

## Middlebury College Class of 2021 Student Commencement Address

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Class of 2021, I'm honored to have the opportunity to serve as your commencement speaker, and to deliver this speech that I wrote with my friend Lukas Kauth.

When Luke and I sat down to write this speech, we decided to begin with a memory of Luke's first visit to Middlebury in March of 2016. As he tells it, he doesn't remember every detail of the campus tour, which conveniently avoided Battell in all its glory. Of all things, he remembered the information session afterward, because it brought his Mom to tears. After touting student-to-faculty ratios and the value of a liberal arts education, the student leading the session shared a quote which he attributed to Maya Angelou. "At the end of the day, people won't remember what you said or did, they will remember how you made them feel." Luke turned and saw his Mom crying. I guess she really didn't want him to go here.

I fully acknowledge the sentimentality and cliché, but I believe that this quote rings true for all of us at Middlebury. We won't remember every picnic at The Knoll, every night in Bi Hall, or every conversation we had as we walked between classes. Hell, I hardly remember anything from my final two days ago. But, I will remember how Middlebury made me feel, how you all made me feel.

Unlike the rest of you, I'm not from Boston. I grew up in a small town, out west. But, even though I'm not from a city, the first time I smelled that fertile fragrance of manure wafting across campus, I wondered what I had gotten myself into. Fortunately, that is just one of the smells of Middlebury. It is accompanied by the smell of the afternoon coffee which gets you through midterms, the smell of the dining hall that somehow lingers on your coat, the smell of freshly cut grass on Battell Beach. This year, there are new smells—hand sanitizers and disinfectants. And there are some that we lost, many of which we never knew we'd miss—like the woodsmoke from the hearth at Flatbread, or the sweat of countless bodies crammed into an Atwater suite.

Although I can't say I'll necessarily miss the manure, it will always remind me of our home.

We remember these sensations. Our professors tell us that we should leave this school with an ability to think critically, express ourselves in writing, and engage with opinions different than our own. They're probably right. But ultimately, it is these sensations that will draw us back. We all know the flavors of the dining hall, the craving for Grille fries in the early hours of the morning. We've experienced the flavors of Vermont, too, like a crisp apple straight off the tree at Happy Valley. As students, we've tasted the disappointment of an all-nighter that didn't pay off. As panthers, we've tasted the sweetness of a NESCAC championship. We were there to celebrate together in good times and support each other when things were tough. Today, I hope we all feel Vermont tastes like a maple creemee.

What does Middlebury feel like? More than most colleges, Middlebury feels cold. No matter how many winters we endure, we'll never get used to that first sub-zero morning of J-term. But, with winter comes skiing and the exhilarating rush of the wind whipping against your face at the Snow Bowl. In the fall, it's the disconcerting crunch of a worm beneath your feet on a rainy day. In spring, it's the surprising warmth of sunbathing at Dunmore on a 50-degree afternoon. Middlebury feels like the grip of your community friend, tugging you across the floor of Proctor. It's the feeling of belonging to something that extends beyond the borders of campus.

We all know the sounds of Middlebury. How could we forget the musical genius of Old Town Road, Mo Bamba, or Mr. Brightside? From Sicko Mode to the Yodel Kid Remix, these are the classics of our eight semesters. I know the next time we hear Like a Prayer, there won't be a dry eye—or a shirt left on—in the room. Saturdays can't help but feel a bit too quiet this year. Who knew we would even miss a cappella concerts? There is still the incessant squawking of the crows that descend on campus each night, and those Mead Chapel bells which have drowned out so many lunchtime conversations. Over the years, we heard the sounds of protest as our classmates called for racial justice and marched for divestment. We'll all walk away with our own music of Middlebury, and it will form the soundtrack of our memories.

The beauty of Vermont and our pastoral campus will perhaps be the hardest to leave behind. I swear, Middlebury is home to the best sunsets in the world. And, though I can't claim to have woken up for many of them, the sunrises are pretty damn good, too. Despite the harsh winters and the 50-minute drive to the nearest "city," I don't think I realized how lucky we were to have called these Green Mountains home. On a foggy morning, the clouds veil the base of these hills, as if the trees themselves were exhaling. In the fall, they erupt in a blaze of autumnal glory only to be smothered by the first blanket of snow. None of us will forget the first time we saw the frisbee team streaking through Davis. And, of course, the sight of our classmates, the faces that have accompanied us throughout these past four years. As we were whisked away by the pandemic, our semester cut short, I didn't realize that would also be the last time I would see some of those faces.

I was struck by the acts of kindness I witnessed last March as we said goodbye. Although our extra week of spring break transformed into a year-and-a-half of social distancing, our class has exhibited resilience and compassion. We all made sacrifices, or lost something, or someone. Yet, in the face of this loss, we persevered. What we have accomplished this year, what we are celebrating now, is not just our academic achievement, but the strength of our community. The fact that we can look into this audience and see our parents, friends, and loved ones is a testament to our accomplishment in keeping our community safe.

The pandemic has shown that life is unpredictable. The only thing we can be totally certain of is this present moment. Yet, we are so often focused on our future—never more so than at graduation. As the admissions fellow in that fateful information session was eager to stress, Middlebury is rigorous. It instills in us a desire to strive towards greatness; that drive is something I admire about my classmates. But, our four years here can feel like a competition to see who is the busiest, the most stressed. We constantly pursue the next internship or job, wish away exams and papers, and anticipate the weekend. Even graduation can feel like an objective, a goal we have been working tirelessly toward for years.

In this moment, however, no matter what your plans are once we leave this place, I hope we can remember the virtue of standing still. Luke and I share a favorite novel, *Lonesome Dove*, by

Larry McMurtry, who sadly passed away earlier this spring. In it, McMurtry writes: “Yesterday’s gone down the river, and you can’t get it back.” As much as I wish it were possible, we cannot relive our time at Middlebury. But we can take a moment now to reflect before we rush on to the next stage of our lives. Thank a professor. Hug a friend, and think of those who are not graduating alongside us. Recall the coaches, staff members, and the classmates who have defined Middlebury for you.

You all, Class of 2021, have defined Middlebury for me. I don’t ask that you remember everything. I don’t imagine you’ll even remember this speech. But I know that we will remember how we made each other feel. Savor the bittersweet taste of graduation. Whether sorrow, relief, anxiety, or unbridled joy, revel in these feelings, and take them with you. More than the diploma, more than Gamaliel Painter’s cane, more than a lifetime of explaining where Middlebury is—these feelings are Middlebury. I will cherish them forever.

Thank you.