

Middlebury College Commencement  
Class of 2020  
May 31, 2022  
Student Speaker Jack Litowitz '20

Thank you, Mollie, and good morning, Class of 2020!

After such a moving and nostalgic speech, many of you are likely still deep in the throes of intense sentimentality after returning for a stroll down memory lane after four, [\*ahem\*] *six* long years of waiting for this day, long deferred—a day that is now finally at hand. No doubt countless feelings and emotions are currently racing through everyone's minds: intense love for friends, gratitude towards those who helped us along the way, pride in personal accomplishment, and joy in celebration—Class of 2020, we made it.

And yet, it is only natural that many of us here today may also, oxymoronically, feel within them sadness (Is this really the end?), apprehension (Will I ever see so many of my classmates together again?), and perhaps even fear (What does the future hold for us now?).

These concerns are justified. In many ways, the world we find ourselves in has become more divisive, or at least more complicated, than ever before. With new problems, tensions, and distrust erupting every day, it is harder than ever to be optimistic about the future. As well-known philosopher and lesser-known Yankees Hall of Fame catcher Yogi Berra so aptly said, "The future ain't what it used to be."

Each year, the world looks to newly minted graduates and imparts to them the same message: "We tried to fix this world, but we have fallen short; now it's up to you: do better, rescue the world from the existential threats already here, and those to come." The iterations of this stern command build in urgency and desperation, collectively rising to a feverish pitch from which paralyzing, deep-seated doubts may arise. Those of us emerging from four years of undergraduate study, determined to make the world a better place, may initially confront these doubts and waver, wondering whether we will be forced to accept an inevitable defeat of "too little, too late."

And yet, while these fears for the future frequently come to define the somber side of a graduating class's emotions, they need not be—and indeed are not—those which define our own.

Class of 2020, never before has a graduating class had the privilege of viewing what the future holds before their departure from campus as graduates. Never before has a graduating class established the beginnings of a formal legacy outside of the stone walls and green hills of Middlebury prior to their official Commencement ceremony. Yet, that is exactly what we have done. I stand before you today not to say, "The future looks bright," but instead with the incredible fortune to say, "We *already* reside in a bright future, and it will continue to shine brighter *still*."

As you all just heard from Mollie, the foundation for this was laid early. From the day we first arrived at Midd, the Class of 2020 navigated complex politics, created spaces for communal discourse and personal expression, established new traditions, and instituted legacies of achievement across athletic and academic domains—all while still finding time to attend a darty or two...

And when COVID first appeared, the initial response was not a discordant collection of isolated voices calling out “everyone for themselves,” but rather a growing chorus from the entire Middlebury student body, a collective voice which sought to answer questions like “How can we be together, even when apart?” “How can we help those most affected?” “What can we do to support those who are suffering?”

Not a class content to remain passive, we quickly got to work answering these questions. Together, we quickly transitioned the Student Fund to provide financial aid to assist our fellow classmates and their families’ return to campus. In only two months we raised over \$130,000 from over 830 individuals—that’s pretty incredible from a class of 700! (Whoever pressed the donate button twice by accident, we thank you!).

But the most revealing attribute of the Class of 2020 is that even after departing campus, we never stopped being active, helping others, and taking charge of our own destiny. “Excellence,” as Aristotle said, “is never an accident. It is always the result of high intention, sincere effort, and intelligent execution; it represents the wise choice among many alternatives—choice, not chance, determines your destiny.” While not everyone at Midd studied philosophy, it is clear that the Class of 2020 nevertheless came to know and embody this ethic. Despite being abruptly dispersed from campus, subjected to separation from our social, academic, and professional relationships, and thrust into a society suffering from the ravages of a global pandemic and geopolitical strife—none of it could dent our unyielding sense of optimism, our thirst for doing good, our unwavering yearning for positive change in this world.

But do not just take my word for it—the clear proof is *you all* sitting here before us today. Although we may not yet have heard our names read aloud and walked across the stage of our alma mater, the Class of 2020 is already made up of teachers, environmental activists, future doctors and lawyers, pro athletes and Olympic hopefuls, investigative reporters, models, bankers, artists, volunteers, and entrepreneurs. Our class is already meaningfully engaged in the world in positive ways, and we are only two years into our postcollegiate journey—imagine what our class can accomplish in another two? In 10? In 20?!

This remarkable class has already set off on the path to success, and we only continue to rise to the occasion and overcome walls and barriers in our way with a tenacious spirit and a creative mind—each new obstacle merely serving to strengthen our resolve.

Most graduation speeches end on a note about venturing into the unknown. At our virtual celebration in 2020, our speaker Jason Collins said, “I want you to look at this situation as an opportunity—step forward and be a leader, innovate, create. We need you, society needs you, the world needs you—be the future leaders we know you can be.” The thing is, our class *already exists* in that future. We *did* look at our premature

departure from Middlebury as an opportunity to step forward. We *did* venture out into the unknown. We no longer need to *wonder* if we can do this—we *know* that we can do this. Indeed, we have already completed the hardest part of all: the first step, that initial “zero to 1” moment on the infinite path toward greater and greater heights, always improving and always rising to the next challenge. We know that we can do it because we have *already begun*.

We have peeked behind the curtain to see that the future will know us as the graduating class who created bonds in the face of adversity and who overcame incredible obstacles rather than one that languished in apathy and self-pity. Even without the closure of a traditional graduation, we came to focus not on the past of “what could have been” but instead on the future of “what could be.”

To be sure, our class confronted enormous difficulties; a future seemingly foreclosed. Moreover, our class will only continue to encounter challenges on the road ahead. And yet, even without following the traditional path, without the well-laid plan in place, the foundation we established during our time at Middlebury enables us to meet these challenges and overcome adversity. So, as you leave here today and return back to the journey we set out on two years ago, be proud, be inspired, and be *confident*—confident that the answer to the question “Did our four years at Middlebury prepare us well for the future?” is “Absolutely.”