

SUMMER 2024

Mid

SEEING THE FOREST FOR THE TREES

How one alumna is
embracing a distinctive
reforestation technique
that promotes accelerated
ecological benefits

makers in postconflict Cameroon, analyzing the institutionalization of conflict and dialogue skills in the bureaucratic practices of the European Union, or understanding the battles over food distribution in Uruguay, our students regularly take those insights and apply them back at Middlebury—both the College and the town. As Conflict Transformation Fellow Agnes Roche '24 put it, "With this mindset of growth and a positive, productive view of conflict and hardship, I am a better learner, friend, partner, teammate, and citizen."

Our graduate students, too, find a deepened understanding of their local surroundings when they return from their work on conflicts abroad. Just ask Isabelle Boutaev, a nonproliferation and terrorism studies student and one of two student coordinators of the newly hatched Trialogue Initiative from Middlebury's Institute of International Studies at Monterey. The trialogue convenes leaders, academics, policymakers, and diplomats from the three major powers of the United States, China, and Russia to explore geopolitical themes of common international interest. In the spirit of deliberative dialogue, the aim is to build a common foundation and shared vocabulary for issues of current or potential conflict in the future. As Boutaev put it after convening the first trialogue in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, "It was a privilege to get to learn more about power dynamics and regional nuances impacting Central Asia and a unique opportunity to get to hear discussions of wider geopolitical realities and conflicts from the Russian, U.S., and Chinese perspectives. It definitely allowed me to come back to MIIS with a fresh perspective on class content."

What is more, our local college community partners are our coeducators, providing profoundly transformative experiences in citizenship for our students who stay and learn about conflict in Vermont or Monterey. When they work with our students, our partners repeatedly demonstrate that we are connected to each other through place. As citizens, we are often deeply joined by a common love of place, whatever our views. In fact, that love of place can motivate us to approach our differences more constructively.

The appearance of Justices Sotomayor and Coney Barrett together in March was a powerful reminder that in a democracy, when you can't agree on anything else, sometimes just being together in the same place matters.

Most of you are aware that in January, I will be leaving Middlebury to become president of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. However, my husband and I will be making our primary home in Shoreham, inspired by a love for that valley between the Green and Adirondack Mountains, our Middlebury and Addison County communities. It really is true that sometimes just being together in the same place matters. ■

On Memory

Whatever else is lost, time can be saved.

BY SAMANTHA HUBBARD SHANLEY '99

WHEN MY MOTHER ASKED ME to attend a gathering of her college friends last summer, I accepted her invitation gleefully. I was a divorced mother, aged 45, kid-free for the week and almost giddy about dropping in on a clutch of my mother's Northwestern sorority sisters. At Middlebury I had made plenty of lifelong friends of my own, but I couldn't help myself. I imagined reaping attention from my female elders, who were undogged by the historical context of being my actual mothers. At my parents' home, on a quiet island in a lake, where my college girlfriends and I had once sat on the dock, knitting hats and stitching dreamcatchers, I pictured myself sequestered in the shingled cottage at twilight while the loons called to one another, bobbing among the waves.

My dad stayed on for the week as the one-man reunion support staff. When I arrived, he was waltzing along the pine kitchen floor with an apron cinched around his waist.

The Cabana Boy, I joked over text to my four siblings.

Dad made the cocktails, grilled the meat, washed the dishes. Everyone knew he was a saint. What was my role again, exactly? As a single mother, I wasn't used to sitting around, doing nothing. I also knew that I was standing in a slim, sweet, and precarious spot. My parents, aged 75 and 79, were admittedly more forgetful than ever. Two of Dad's younger brothers, twins, had recently died within five weeks of each other after years of cognitive decline. My 96-year-old great-aunt, for whom I coordinated care, was living with severe dementia. I wanted to enjoy my parents, exactly the way they were, as long as I could.

On a night when my mother and her friends, Sally, Jackie, Joan, and Mary Lou, had agreed to discuss Ann Patchett's latest collection of essays, we sat in front of the fireplace with no flames, for it was a hot and early summer. We marveled at the components of great nonfiction—characters, plot, insight, surprise.

My mother stood up and went to use the restroom. She returned, holding a soft, cream-colored bath towel. One hand was placed beneath the towel and the other on top, as if she were offering instructions on reheating a casserole.

"I have to tell you something," she began, sitting down, on top of the coffee table.

She had lost a diamond earring the summer before, she explained. As soon as she'd noticed it gone, she'd sent Dad looking for it, snorkeling around the dock, peering under granite boulders, and sweeping below the deck with a searchlight. At last, they'd given up hope.

"Just now, I went into the closet for a towel," she went on, a smile broadening across her face, "and lo and behold..."



She lifted the towel from its fold, so it hung from her arm. There was the diamond stud, still clutching onto a loose thread, like a glittering sea urchin. The earring, she supposed, had gotten caught while she was toweling off after a shower, nearly a year earlier.

"What would Ann Patchett say about this?" someone asked as the rest of us cheered for the diamond. "She would tell us to find parallels to this moment and get to work," I explained, as if to my writing students.

For example, I told my mother's friends, when I was a child, my mother had a gorgeous sapphire bracelet that her father had given to her. When she lost it, she was heartbroken.

A few years later, I continued, after a family viewing of the White House Christmas trees in Washington, D.C., Dad was driving us home in the minivan. He took his hand off the wheel and felt around his back—something was poking at him

IN THE MORNING, WE SWAM OUT TO A gigantic water trampoline, which my parents had bought for their 14 grandchildren.

"How do you get up on that thing?" the women asked as we lounged in the water on swim noodles.

"The kids call this thing 'Waldo,'" I explained. Then, using a floating platform as a stepping stone, I launched myself up.

Sally came next, for she was the most adventurous, and then Jackie, the most determined. We lay there, momentarily beached and triumphant.

"What do you do once you get up here—just sit?" Sally asked.

I shrugged. The children always managed to jump around and have fun. Once,

how. God, I wasn't ready for that. Instead, I wanted to soften and savor, hold fast to the moments between now and then, preserve them in words of amber. That's what I did best, after all.

THE NEXT DAY, I TEXTED A GROUP CHAT OF MY Middlebury girlfriends.

"This is going to be us, someday," I wrote, imagining my mother's friends the night before, gathered on the deck at sunset, arms wrapped around one another, cocktails in hand.

Our 25th Reunion was coming up in June, and my daughter, my eldest child, would be starting at Middlebury a few months after that.

"I cannot believe you have a child starting college already!" one of my friends texted back once I told her my daughter had been accepted to the Class of 2028.

But I wondered whether it hurt more to lose the memories attached to those things than it did to lose the items themselves.

beneath his parka. My mother reached over from the passenger seat, shoved her hand up inside the jacket, and pulled out her sapphire bracelet. She had always hidden her jewelry among the ski parkas in the second-floor closet—the bracelet had simply gone astray.

I finished telling the story and looked at my mother. "I have no recollection of that," she said flatly.

Dad threw up his hands. "Me neither!"

I wondered exactly when I'd become the genuine memory bank for my family.

"Wait a minute!" Sally reached for my mother. "You lost a ring in Charleston once!"

My mother turned toward her, aghast.

"You left jewelry at airport security, too," I reminded her.

"Hang on—" my mother started. "You're right." She grasped at these clues, but they fell away like mental scree, once lost, now tumbling again.

"I guess the pain of losing precious things is too great to bear," she explained in a sudden moment of clarity. "So, I just wipe it away completely to avoid feeling it again."

But I wondered whether it hurt more to lose the memories attached to those things than it did to lose the items themselves.

when Waldo broke free during a windstorm and floated across the lake, we'd set out looking for him in the pontoon boat, all 25 of us, whooping and hollering, wondering aloud where he was.

Someday, I thought, when the children had outgrown Waldo, that memory would remain.

WHEN IT WAS TIME FOR MY MOTHER'S friends to leave, Dad heaved a purple suitcase into the trunk. The women hovered around him, rearranging their bags.

"How many septuagenarians does it take to pack a rental car?" I asked, like a middle-aged brat.

All six of them laughed until Jackie turned to me.

"Listen, Missy," she said with a twinkle in her eye, "someday, you'll be doing the same thing, and we'll be looking down upon you and thinking, Oh, how cute. Just you wait!"

All at once, I imagined it: the six of them gone. I thought of my children, of what else we'd have lost by then, and

"How are we this old?" said another.

Of course, I can't believe we are here, either. What began as joyful news that my daughter had been accepted to Middlebury soon gave way to unexpected bouts of weeping.

"She's really leaving now," I told my friends. "She's actually going somewhere."

It is not a loss, exactly, but a stark reconfiguration.

As a young mother, I always wished for things to get easier, less exhausting. Over the years, I found that they simply changed. The only thing I can do is hold my daughter, my two sons, and everything else exactly the way they are now.

As my uncle, one of the twins, lay in his final days, suffering from aphasia along with cancer that riddled his organs, he opened his mouth, trying to speak.

"I love *everyone*," he said at last.

Now and then, I think of him, his mind and body nearly gone. Still, he managed to reveal a thousand stories wrapped up in that one, final delight. It reminds me that if time is the treasure I don't want to lose, then story is the craft to keep it near. This is an act of love in and of itself. Whatever we truly care for, whatever we cherish, our emotional currency, if you will, is difficult to articulate, invisible—wordless, even. But I can still try. ■