

Middlebury College Class of 2021 Commencement Address:

“Watershed”

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Thank you so much. It's great to be back here at Middlebury. I was honored and also so surprised to get a call from President Laurie Patton asking me to speak to your class today. I knew right away that thing one was I had to say “yes,” and thing two was I had to not share with her all the reasons why I was maybe not the right person for the job. I was caught by surprise because, a lot of the time, I forget I'm not in my early twenties like you. Objectively, I just turned forty. I have, somehow, just by putting one foot in front of the other for two decades, achieved some kind of professional status. I have a family of my own, including Noah, who is a fellow-Midd-grad-husband (so I'm here to tell you, the hype is real), and we have two little girls, seven and one.

So by all outward appearances, I'm a grown-up, but on the inside, a lot of the time, I still feel like I'm in my early twenties, it's 2004, and I'm sitting right where you are now, listening to our commencement speaker, whose name I had to look up, because I'm sorry to say I had no memory of the speech. I was totally exhausted, I was literally and emotionally hungover, and I was focused on my own stuff: my friends, my plans. So I won't be surprised or offended if you don't remember anything I say today. When the president called me I thought, ah, she doesn't realize that I'm maybe not the right person for this job because I'm actually in my early twenties, so who am I to have any kind of wisdom to you? But I didn't say that out loud, and so: here I am, and there you are... and we're doing this.

I wonder how you guys are. I wonder how you have weathered this crazy year and how you're feeling about entering the world of adult dreams and schemes at this particular time in history. Here's what it's been like for me. Last spring, I was living with my family in Brooklyn, in the afterglow of my musical *Hadestown* finally making it to Broadway after many years of development. I was nine months pregnant with our second baby when the pandemic suddenly started to feel like a real concern in New York City. We finally made the decision to leave, packed in a rush, and drove to my parents' farm here in Vermont, where I had the baby exactly a week later. And then, like all of you, we were in the midst of this extraordinary time—of suffering for so many, but also for so many, myself included, a time of healing. Because of the stillness.

I haven't stayed in one place for this long since I was a student at Middlebury. We were staying in a little house that used to belong to my grandparents. I found a box full of my old letters and my (highly embarrassing) old journals. I learned how to make pickles with my brother. I started talk therapy for the first time in my life. I read the entire annotated lyrics of the Grateful Dead. We did a lot of hiking. One day I texted an old friend "what is the name of the reservoir where we used to hang out in high school?" I wanted to hike there, and I had forgotten the name of this place, this little reservoir with surrounding fields and forests and public walking trails. My friend said, "It's called the Watershed." I hiked around it with my family, the baby strapped onto my chest, and I kept turning that word "Watershed" over in my mind and finding it very beautiful.

A watershed in its literal sense is a dividing ridge that separates waters—so the rain falls and flows either to this side or that side of the ridge. And then of course in the metaphorical sense of the word we have these phrases “a watershed moment” or “a watershed event,” essentially a turning point, which could be personal, or it could be historical, and sometimes—as I think is the case with your generation—it could be both at once.

This word spoke to *me* because last year I found myself multiple times uttering the phrase, “I’m at a watershed in my life.” Ultimately, we decided not to go back to New York, so I put a whole era of my life behind me, my life in that city, my creative life that was defined for more than a decade by this one musical. That’s all behind me, and what lies ahead is still coming into view. So I’m speaking to you today from my little mountaintop over here, as someone at a watershed in my life, and I see you over there on your own mountaintop, because you are, all of you, also at a watershed in your lives. Most of our lives we spend in the woods, among the trees, we keep our heads down, we put one foot in front of the next, we’re meeting deadlines and obligations, we’re keeping up with our studies, our jobs, our families and friends. But at these watershed moments we get a brief glimpse of the big picture—how far we’ve come, what lies ahead—for a brief moment we’re able to locate ourselves in the geography of our own lives.

I wanna say that based on my own experience I don’t think that this *very* moment, of you wearing the cap and gown in front of everyone, I don’t think *this* is the moment when you get to have that big picture feeling. I’ve often noticed that, for me, these rituals of public recognition are the times when I feel the least present and the least able to grasp

the significance of the moment. I already told you how little I remember of my own graduation day. Delivering my Tony acceptance speech for *Hadestown* was an out-of-body experience. Even my own wedding felt like this incredible party that I wasn't quite at. I've learned not to expect to find meaning at those moments when everyone's going "THIS IS SO MEANINGFUL! ISN'T THIS MEANINGFUL FOR YOU?!". These rituals are really important, but mostly for other people. Your parents seeing you in that cap and gown. Your grandma, seeing you in the white dress. It's okay if you aren't grasping the significance of the ritual right now, because it's much bigger than you.

But if not today, I hope you will find yourself alone in a quiet moment when you can really stand on your metaphorical mountaintop, looking backwards and forwards at how far you've come, and what lies ahead, and locate yourself in the geography of your own lives before you're back in the woods again—because you will be. I hope you'll allow yourself to dwell awhile in this watershed moment, because it has insights for you, and also because to be real, we only get so many of them in our lives.

So I'm looking back at the path I've been on since the day I was sitting where you are now, to see if I have any kind of wisdom for you. There are two ideas seem worth sharing. These come from my life as a creative artist, but I hope they apply to every discipline, and also just, beyond any notions of doing or achieving, I hope they apply to life with a capital "L". The first thing is this:

Create occasions for yourself to rise to.

About a year after I graduated from Middlebury, I was in the early days of my singer-songwriter career, I was driving down the highway when this weird little song popped into my head, and it seemed to be about the Greek myth of Orpheus & Eurydice.

I started getting excited about the idea of writing a song cycle or a “folk opera,” and I got a small arts grant, which was enough money to rope in my early collaborators and to go ahead and book the performance spaces where we put on the show that first year. What I want you to understand is that I actually put tickets on sale and started promoting this show which was unfinished—it was basically in the “ideas stage,” like I think you could count on one hand the number of songs I had written for it. When I look back, the confidence is staggering, I would *never* do something like that now, but I don’t think it could have happened any other way. I had to create an occasion for myself to rise to.

I realize that this is a cliché, this idea of, “leap-and-the-net-will-appear,” “if-you-build-it-they-will-come,” “fake-it-till-you-make-it,” and so on. It’s a cliché because it’s *true*, and I believe it’s especially true in your early twenties. Early twenties is a time of genius. I think it’s because you’re like the roadrunner in the cartoon who runs off the edge of the cliff and is somehow able to keep running on thin air just as long as he doesn’t “look down.” You have access to certain superpowers in this life moment that you might have a harder time accessing down the line. So yeah, I’m jealous of you, but mostly I’m excited for you. My first piece of advice is, create occasions for yourself to rise to, and don’t look down!

My second piece of advice is for when you do look down. Because eventually you will, and like the roadrunner in the cartoon, you will fall off the metaphorical cliff. So my second piece of advice is:

Understand failure to be an essential part of mastery.

I did the Middlebury summer language program in Arabic in 2003, and I remember a professor saying something that made a deep impression on me. He was

saying how students often get so frustrated when they forget a word that they've learned, but that you have to look at that process of forgetting (and getting frustrated, and re-learning the word) as an essential part of mastering the word.

There will be occasions, created by you or by others, that you just can't rise to in the way you want. I remember many instances of being given opportunities as a young performer that I just wasn't ready for. Usually, it was opening up for some big artist on some big stage that would trigger my stage fright. I would spend the whole performance spiraling in my own head, and then later I'd feel embarrassed, wishing I could have done better. But the next time I was on a stage like that, it was one percent easier. Being presented with opportunities you're not ready for, saying yes, and then feeling inadequate is an essential part of you actually being ready for the next opportunity.

So in twenty years when the president of Middlebury calls and asks you to deliver the commencement address to the Class of 2041, thing one is, you say yes! Thing two is you do not share with her all the reasons why you're maybe not the right person for the job. Take this mantra into every situation: Yes, you belong here. Yes, you're the right person for this job. And even if you fall short of your own or others' expectations, you still belong, you're still on the right path, and this failure is an essential part of you coming into your own mastery.

Just one more thought. I'm mindful that I'm speaking to a rare generation who is not only at a personal watershed but also a historical one. Your lives and the world you're entering have been changed forever by the watershed event of the pandemic. There was a very different watershed event for my generation during my time at Middlebury. I was a sophomore recently returned to campus for the fall semester, and at the beginning of my

morning class, which was an intro to acting class, the professor said, “Something has happened in New York, but we’re gonna go ahead and hold the class anyway.” This was before smart phones, and to be honest no one really had dumb phones either. After class we all rushed to Proctor lounge where there was a television, the lounge was totally jammed with students, all watching as one of the World Trade towers collapsed right before our eyes. In the midst of that trauma, there was this extraordinary sense of togetherness. I never felt more connected to my generation than I did in that lounge. For a moment I located my generation in the geography of human history.

My boyfriend (now my husband) had recently graduated from Middlebury, and was visiting me at the time. He was planning to drive home to Long Island on that day, but he couldn’t do it because all the New York bridges were temporarily closed. We pulled a mattress onto the roof of the Mill (the Mill was, and apparently still is, a social house for social misfits; I wasn’t a member myself, but Noah was). And we slept out there on the roof of the Mill under the stars on the night of September 11th. I’ll never forget that someone was playing a saxophone in the street below us in the dark; it was the most beautiful thing I’d ever heard. I made some major life decisions in my heart right then and there, which I don’t have time to go into in this speech.

All this to say that historical watershed events, as traumatic as they can be, *also* offer us a glimpse of the big picture. You locate your generation in the geography of human history. In the case of the pandemic, I think your generation has seen the physical outlines of something that has mostly just lived in the realm of ideas, which is that the whole of human society, and the planet itself, if viewed from a certain distance, is itself one organism, with one immune system. And what happens when that immune system is

compromised. A personal watershed comes with insights that will change your life. And a historical watershed comes with insights that will change the world. And you're a rare generation because have access to all that insight at once.

I can't wait to see what you do with your moment.

I'm gonna leave you with this little song that I wrote last year, and I'm just gonna sing it a cappella. When I wrote this song one of my first thoughts was, man I really hope some a cappella group sings this at a graduation somewhere. So I'm going to manifest that right now. It's called—surprise, surprise—it's called “Watershed.”

WATERSHED

Nobody gives you a map of the ridge

You climb one mountain and you find the next

You follow the river to the fountainhead

Watershed

The tallest summit you look up to

Someday it's gonna look small to you

There's a new one coming into view

And you'll climb that too but before you do

You get time to stand looking off the ledge
Where the rivers branch to the east and the west
And to catch your breath at the sight of it
How the heights on which your heart was set
That you won so hard and then lost so fast
Are now somehow just silhouettes
You stop and bend in the light that's left
And you cup your hands in the riverbed

Watershed, watershed, watershed, watershed
Watershed, watershed,

And then you'll keep climbing step by step
By the grace of god and by your own sweat
And a river of tears that you won't forget
But you will forgive if you haven't yet
Cause they carved the path that you had to tread
And they'll do it again for the path ahead
And the heaven you seek is not separate
From the heart that speaks when your cheeks are wet

Watershed, watershed, watershed, watershed
Watershed, watershed, watershed, watershed

Nobody gave you a map of the ridge

You climbed one mountain and you found the next

You followed the river to the fountainhead

Congratulations Class of 2021! See you out there in the world.