

Middlebury College Commencement Speaker  
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Good morning. I am so honored and thrilled to be part of the Middlebury Class of 2018. Thank you, President Patton. Thank you to the Board of Trustees and to everyone who made it possible for me to celebrate with you today. I was told that the Class of 2018 was up very late last night and actually may be sleep deprived. And that is something that I have to say I share with you today. That is something that we have in common because this may be the most difficult commencement address I have ever delivered. And that is because of the moment we now inhabit, the normalization of upheaval, the uncertainties we face not just as a country, but as a planet and as a species.

And yet here we are, gathered together at what will now be your alma mater, exams over, requirements met. Here we are, your shining faces, the robes, the kente cloth, and the leis, and the Ray-Bans, I love them, the tassels dangling, the talent, the genius, the hopefulness. Even the rains have held back so the skies can salute you. You made it, and we are with you.

You are singularly connected to this historic moment of polarity and promise. You were studying and incubating into adulthood as the world changed, or rather, revealed itself, to all of us. And so today, in our fractious era, I am here to make the case for radical empathy.

You see, it so happened that a fuse was lit in our country the summer you arrived on campus as freshmen. It was late summer 2014. The month before you arrived, a young man, exactly your age, was preparing to go to technical college in St. Louis, Missouri. He was from a completely

different background than most everyone here. Two days before he was to start classes, he had a now much-debated interaction with a police officer. He was shot and killed. He was unarmed. His name was Michael Brown.

His death touched off weeks of uprisings in his hometown of Ferguson, Missouri, and fueled a movement, Black Lives Matter. Yes, most people do not think of Michael Brown as a rising college student. He had the modest, working-class goal of having his own air-conditioning business. He and hundreds of other unarmed citizens, whose names we now know from their hashtags, should be alive today. Closer to home, here on this campus, we mourn the loss of your classmate, Michael Moss, who succumbed to illness last year, and of your Spanish Professor, Juana Gamero de Coca. They both should be with us as well.

There is something about loss that should humble us, the survivors, and move us to self-reflection and insight and gratitude for life. In the time since you have been at Middlebury, it has become a feature of the American landscape to see videos of our fellow human beings, unarmed citizens, beaten or dying before our very eyes. Every senseless death is a referendum on what we are willing to tolerate as a nation. Each case that does not get acted upon deepens our own collective complicity in this injustice. What is the effect on all of us, collectively? Does this numb us to the pain of people we perceive as different from us, make it seem acceptable on some level, normal?

People may not agree on the circumstances of Michael Brown's encounter with the police on that day in 2014, or of the many cases that have followed. These are split-second decisions, and in cases involving people of color—from Tamir Rice to Philando Castile—officers are often

heard to say, “I feared for my life.” And, of course, everyone deserves the benefit of the doubt.

But I think the human question that is hard to reconcile and that we as a nation must confront, is what happens in these cases after the person is down? What does it say about us as a nation? Why is it that the basic human response—to help a person in distress—goes missing? Life is so very precious. Why is it that first aid is not administered to people once they are unconscious, handcuffed, on the ground? Where is the threat once they are already near death? Where is the basic human impulse to take the hand of someone whose life is slipping away and to comfort them?

The missing link in our age is empathy and the recognition of the shared humanity of another who may on the surface appear different from us. Empathy is a muscle that goes flaccid with disuse. The lack of empathy is the source of division, injustice, and unnecessary suffering. The times in which we live call not just for empathy, but for radical empathy.

Empathy is not sympathy. Sympathy is looking across at someone and feeling sad, sorrowful for them. Empathy is not pity. Pity is looking down from on high and feeling sorry for someone. Empathy is commonly viewed as putting yourself in someone else’s shoes and imagining how you would feel. To me, that’s a start, but that’s not true empathy. It’s role playing. And it’s not enough in the dangerously fragmented world we now live in.

On its face, trying to imagine how you would feel seems noble and well-meaning. But it gives a false sense of emotional competence, centered on yourself. It can fool us into thinking that we know more than we actually do. It presumes to project ourselves onto someone else’s reality,

presumes to know how a person in a different circumstance must be feeling. Alone, it is dismissive of another person's truth and is actually a barrier to understanding.

Radical empathy, on the other hand, means putting in the work to learn and to listen with a heart wide open, to understand another's experience well enough to know how they are feeling, not as we imagine we would feel.

False empathy is in the comments sections all over the Internet. You've seen these. "If I was homeless, I would never live under a viaduct." "If someone threw me to the ground and shoved my face into the concrete, I would never resist." "If I were hungry, I would never beg for food." "If I were in an abusive relationship, I would just leave." "If my boss hit on me, I would just report it."

Radical empathy is not about you and what you would do in a situation that you have never been in and perhaps never will. It is the generosity of spirit that opens your heart to the true experience and pain and perspective of another. We need more of that in this world. If you love yourself and if you love humanity, if you have empathy, you cannot hurt another human being any more than you would want to feel that pain yourself.

The work that goes into learning another person's reality opens up new ways of seeing the world, allows you to more accurately assess any situation that you happen to be in. You gain a greater comprehension of people and systems that may otherwise confound you; answers to questions about human behavior that come to you more easily. Humans do not surprise you when you have radical empathy, because you can begin to anticipate behavior through wisdom

and discernment. When you know the circumstances, motivations, and perspectives of anyone you are dealing with—at work, in relationships, with presumed adversaries even—you have insight to guide you in every decision you make. Now, radical empathy does not necessarily mean that you agree but that you understand from a place of deep knowing. In fact, empathy may hold more power when tested against someone with whom you do not agree and may be the strongest path to connection with someone you might otherwise oppose.

Without radical empathy, I would not be standing before you today. It took radical empathy to tell the story of six million African Americans who defected from the Jim Crow South during the 20th century for all points North, Midwest, and West. It took me 15 years of research to write this book. I often say if it were a human being, it would be in high school and dating, that's how long it took me to finish this book.

The Great Migration was a leaderless movement—a beautifully inspiring leaderless movement—of six million American citizens seeking political asylum within the borders of their own country, not unlike the ancestors of most every American, of most everyone here in this space, the people who crossed oceans and rivers to get to freedom in America.

This migration changed the country North and South. Before World War I, when the Great Migration began, 90 percent of all African Americans were living and almost held captive in the South, held captive in a repressive caste system known as Jim Crow. It was a world in which it was actually against the law for a black person and a white person to merely play checkers together in Birmingham. You could go to jail if you were caught playing checkers with a person of a different race. By the time the Great Migration was over, nearly half of all African

Americans were living all over the rest of the country. It was nearly a complete redistribution of an entire people. No other group of Americans has had to act like immigrants in order to be recognized as the citizens that they had always been.

Had they not fled, some fixtures in American culture might not have existed. Toni Morrison, John Coltrane, Michael Jackson, Prince, jazz, Motown were all products, just a few of the many products—gifts—of the Great Migration.

To tell the story required that I hold a casting call to audition people for the role of being a protagonist in my book, I ended up having to talk with 1,200 people, and then get to know and to feel the inner desires and heartbreaks of the three protagonists that I chose. They ended up sharing with me, as a result of empathy, things that they had not even told their own children. I had to become a sharecropper from Mississippi who fled to Chicago. I had to become a railroad porter from Florida who fled to New York. I had to become a 78-year-old man, a surgeon, no less, who had grown up in an era I never knew, in a Louisiana town I had never seen, and who developed a gambling addiction which I do not have.

And when the book finally came out, I knew it had achieved its goal one night when I was speaking at a library on Long Island. It was a bitterly cold, rainy, miserable night. The auditorium was packed. Afterward, there was a signing line that snaked around the perimeter of the auditorium. A grandmotherly figure, diminutive and sweet-faced, had somehow managed to elbow her way to the front of the line. Her arms were heavy with books that she wanted me to sign. As she stood there, her eyes were welling up with tears. She said to me, “I can’t even talk about the book. If I start to talk about the book, I will cry for sure. You see, I am an immigrant

from Greece, and this book is my story.”

She saw herself in people who might be perceived on the surface as completely different from her, and saw herself.

Empathy means teleporting yourself into the heart of what it means to be human. Empathy is not masculine or feminine. It is not weak or soft. It is a superpower that can heal and build bridges stronger than steel or concrete. The most important bridge any of us will ever cross is the bridge to the human heart.

I learned empathy from my father. He and my mother both fled the Jim Crow South during the Great Migration. My father was a Tuskegee Airman who suffered the heartbreak that all of the Tuskegee Airmen endured when companies refused to hire these great pilots after the end of World War II. He, and others like him, lost his dream of working as a pilot and had to remake himself. He went back to college for another degree and became a civil engineer, literally the builder of bridges. His enduring legacy to me, which I seek to pass on to you today, was of the greater bridge of empathy.

One of the honors of my life was to know that my parents were in the audience when I gave my first commencement address 20 years ago, exactly, in Minnesota. My father did not live to see the book that I would become known for. But he used to always say to me, in good times and in bad, “I am with you.” So hug your mother and your father even if they do text you too much. Hold your family close. Cherish those that you love and those that love you.

And I will offer this one last bit of advice as you head out into the world: When you discover your strengths, you have no competition. You are your only competition. Make yourself and all of us proud. Go get your Gamaliel Painter's cane! Congratulations, Class of 2018! As my father would say, "We are with you!"