

February Celebration 2012.5
Remarks by President Ronald Liebowitz
Saturday, February 2, 2013

Good morning. It's a pleasure to welcome you to this celebration of the achievements of the class of 2012.5. I am delighted to have the opportunity to address you, the graduates, as you make your way from college to the next phase of your life.

Whatever that next phase may be, each and every one of you should feel a sense of great accomplishment for all you have achieved while here at Middlebury. You should also carry with you great confidence because your time here has prepared you well to meet the many challenges these dynamic times will undoubtedly present to your generation. I will elaborate a bit on this message in a few minutes, but I want first to give those present today a profile of your Feb class and a sampling of what it has done while here.

To the surprise of nobody here today, especially the parents and grandparents, this Feb class has accomplished an enormous amount over the past four years and contributed so much to the College community as well. Here is a sampling of the things you have done along with a quick profile of who you are.

There are 95 seniors in today's celebrating class:

- 53 men and 42 women
- 65 of you came to Middlebury as Febs, meaning 30 of you chose to join the Feb ranks and have done so, not surprisingly, seamlessly.
- Economics, literary studies, and sociology-anthropology were the most popular majors, followed by history of art and architecture (6), political science (6), and psychology (6),
- Seventeen of you majored in more than one subject.
- Forty-six of you spent at least one semester at universities in other countries. Your adventures took you to 28 countries on three continents.
- You come from 25 states: 11 of you come from Massachusetts, the state with the largest representation, followed by Vermont, New Jersey, New York, and Washington.
- Your class includes international students from Canada, Kenya, and Slovakia.

Each of you came to Middlebury with the strongest academic qualifications and the determination to make the most of your time here, and your academic achievement reflects your hard work here.

- Your class includes a finalist for a prestigious Thomas J. Watson Fellowship.
- Three of your classmates are finalists for Fulbright grants to do research in China, Bahrain, and Bolivia.
- Three members of your class presented at national conferences—The National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in American Higher Education, the Third Coast International Audio Festival, and the Society for Neuroscience annual meeting.
- Another put knowledge gained in an ES401 seminar to work for the *Vermont Agency of Natural Resources River Management Program*, assessing and documenting the factors in the White River watershed that caused or aggravated flood damage during Hurricane Irene.
- Two of you were on the Middlebury team that placed fourth in our first Solar Decathlon competition in 2011. Six of you are members of the 2013 team. Sponsored by the US Department of Energy, the Solar Decathlon challenges 20 collegiate teams to design, build, and operate solar-powered houses that are cost-effective, energy efficient, and attractive. Perhaps no other single event or accomplishment better affirms the power of a liberal arts education and the talents of our student body.

The creativity of your class was evident from the time you arrived at Middlebury, and your achievements in music, theater, dance,

literature, and the visual arts have enlivened the college experience for so many of us.

- A number of you had leading roles in major theater productions, including a classmate who starred in the Winter Term musical each of his four years here. [*What will the producers do next year?*]
- Two of you have participated or will participate this summer in the College-affiliated Potomac Theater Project theater company in New York City; another worked at the Dorset Theatre Festival.
- One classmate became a leading soloist in campus musical productions, including the music department's staging of Pergolesi's opera *La Serva Padrona*, and was also a soloist in the statewide college choral presentation of Leonard Bernstein's "Chichester Psalms."
- The audio storytelling work of one classmate has been featured on Transom.org, a Peabody Award-winning website exploring new voices in public radio, and her recent video was a staff pick on Vimeo.com.

Members of your class played on 8 different varsity or intercollegiate teams—women's golf, men's lacrosse, football, baseball, men's squash, men's rugby, men's soccer, and skiing.

Quite noticeably you have demonstrated your leadership ability in many ways:

- You have energized and played an active role in campus organizations, including Hillel, the Christian Fellowship, the Mountain Club, the *a cappella* group Mamajamas, the telemark ski club known as the Free Heelers, the Student Investment Committee, and the Socially Responsible Investment Club. In fact, multiple groups have led the way—some in unconventional but highly creative ways (!)—in the College’s current review of its policies regarding its investments in fossil fuels. That discussion will continue throughout the spring.
- Some of your classmates helped to found JusTalks, a student-led forum on identity; organized The Hunt, a winter-term campus-wide scavenger hunt that challenges students to use their creativity; and founded The Middlebury Quakers.
- A number of you guided and expanded programming at the Old Stone Mill as board members
- Others were active in planning and organizing last week’s symposium at the Middlebury Center for Social Entrepreneurship.

You have demonstrated a strong commitment to service during your years at Middlebury, volunteering with Community Friends, the John Graham Shelter, *Juntos* migrant outreach, and other community organizations.

- And your service was not limited to Addison County. One of your classmates organized a team of 12 students to build a

library in the Huruma slum in Nairobi, Kenya, raising more than \$15,000 from the Middlebury community.

- Two of you organized a Middlebury Alternative Break trip to Mexico to work on women's empowerment.
- Several of you created a Middlebury chapter of GlobeMed, which pairs students with grassroots organizations around the world that are alleviating health inequities. The Middlebury chapter now numbers 60 people and raises \$15,000 a year to further the partner organization's work. Two of you put your GIS knowledge to work for the chapter's partner, *Gardens for Health International* in Rwanda, mapping the Rwandan communities with the highest rates of malnutrition so Gardens for Health can target their assistance programs accordingly.

Again, these are only a representative sampling of the accomplishments of the Class of 2012.5. Febs always excel with their abundance of enterprise and creativity, but this year's class is quite remarkable, even for Febs. We are enormously proud of you and we salute you for all you have achieved. Congratulations!

If you took a poll of Vermonters and asked which month they liked the least, the vast majority would choose February. As

Joseph Wood Krutch, one of the great literary naturalists of the early 20th century, said, “The most serious charge which can be brought against New England is not Puritanism...but February.”

February is the year’s dark predawn—it’s cold and quiet. But most of you came to Middlebury in February, which says something about your character. It suggests that you are optimists...maybe a little nonconformist...willing to take risks...eager, as poet Robert Frost wrote, “to take the road less traveled by.” *[Now given Professor Parini’s talk last evening, I might want to think more about my use of that line, but for now, I will deem it most appropriate!]*

Those are important characteristics that I think you share with your College. One thing that has characterized Middlebury since its founding is a willingness to do things differently...to innovate...to take a calculated risk in order to accomplish something extraordinary. A college that began as an experiment in an out-of-the-way farming settlement has developed into one of the leading liberal arts colleges in the country largely because like you, it has done things a bit out of the ordinary.

You have many reasons to be proud to be a Middlebury graduate, and, over time, I know we will make you even prouder. I am equally confident that all of you will continue to make your College...and parents and grandparents...proud.

As you leave Middlebury, it is fitting to ask yourself what it is you will remember most about your time here, and what part of your college experience will make the greatest difference in your life after Middlebury.

As a geographer, I would like to think it will be the place *itself*—the physical environment—that will exert the greatest and most durable influence on you. I agree with Wallace Stevens, who wrote: “His soil is man’s intelligence.” And it is hard to argue with Stevens: we learn from our environment, and the places that teach us things that truly matter are carried in our hearts as well as our brains forever.

The natural beauty that surrounds us here is likely to be one of the things you will remember most about Middlebury. I am sure that many of you have experienced some unexpected moments of joy as you walked to class on one of those spectacular autumn days when the vibrant foliage on the mountains stands out sharply

against the blue sky; or walking on that pristine white carpet across campus; or seeing the multiple shades of green that burst across the landscape in the spring—even if spring doesn't show itself until you are about to leave for summer break. And of course, there are the breath-taking views of both the Adirondacks and Green Mountains from the College's Snow Bowl soon to be experienced in a slightly different way in just a few hours.

These simple things have inspired a sense of adventure and creativity in generations of students who have studied at Middlebury, along with enduring strong feelings of attachment. I hope you will take with you an appreciation for this corner of the natural world, now firmly rooted in your hearts, wherever you go, along with the sense of wonder that it inspires.

Yet when one speaks of “place,” one must include the human as well as the physical characteristics of that particular place when considering its overall impact on one's personal development and life.

And when you think back on your Middlebury years, I am sure you'll find that your memories of this place are, more than anything else, linked to its people—your friends, your professors,

your teammates, your coaches, staff members, and your acquaintances in town.

Seated around you today are 95 fellow Febs, many of whom are very likely to be your friends for life. Through the years, they will celebrate your achievements, reach out to you when you stumble, share your joys and disappointments, and always remain close to you.

Friendships like these, which began in the cold and bluster of a Middlebury February, are often intense, especially when they develop in a community that is small and relatively isolated, and where there are few distractions to compete for one's social and intellectual energies. Your four years here have helped you develop the kind of relationships that are hard to replicate in another environment. They have also given you an appreciation for the strength of community, which will influence how you interrelate with others throughout your lives: in a more personal, caring, and actively engaged manner.

One of the great advantages of attending a small, residential College is the opportunity to work with faculty and staff outside the traditional classroom to make a difference in the life and

direction of the institution. And many of you have, on multiple projects, be it pushing the College to purchase local foods; adopt sustainable building practices; lowering the thermostats in buildings during the heating season; installing a new biomass gasification facility that has already reduced our dependency on high-carbon-yielding oil by half; committing to be carbon neutral by the year 2016; investing in a Solar Farm just west of Bi-Hall in order to test the feasibility of shifting more of our electricity needs to solar-based technologies; and now posing the very large question of how best to address the “knowns” and “unknowns” of climate change through how we conduct our business, including our investment practices. These ideas, all of them, have come largely from Middlebury students, and have been engaged and, in many cases, implemented by faculty, staff, administrators, and trustees.

Beyond the benefits that accrue to the College for this kind of passion and engagement, these initiatives, and many others that involve student engagement at and around the College, are the best examples of how a liberal arts education should work, and why a liberal arts education is the best preparation for life: students engage a broad range of subjects in a formal classroom setting, taught and mentored by an accomplished and committed faculty,

and then they use what they learned to make a difference outside that classroom in multiple venues—not only here on campus, but in the town, the county, the state, and often times around the globe.

The greatest value of your liberal arts education is that it prepares you to live in a rapidly changing world that is likely to get more complex and less predictable in the coming years. It is an education that inspires one to continue to learn throughout one's life, and teaches one how to appreciate the physical and artistic world we inhabit. The great American patriot and president, John Adams, who played many roles in his long life, said, "There are two types of education, both crucial: one teaches us how to make a living, and the other how to live."

But learning *how* to live—how to be active and productive citizens and draw satisfaction from life itself, will be different for you than it was for your parents' generation, and even different from those who sat where you are now sitting just a decade ago. Globalization, and all the intended and unintended consequences it has generated, will require you to marshal all the skills you have learned at Middlebury to navigate an exciting, but uncertain future.

Over the past twenty years, the world has not only become flatter, as Tom Friedman has noted, but it has also become smaller...brought closer together through the lowering of political, social, financial, and cultural barriers. Transactions and interactions now occur as if New York and Hong Kong were neighboring municipalities, and competition for jobs and other opportunities are no longer determined by where people grow up, where they live, or what citizenship they hold. The local has truly become the global, and the global, the local. What is happening in China, Europe, and Latin America, or just about anywhere in the world, affects us in this country, even in rural Vermont, as much as what is going on in many parts of the United States.

You will soon be part of this world—a remarkably connected world in which the balance of economic and political power is shifting before our eyes. Each of you will have an opportunity to play an important role in this ever increasingly complex and evolving world.

And though it is perhaps daunting to think about your next chapter, and how you will participate in all that is going on beyond the hills of Vermont, you should, as I noted earlier, take comfort in the fact that you are well prepared to jump in. Because of your

strong liberal arts background and how that background has shaped the way you think and act, combined with your deep appreciation for the power of relationships and community that was honed right here, you are in a great position to make a real difference in whatever career you choose.

The best advice I might offer you as you begin your post-Middlebury lives, destined to be consequential players in solving the large challenges before our country and humanity at-large, is rooted in the lessons our faculty conveyed to you by example during the past four years: learning is a life-long endeavor...it never ends. Just as the professors with whom you studied learn more and more each year through their research and teaching, you, too, will learn more and more as you research your way through life's long and challenging syllabus.

As you put your intelligence, creativity, optimism, and values to work for the common good, remember...*always remember*...to exercise humility. You may think you have all the right answers as you engage people from all walks of life because of all you have accomplished at such a young age. But make sure to leave space for the reality that you have lots more to learn, and indeed will learn a great amount from the experiences that lie in front of you,

from your future successes and failures, and, most importantly, from others.

Your days as Middlebury students have come to an end this past week, but may all that you have learned and experienced here serve you well throughout your lives.

We hope the fond memories of your college days stay with you, and that your bond to Middlebury will remain forever strong.

And most of all, we hope that over the course of your four years here you have learned, in John Adams' words, how to make a living, and *how* to live.

We wish you well, and look forward to seeing you back on campus often.

Thank you.