and went on to become a nurse practitioner. Her family and friends then started the Kelly Brush Foundation. The



foundation has hosted a bicycle ride—called the Century Ride—at Middlebury each year.

The first year, the ski team organized the ride to raise money for Kelly to buy adaptive sports equipment. And over the past 10 years it has grown to what it was on Saturday: a festival of 750 cyclists and 100 volunteers. The ride now features a large number of hand cyclists, whose athletic feats are extraordinary, and Chris Waddell '91, another Middlebury alum who is a champion paralympic sit-skier and wheelchair track athlete. Kelly's injury began at Middlebury. The worst thing that could happen happened. And Kelly turned that into something community focused for the team, and then for her patients, and then for the entire community of folks with spinal cord injuries who want to continue to compete athletically and live spirited, inspired lives. The whole community of Middlebury embraced her, not only after her fall, but every year up to now, 10 years later. Students. Alumni. Parents. Faculty. All of them rode in that race on Saturday. That is the community that you have become a part of. One that will encourage you in your wisdom and embrace you in your resilience, and do so over a lifetime.

You have heard today the voices of wisdom from 2nd-century Mediterranean. From 5th-century BCE Greece. From 12th-century Germany. From 8th-century India. From 7th-century Arabia. From 20th-century America. These are historical voices that join our voices in helping you find the right balance of body, mind, and spirit.

So I ask you once again: How long will you dwell in distraction, focused on what you are not, instead of getting on with the glorious business of being who you are? You have dreamt of Middlebury, and now you are here. With Toni Morrison, I welcome you to the world of engaged, directed, daytime vision. I welcome you to the place of dreaming awake. Now go, and get on with the glorious business of being who you are.