

Middlebury College Commencement
Class of 2020
May 31, 2022
Student Speaker Mollie Smith '20

Good morning and welcome! Welcome faculty, staff, parents, friends, and relatives. But most importantly, welcome *back*, Class of 2020! We're finally here—we made it. Jack and I are both so honored to stand before you today.

When my younger brother, Reid, and I packed up our rooms at Middlebury in March of 2020, we were in a confused haze. After hugging our roommates and agreeing that “there’s no way we won’t be back in two weeks!” we shoved a few duffel bags and textbooks into our family’s old Suburban, crossed our fingers that the car wouldn’t break down again, and made our way south to Boston.

Usually, I relish change. I don’t consider myself a particularly religious person; while some find solace in a higher power or deity, I find faith in a more laissez-faire mentality that focuses on going with the flow. Fresh starts allow you to take a step back, put things in perspective, and reapproach the new with a more thoughtful, intentional sense of both purpose and self.

And isn’t this why we all came to Middlebury? We came here to evolve, to discover new joys and new challenges, to fine-tune the kind of humans we are and seek to become. But, as is often lost in the fine print of it all, we don’t get to decide *how* we change or the events that stimulate said growth.

When we first arrived on campus, whether in September of 2016 or a bit later in February, I don’t think it’s a stretch to say this quest, this yearning for intellectual evolution and personal achievement, wasn’t at the forefront of our minds. Instead, if you were anything like me, it was something along the lines of “My God, I’ve never seen this many people wearing Birkenstocks in one place.”

The beginning of any new season of life is naturally wrought with the growing pains of transition, and our first year at Middlebury was no exception. Together, we learned the new norms of this collegiate ecosystem, the social rules that guided us through our time here. Through a baptism-by-fire-like manner, we got the hang of it. After all, there’s really no other way to learn how to respond when you hear “Like a Prayer” by Madonna for the first time in Atwater.

Our class’s own endeavors of transition and of change were echoed on larger levels, both on campus and throughout the country. On a national level, we navigated through a turbulent, divisive presidential election that manifested itself on campus in the forms of op-eds, discussions, walkouts, and protests. Amidst this turbulent backdrop, the beginning of our time at Middlebury, as the adage goes, came in like a lion. Yet while the world seemingly grew more divided by the day, at the same time, we were growing

closer—closer to one another, to ourselves, and to the idea of who our Middlebury selves might be.

The end of our time here at Midd, instead of going out like a lamb, went out like an entire hungry, pissed-off pride. We were torn from our XL twin beds and rocketed head-on into the world of the pandemic, drowning in uncertainty, fear, and turmoil. We were like freshmen, yet again, but this time we didn't have the comfort of being across the halls from each other in Battell or Stew.

We came to Middlebury knowing, hoping, even, that we'd leave as adults marked by the indelible impact of this community, this place, and this world. I don't think anyone could have predicted, however, that our time here would culminate in the manner it did. We expected hardship and we expected obstacles, but we did not expect to miss out on so many "lasts," nor to be known as "that class"—the one that missed their senior spring.

But instead of passively accepting this label—instead of merely relegating our time at Middlebury as one that can be overshadowed in this manner, I urge us all to think differently, to reshape the narrative of what defines us, the Class of 2020, and instead celebrate that yes, we are indeed "that class."

We are the class that led teams to national championships. We are the class that helped spur the successful efforts of fossil fuel divestiture. We are the class that helped create a Black Studies program here at Midd. We are the class that established Panther Day. We led forums, wrote theses, and applied to grad school. We protested, marched, voted, and debated. We worked to provide space here on campus to give larger, more widespread conversations a solid, productive foothold in the discourse of our student body. We cultivated space for conversations of identity and stories of vulnerability.

We are the class that advocated for and got that shockingly good vegan ice cream in the dining halls. We are the class that whenever we hear "Closer" by the Chainsmokers we will become overwhelmed with a visceral need to immediately find, and subsequently stand on, an elevated surface. We ran the TAM, we planted at the Knoll, we led orientation backpacking trips through the Green Mountains. We were mentors and teammates, we made lifelong friends, and we fell in love. And upon hearing of our campus's imminent closure, we, my friends, are the class that bought out BevCo.

This ceremony today is an opportunity for celebration, for we are finally able to honor the pivotal years we spent together. At the same time, it's also an opportunity for closure and for reflection, two things that are often neglected in our fast-paced quotidian routine. It's a chance to take stock of the good times and bad that made up not just the last four years, but the last six, and how they have shaped us both individually and as a class.

It would be both emotionally efficient and conceptually satisfying to compartmentalize these two—a celebration of the future and honoring of the losses of our past—into two distinct boxes. Yet in doing so, we risk losing the nuance, the shades of gray, the liminal in-between, the connecting fibers that serve as the atomic bonds between the simplest units, the intangible pieces, of our collective whole. It is the balancing act of this duality,

and others like it, that I believe serves as part of the foundation of our growth and of this fine-tuning of self we constantly pursue.

I lack both the language and the life experience to impart wisdom as to how this balance might be achieved, for it is a Herculean task. This duality that characterizes so much of our lives has been captured beautifully by many people much wiser than I. What I can contribute, though, is the suggestion that we refrain from taking a third-person approach by relegating this duality as an awkward guest, both at today's festivities and in the days following.

May we take time to envelop ourselves in all of the complicated emotions of being back here. May we let ourselves get a bit nostalgic, even a bit sentimental, at the sight of the Adirondack chairs peppering the lawns or the fluttering flags on Mead Chapel, emblematic of the spring we lost. May we embrace our friends, laugh with abandon, pose for a million photos, and practice gratitude for this day. May we walk across this stage with confidence and grace, as today we are a bit wiser and more sure of ourselves than we were two years ago. May we be unflinching in our self-compassion and radical in our shared joy. May we remember Will Nash, Jack Langerman, and Thibault Lannoy and honor their friendship and spirit. And to quote one of my favorite authors and sage expert of the in-between Suleika Jaouad, "May we be awake enough to notice when love appears and bold enough to pursue it without knowing where it will end." For if the last two years have taught us anything, it's that we truly don't know when things will end. As Madonna herself sings, "Life is a mystery." But while she claims that everyone must stand alone, I disagree. For we, the Class of 2020, will always stand together—and *that* feels like home.