

Commencement Speech
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I'm a Florida girl. Born and raised in a state best known for its plethora of beaches and retirement homes. I was born in Miami, moved down the road from Sea World, and ultimately ended up outside Jacksonville. Alligators, hurricanes, and hundred degree summers are elements I've grown accustomed to. But in spite of the soaring humidity and abundance of bad drivers, I've always been fond of my beach-front state. I lived there for 22 years. Baking under the sun for hours, occasionally pointing out people I knew were from out of town, was a part of my weekly—if not daily—routine. I will always be fond of the unhurried way of life and good old southern hospitality. Florida is my home; it's where I developed all of my values and convictions. So when I decided I wanted to go to graduate school in New York, you can imagine the shock of my family and friends.

I think it's almost impossible to walk into such a momentous life-change feeling fully prepared. Sure, I'd been away from home before. I traveled to Ireland with a study abroad program, and I'd been living independently for almost two years. Though these experiences certainly made me feel more comfortable about moving a thousand miles from home, I didn't have any idea what I was heading towards in the city that never sleeps. I also wasn't aware of how much of my previous life I'd carry with me to New York, how the people and places of my sunshine state would be transferred into this unfamiliar urban landscape.

Of course, I soon discovered that Adelphi University was not actually in New York City. It was on this mysterious island, referred to as Long Island, and it was a good hour and fifteen minutes from my apartment in Brooklyn. Now, here's something you should know about Floridians: our state is huge. It takes about eight hours to drive from the top of Florida to the bottom, and six hours from the east coast to the edge of the panhandle. So I'm no stranger to long drives. I just wasn't expecting to find the same epic proportions in New York. I guess I never really sat down to think about the enormity of the city and its surrounding boroughs. And in Florida, I had a car to carry me from one place to another. I was green to the whole subway system, and of course, the Long Island Railroad. Once I did finally manage to navigate my way through the endless, white-tiled tunnels that smelled faintly of garbage, it was on to the luxurious cars of the Long Island Rail Road, where bells rang out at every stop and the train crew punched my ticket an absurd number of times.

When I arrived at Adelphi, I think I was expecting something more like NYU, or Boston University. A campus that blended in with the rest of the cityscape. I was surprised to find that the Garden City campus is like a sumptuous retreat. More like something you'd find upstate rather than in the streets of lower Manhattan. There were manicured lawns, and herds of rabbits frequented the green spaces. The students seemed like the college students I'd experienced in Florida, except there were fewer sunburns and flip-flops. I

remember hiding out in the lower level of the student union, in the underground café, because I didn't know where else to go. The first week of classes, I missed a train, played solitaire in the library for four hours, and rediscovered the feeling of disappearing into the crowd.

Then something bizarre happened. Something that had never really happened at my undergraduate university. I began to understand that just because I'd left behind everything of my previous life—except my clothes, of course—this didn't mean that I'd lost who I was as a person and was forced to begin all over again. It meant that I was adding to what was already there, shaping the Florida girl into something bigger, something beyond my previous scope of experience.

The MFA program is small, which allowed for intimacy among my fellow students. The same people were in all of my classes, allowing us to become familiar with one another fairly quickly. Most of us came from diverse backgrounds and locales, but our shared love for reading and writing brought us together and fed our initial conversations. We became fast friends, though I must give credit to more than just my good 'ole southern friendliness, or their openness. Our program really encouraged us to build a community of writers, a group of artists who would support and encourage one another. As a foreigner in this strange land, a sense of community was the best thing Adelphi could have offered me. I'm not a shy person, and I can certainly fend for myself, but moving here presented a fresh set of obstacles. I needed somewhere to call "home," even if only for the time being.

Yet, in the months leading up to graduation, I began to realize that Adelphi's community had evolved into more than just a temporary home. The community I was welcomed into when I first arrived here will travel with me long after I leave. I've met people whom I hope will always read my work when I send it to them, and provide careful insight and advice. I've made friendships that I can see lasting for years down the road. The teachers and mentors of the program have shaped me in ways I never could have foreseen, and am forever grateful for. In many ways, I don't want to leave at all. I want to stay inside the incubator where it is safe and warm, where I know all the other eggs. But, of course, this is not possible. It is my time to go off and fend for myself, armed with only the knowledge I've been given. And yet, I'll leave this place knowing I have twenty or so people who've got my back.

Eudora Welty says of place in fiction, "Place conspires with the artist. We are surrounded by our own story, we live and move in it. It is through place that we put out roots." Though I came to Adelphi enthralled by the idea of living somewhere different, gathering new experiences to write about, I also realized the importance of remembering where I was before New York City. After having lived here for two years, I can admit that I feel an even deeper connection to the places I've come from.

So I say to you: give thanks to the places and people that have made you. In particular, think of how this place, this Adelphi community, has shaped you into the person sitting here today, awaiting your diploma. The circles we move in influence not only our

perceptions, but also the choices we make as we move through life. Instead of relegating them to your memories, carry the places with you, always, like an old friend who's been with you through the years and wouldn't dream of missing the next chapter.