

Address by Student Commencement Speaker Bronwyn Oatley '13  
May 26, 2013

Good morning students, faculty and staff; and welcome parents, grandparents, sisters and brothers. We're thrilled that you're here, both, because you look particularly fine this morning and also because it means we've done it. We're graduating!

George Bernard Shaw once said, "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man."

My guess is that if he were still alive today Shaw would describe Middlebury students as "unreasonable" people.

In my four years at Middlebury, I have had the privilege of observing both the visible and less visible unreasonableness of the students that sit to your left and right.

Just under one month ago today, I looked through the archives of *The Middlebury Campus*. I've been reporting for the paper since freshman year, so naturally—when preparing these remarks—I went to the one and only source for on-campus news. I went to the place where week in and week out, we find compelling, evocative, dynamic journalism: *The Middlebury Campus*.

The headlines from September 10, 2009, when we first arrived on campus: "College Cuts Late Night Care at Parton," "Job Attrition Leads to Early Atwater Closure" and "Alcohol Policy Takes New Practical Stance." Welcome to Middlebury eh?

Reading that first page, I'm convinced that our freshman selves were likely sure that we would have no access to Neti Pots at the health center, no dining halls in which to eat, and would be totally sober the whole time we were here.

How wrong they were—Neti Pots for everyone at the health center, am I right?!

As I moved through the issues, from October to November to December, I saw the hyper-visible moments of our collective achievement: "Solar Decathlon Takes Fourth Place in D.C. after Two Years of Work," "Men's Tennis Team and Women's Cross Country Win National Championships," "College Adds Chicago Posse." I saw the men and women of this class in amazing theatre shows, in outstanding a cappella performances, and in Bi Hall—doing biology and chemistry, and getting their deductive reasoning and science credits. No, I'm kidding; while many of us social science cats were off deconstructing nationalism, identity and gender—these guys and gals were learning how to actually put things together—like molecules, and space ships, and babies.

Flipping through the papers, I also saw the highly visible moments of our collective struggle: "College Hits 250<sup>th</sup> Isolation Case of H1N1," "Sunday Night Group Rallies for

Climate in Copenhagen,” and “Socially Responsible Investment Group Meets with Board of Trustees.”

Yet, as the pages kept turning, and the faces of the members of this class appeared on pages 1-25, I began to recognize something that those headlines couldn't capture. I began to see the *less visible* instances of the unreasonableness of our peers.

I'm talking about the unreasonable strength of the students who have coped with loss of a parent or loved one while attending Middlebury. I'm talking about the unreasonable determination of the first-generation college graduates. I'm talking about the unreasonable bravery of those students who have struggled with mental illness while attending college.

Though as a reporter I've been inspired by the visible achievements of this class, as a student I have been perhaps more profoundly humbled, motivated and challenged by the *less visible* achievements and struggles of those students that sit to your left and right.

Though this is a day to celebrate the many and profound visible achievements of this group of hooligans, it is also a day to recognize their many less visible achievements and struggles.

Furthermore, it is a day to call us to use these lessons as we move forward.

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In high school, my identity was centered around my life as a ski racer. I missed over 90 days of school per year to train; lived, nearly year-round in my uber-flattering spandex downhill suit, and I had a less-than ideal beard-like goggle tan for much of the winter.

Socially, I did fine. I had friends, I went on sleepovers, and like all the cool kids, I rocked out at chaperoned Friday night ragers—but I never dated. When asked, I said that I was too focused on skiing. That I wasn't interested yet. In reality, I was hiding, unwilling to listen to muffled voices inside my own head, the ones silenced by layers of ego, social pressure and fear.

In October of our freshman year, as *The Campus* ran the un-extraordinary headline, “Bridge Construction Stifles Business on Bakery Lane,” I did one of the scariest things that I have ever done—I walked into a Middlebury Open Queer Alliance meeting. Weeks later, in the basement of Battell, with tears streaming down my face, I came out to my mother.

Outside of this community, this could have been a very lonely process, and at times—to a certain extent—it was. There may have been one or two Friday nights when I sat marooned in my B1C single, snuggie on, popcorn falling all over my comforter, as I watched episode after episode of *The Office*. But in all honesty, at a time in my life when I was at my most vulnerable, well that's when this community took me in. Though often

referred to negatively as “the bubble,” I believe that it was in this protective community that I was first able to find my own footing. I believe that it was in this space, that I was really able to grow.

Though not everyone in this class is gay, I recognize that I am not unique in having been given the space and support at Middlebury to explore new parts of my identity. Supported by students, faculty and staff, we were challenged to study abroad, to take classes outside of our focus, and to seek relationships that added value to our lives. For all of us, this weird little extraordinary community has provided the foundation upon which we could explore our intellectual, athletic, artistic, or spiritual selves. While yes, occasionally there were also Friday-night snuggie wearing incidents all over this campus—I know you guys were doing the same things—in different ways, each one of us was provided space in which to peel back layers of ego, social pressure and fear in the presence of immense support from students, faculty and staff of this institution.

In this moment, this class is like a massive, powerful supernova, an insanely hot ball of star, ready to explode out of this rural Vermont community. We have students ready to start work domestically and abroad, some about to begin internships, and others who will travel, for the next few months, years or decades. Hear that parents—decades.

Though each on a different path, after we cross this stage, we will all move out of this community and into a world, heavy with ego, fear and social pressure. But graduates—we have been trained well. We have learned, in ways large and small, to listen to the voices inside; and we have proven, in ways visible, and less visible that we are ready.

Shaw said, “The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man.”

Class of 2013, love wildly, live boldly, and continue to listen to the voices that lead you toward growth. Class of 2013, follow in the footsteps of the 213 classes of Middlebury College students who have walked across this stage. Class of 2013, continue to be unreasonable people.