

In Words

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Through Trials and Triumph

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Through Trials and Triumph

To the admitted Class of 2024, congratulations, and welcome!

A few weeks ago, I took my last stroll — as a student — down Middle Path. I said see-you-laters, without realizing they may be indefinite, to the times and the people that are irreplaceable. A few days ago, Kenyon's Office of Student Engagement livestreamed a walk down the Path and, for a split second, I smelled the earthy perspiration of early morning dew. Spring in Gambier is a gentle spirit. With the first crack in earth's soil, new lives begin to bud: buoyant crowds of crocuses and daffodils begin to bloom and, as the freshest breath of air to the Hill, members of the newest class start to visit campus.

To say that this spring is an unusual one would be an understatement. The crisis we face today will be one entered into the books: the disruption, the uncertainty, the taunting calmness and the silent clamor, they loom over us all. Like you, me, and many others elated to conclude another chapter of one's academic journey, COVID-19 has abruptly and drastically upended some of the most precious "last" moments, leaving our stories without the epic exclamation marks we had envisioned. My eyes feel strained squinting in search of the pinpoint of light at the end of this murky tunnel. Despite it all, I encourage you to find the temple inside you for refuge, to embrace your community at a distance or nearby. For me, that community is Kenyon.

On March 18 of this year, my phone screen lit up at 3 p.m, reminding me of my fourth acceptance-versary to Kenyon. It took me back to March 18, 2016, when I received the email notifying me of an update in my Kenyon application portal. That memory still elicits the same response: burning red cheeks, clammy hands, the sound of my heartbeat bouncing off the walls.

Purple confetti, thumbs up, "Congratulations."

Oh, what a moment: for those like me who are the first to graduate from college in the United States — or in general — this is the capstone to our aspirations; it is a symbol of hope, a testament to sacrifice, an emblem of what is ahead. At the time, I had my doubts, as many of you surely do now. I doubted my ability to succeed, to be able to thrive within the silence of rural America and the resonance within. What if I don't think enough? Don't do enough? Is there a way to do college ... "correctly"? As the transition between high school and college was finally in sight, I could envision myself marching proudly over the bridge between being too young to be taken seriously and too grown to be coddled.

Those spiraling thoughts made me hesitate; they made me draw endless lists of pros and cons until I had exhausted my imagination of what could go right or wrong; they simply made me uncomfortable. I even thought about drawing my college choice out of a hat. The implications of any decision seemed like a perpetual free fall: unstoppable, unimaginable, incomprehensible. But I made the decision to haul three bags and a half, plus a trombone, from the metropolis of Vancouver to Gambier, Ohio. And let me tell you, I am so, so glad I did.

Throughout my days in quarantine, I can't help but notice the clock as it strikes 11:10 a.m. — Common Hour, when classes pause so Kenyon can come together in community presentations, ceremonies and other activities; or 4 p.m. — when the campus concludes daily classes and the dynamic spirits of athletics, art, and other extracurricular activities begin to bloom. The million possibilities of what I could be doing on campus: soaking up the sun on Ransom lawn with my

friends while getting some work done, seeing the last ray of the day glance off the tower of Peirce Hall; continuing the in-class discussion with my professor as we pack our bags, step out of the classroom, squeeze through the Ascension hallway, onto Middle Path, as she heads home and I go ... somewhere ... whatever it may be, I was and am never alone.

The Kenyon campus is an intentional one. It is significant in that no individual would stumble upon a Hill in rural Ohio in search of higher education; you, me, and everyone else who has made the Hill their home has done so not by chance, but with purpose. It comprises generations of thinkers, doers, writers, challengers on quests to ask the big questions, solve the unknowns, and to humanize. I miss my professors, my friends. I treasure the Gambier spring where we enjoy community cookouts, where we pester our professors to have classes outside, where we welcome admitted students to visit the Hill, where the end of a semester means a brand-new one is steadily approaching. What binds the Kenyon community is not only the time shared (and the time lost), it is also a sense of camaraderie, it's the connection. It is "the thrill of spirit which love imparts."

The excitement of awaiting the rites of passage that anchored this year are now replaced by loss and anticipatory grief; the things that were meant to solidify our memories and relationships now seem antiquated. Although now I cannot make small talk with a friend leaning up against the walls of Ascension, or grab a toasted blueberry bagel during extendo in Peirce; although it may seem like the small moments that defined the idea of comfort on the Hill suddenly washed away, leaving us to seek new comfort through distant yet fond connections: Zoom classes, virtual office hours and check-in sessions, or discussion boards in our class Moodle pages. What is left in the conclusion of my Kenyon story, still, is encapsulated in the strength of community that transcends the distance between us. Day in and day out, I hear the cheers of my friends near and far, the sharing of little victories and the tales of joy.

The Kenyon journey is a collaborative, open-ended and ever-renewing tale of growth, and I am excited for you to take ownership in writing that story while seeking comfort in uncomfortable situations. Class of 2024, I hope you recalibrate and rediscover the narrative despite the shifting ground under our feet — I hope you find your groove when taking your first stroll down Middle Path.