

Columbia Baccalaureate Ceremony 2021

JEWELNEL DAVIS: Congratulations to the class of 2021. Etched in stone above the entrance to Earl Hall are the words erected for the students, that religion and learning may go hand in hand and character grow with knowledge. As a University community, we remain committed to the aspiration in a world that is far more complex than any of us would have imagined when you entered Columbia University and Barnard College just four years ago.

Each of you talented seniors are a testament to the hopes that we keep sacred. There are responsibilities and challenges for courageous people of goodwill and good character. You must be brave as you give voice to the common good of us all.

The Columbia University seal says plainly, translated from Latin to English, in your light shall we see light. In your light shall we see light. May the light of your recent optimism, the bright arc of your daring dreams, and the spiritual and intellectual illumination that keeps open your mind, heart, and spirit be encouraging and reassuring to you now and in your future. Welcome-- welcome to this multifaith Columbia University baccalaureate service.

IAN ROTTENBERG: It is an honor and a joy to welcome you all to our 2021 baccalaureate service here from St. Paul's Chapel on Morningside Campus. If this year were like most years, all of us would be together gathered in this space to celebrate. But even though we are physically apart from one another, the same spirit of community, faith, and celebration binds us together this year. Thanks to the remarkable work, endurance, and spirit of our graduating seniors, we are able to maintain the essence of this wonderful tradition.

Representing their schools, their fellow graduates, and their diverse religious communities, our students are the heart of baccalaureate. Their dedication to sharing with us from spaces here all around campus and from their homes allows all of us to be connected even while we are physically apart. With much gratitude and with sincere congratulations, it is my honor at this time to turn the baccalaureate service over to our student participants.

MIKYLE HASSANALI: Recited every night during the holy month of Ramadan, [NON-ENGLISH] is a supplication in the Shia Muslim tradition that focuses on the themes of God's generosity, his relationship with mankind, and the noble attributes of the prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him and his family. This Ramadan is different for me, as I lost my grandfather, the man that taught me my religion, last month. He was immensely proud when I told him I would be reading these words today, and this recitation is dedicated to him.

[NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

JULIETTE JUNG: Today, I'll be reading from Ephesians chapter 2 verses 1 to 10 from the Bible. In this passage, the apostle Paul explains that we as sinners can find salvation in the Grace and mercy of a loving God who lived and died and rose again to grant us eternal life. And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience among whom we all once lived, in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were, by nature, children of wrath like the rest of mankind.

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ-- by grace, you have been saved-- and raised up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus so that in the coming ages, he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace, you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing.

It is the gift of God, not a result of work, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. This is the word of God, amen.

PRESENTER: [A CAPELLA SINGING]

PRESENTER: And now the end is near. And so I face the final curtain. My friend, I'll say it clear. I'll state my case of which I'm certain.

I lived a life that's full. I've traveled each and every highway. And more, much more than this, I did it my way.

PRESENTER: Regrets, I've had a few, but then again too few to mention. I did what I had to do and saw it through without exemption. I planned each charted course, each careful step along the byway. But more, much more than this, I did it my way.

PRESENTER: Yes, there were times I'm sure you knew, when I bit off more than I can chew. But through it all, when there was doubt, I ate it up and spit it out. I faced it all and stood tall and did it my way.

PRESENTER: I've loved. I've laughed and cried. I've had my fill, my share of losing.

And now asked to subside, I find it all so amusing. To think I did all that, and may I say, not in a shy way, oh no. Oh no, not me-- I did it my way.

PRESENTER: For what is a man? What has he got? It not himself, then he is not.

PRESENTER: To say the things he truly feels and not the words of one who kneels.

PRESENTER: The record shows--

PRESENTER: I took the blows.

PRESENTER: And did it my way.

PRESENTER: [A CAPELLA SINGING]

PRESENTER: I did in my way.

MATTHEW ROSENBERG: I want to thank Rabbi Yonah Hain for his help in choosing a meaningful piece of Torah liturgy as well as my parents, my brother Andrew, my sister Stacy, and friends for all their support throughout my Columbia journey. I'll be reading from [NON-ENGLISH], specifically [NON-ENGLISH], Genesis, chapter 28, verses 10 through 16. It is the story of [NON-ENGLISH], Jacob, leaving his parents' home for the first time and discovering that God's presence can be found in many places, not just in his child at home. This is a lesson I learned in my time at Columbia, where I found God's presence in places I would have never expected.

[NON-ENGLISH SPEECH].

Jacob left Be'er Sheva and set out for Haran. He came upon a certain place and stop there for the night, for the sun had set.

Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. He had a dream. A stairway was set on the ground, and its top reached the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it.

[NON-ENGLISH SPEECH].

And the Lord was standing beside him, and he said, I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. The ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring. Your descendants shall be as the dust of the Earth.

You shall spread out to the West and to the East, to the North and to the South. All the families of the Earth shall bless themselves by you and by your descendants. Remember, I am with you. I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I promised you. [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]. Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, surely the Lord is present in this place, and I did not know it.

GAURI TALWAR: Hi, everyone. My name is Gauri, and I'm a senior at Barnard. Today, along with Ria, I'm representing my Sikh faith. Before I begin, I would like to thank my mom, Amrita, without whom I wouldn't be here today.

Here, we chose an excerpt from Ashab from the Guru Granth Sahib, which is our central religious scripture in Sikhism. We both decided to choose this excerpt because it exemplifies the work that we did with Columbia Sewa, a social justice organization based upon the Sikh value of Sewa along with the core egalitarian beliefs of Sikhism. In addition to the work we did with CU Sewa, it symbolizes our experience at Barnard and Columbia that encourage us to find unity in diversity and respect everyone's beliefs and opinions whether in a class, event, club, or friend group.

[NON-ENGLISH SPEECH].

Thank you.

RIA SAWHNEY: Hello. My name is Ria Sawhney, and today, I will be sharing a piece from my Sikh faith. This excerpt in particular exemplifies the Sikh concepts of equality and freedom of religion, which state that we should view everyone as equal souls and accept them.

Like Sikhism, each religion has their own theories revolving around life and death though what matters most are the actions that we take in our short lifetimes and how we can be there for our community regardless of whether their religious beliefs clash with ours. Sikhism also preaches that there are many ways to understand God and to understand the truth. Everyone is equal under the eyes of God.

Therefore, we should strive to recognize the quality of our fellow human beings and promote interfaith dialogue.

The eyes are the same, the ears the same. The bodies are the same, and the habits are the same. All the creation is amalgam of earth, air, fire, and water.

Just as millions of sparks are created from the fire, although they are different entities, they merge in the same fire just as many creatures are born from dirt and eventually become dirt again, just as waves are created on the surface of the big rivers, and all the waves are called water. Similarly, the animate and inanimate objects come out of the supreme lord. Having been created from the same lord, they emerge in the same lord.

There are many turtles and fish, and there are many who devour them. There are many a winged phoenix who always continue flying. There are many who devour, even the Phoenix in the sky, and there are many who even eat and digest the materialized devours. Not only to speak of the residents of water, earth, and wonders of the sky, all those created by the god of death will ultimately be devoured by it. Just as the light emerge in darkness and the darkness in the light, all created beings generated by the lord will ultimately merge in him.

PRESENTER: [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

HARITI PATEL: Hello, everyone. I'm Hariti Patel. It is with great honor that I represent the Hindu faith in Barnard College today. I would like to share with you all a set of prayers for Lord Shiva, Lord Vishnu, and Goddess Durga. These are all Sanskrit shlokas which devotees, including me, often recite on a daily basis after performing aarti, a ritual of worship as a form of respect, gratitude, and closure.

The first mantra, Shiva Yajur mantra, is found in the Yajurveda, one of the four canonical texts of the Hindu Terma. The second mantra, Mangal Acharan helps bring good fortune, happiness, and prosperity prior to starting a new chapter in life, much like we all are as we leave Columbia. The third mantra induces powerful vibrations throughout the body and soul to reach a divine energy that can relieve the chanter from worldly issues.

[NON-ENGLISH SPEECH].

My family has instilled deep cultural and religious values in me ever since I was a child. I recited these three prayers every day with my family members and came to college with the intention of reciting them daily behind the closed doors of my dorm rooms.

However, I found a group that enabled me to recite such prayers and celebrate my faith with my fellow students. The Columbia Hindu Students Organization has had a monumental impact on not only my college experience but my life in general. From being a planning board member as a freshman to leading as a co-president as a senior, this group has strengthened my belief in Hinduism while helping me develop more confidence and lifelong friendships.

Through our weekly meetings and pujants, our interfaith and community projects, and our four main events, Verratti Diwali holy and classical night, I have learned about how our faith teaches us to respect everyone and everything regardless of religion, color, caste, and creed. After celebrating our prominent religious events with students of various different backgrounds, I grew even more appreciative of the fact that the beauty of our lives lies in our diversity, and this diversity is truly what unifies us. I'm extremely grateful to have spent three years among a diverse community that has allowed me to succeed in the academic front and deepen my cultural and religious inquisitiveness.

As I leave Columbia with my fellow graduates to begin a new chapter, I encourage everyone to have an open mind and cherish the diversity around them. Being thankful and appreciative of others will foster positivity and respect that will unify all of us. As I conclude, I would like to extend my heartfelt thank you to my fellow graduates, other baccalaureate speakers, Dean Rottenberg, Tessa McGowan, Columbia and Barnard's faculty and staff, my friends, and last but certainly not the least, my family. Without your continued support and encouragement, I would not have had such an amazing experience and the opportunity to be here today. Thank you, everyone, and congratulations.

YAIRA KOBRIN- WIENER: Hello, everyone. My name is Yaira Kobrin, and I am a part of the Jewish community at Columbia. I want to thank the Columbia Barnard administration and the Office of Religious Life for the opportunity to speak today, the Columbia/Barnard Hillel staff for their constant support, and my friends and family for their love and encouragement over the past four years.

The stages of the Babylonian Talmud have a long discussion about prayers that are made in vain. The sages explain that prayers made over something that has already been determined are considered

prayers in vain. Instead, one should pray over futures that are not yet determined and give thanks for what has happened in the past.

But the sages don't forbid prayers in vain, and over the past year, I've been coming back to this idea over and over again. Prayer, the sages say, is transactional. Prayers made before an event take place influence the outcome of that event while prayers made after an event takes place are made in vain, unable to achieve a specific goal. Yet, by not forbidding this type of prayer the sages acknowledge that prayer is not only transactional-- it's also transformative. While a prayer made in vain will not achieve a specific outcome in the physical world, it can change my perception of the world and my experience of reality.

My engagement with my religious community has often been transactional. Growing up, my Jewish community and I had a transactional relationship. My community provided me with things, like friendships, a support system, and more. When I came to Columbia, I was welcomed into the Jewish community on campus, and my relationship with my community was again often transactional.

And there's nothing wrong with that relationship. My campus community gave me some of my closest friends and some of my favorite memories from my time at Columbia. The community gave to me, and I gave back to the community.

As both a leader and a lay person, I was privileged to have the opportunity to actively change the Jewish community on campus, to create an impact in my specific corner of campus, and to actualize the changes that I wanted to see in my community. But community, like prayer, is not only transactional. Community too is transformative.

The most powerful part of my experience as part of the Jewish community on campus was how the community transformed me. In moments of tragedy, both communal and global, and in moments of joy, the Jewish community provided me not with a tangible, physical change, but instead transformed my perception and my experience of my own reality. Engaging with my community pushed me to not only give and take but to grow as an individual and see the world and others in profoundly new ways.

Jewish tradition values prayer because by engaging in prayer, you can transform the world but also because by engaging in prayer, you yourself are transformed. And community, too, can change both the world and your perception of it. While our graduation marks our departure from our physical campus communities, we take with us our transformed perspectives, perhaps the most powerful tool we could have with which to change our world.

PRESENTER: [A CAPELLA SINGING]

PRESENTER: You're broken down and tired of living life on a merry go round. And you can't find the fighter, but I see it in you. So we going to walk it out.

Move mountains. We go walking out and move mountains. And I'll rise up.

I'll rise like the day. I'll rise up. I'll rise unafraid.

I'll rise up, and I'll do it 1,000 times again. And I'll rise up, high like the waves. I'll rise up in spite of the ache. I'll rise up, and I'll do it 1,000 times again for you, for you, you, for you.

PRESENTER: [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

PRESENTER: Move mountains. We going to walk it out and move mountains. And I'll rise up.

I'll rise like the day. I'll rise up. I'll rise unafraid. I'll rise up, and I'll do it 1,000 times again for you.

PRESENTER: Where will my heart come from.

PRESENTER: I will rise for-- do do do do.

PRESENTER: Where will my heart come from.

PRESENTER: All we need, all we need is hope. And for that, we have each other. And for that, we have each other. We will rise.

We will rise. We'll rise. We'll rise.

And I'll rise up. I'll rise like the day. I'll rise up.

I'll rise unafraid. I'll rise up, and I'll do it 1,000 times again. And I'll rise up high like the waves. I'll rise up in spite of the ache. I'll rise up, and I'll do it 1,000 times again for you.

PRESENTER: My hope will come from God.

PRESENTER: For you.

PRESENTER: Maker of heaven and earth.

PRESENTER: For you.

PRESENTER: My hope will come from God.

PRESENTER: For you.

PRESENTER: Maker of heaven and earth.

PRESENTER: [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

TASMINE AYMAN: Abdul Baha, the son of the prophet founder and central figure in the Baha'I faith, gave a speech in this very room, Columbia's Earl Hall Auditorium, in 1912. He said the most noble and praiseworthy accomplishment of man is scientific knowledge and attainment and that it is the very means through which the betterment of the human race is accomplished and the development of mankind is made possible. My name is Yasmin Ayman, and I'm representing the Baha'I club of Columbia University. I feel blessed to be giving this speech in the centenary year of Abdul Baha's passing in honor of my time at Columbia. As an aspiring neuroscientist and a Baha'I, the harmony of science and religion as a core tenet of my faith deeply resonates with me. Yet has also represented an ongoing struggle on my part to test the limits of science and a materialist outlook on the world while also challenging my own religious beliefs with the insights afforded to us through the scientific process.

Implicit in this personal struggle was my ongoing realization of the Baha'I belief in the interconnectedness and interdependence between faith and reason. When I first started my college journey, I adamantly boxed faith and reason and their traditional expressions and religion and science into two categories with mutually exclusive worldviews and toolkits. I would go to the lab and practice science and then retreat home for prayer and meditation. My immersion in each worldview was distinct, and so were the lives I lived in allegiance to each of them.

However, as I progressed in my academic journey in neuroscience, I saw the inherent limitations of the reductionist methods of science. I would sit in front of a microscope, admiring the intricacy of the human body, but wonder what more there could be to the self, to life. We were surely more than electrical potentials and nerve cells. Yet when employing the tools of science, that's all I saw. There was no lens that revealed the intangible, no language that did it justice.

Science affords us a toolkit without telling us how to use it, and it was that moral and spiritual directive I yearned for in my education. I sought refuge from the limitations of science in philosophy classes and in my faith. While studying philosophy, I found solace in discussions of the content, structure, and normative aspects of the mind and thought.

In Soul Cafe, an interfaith discussion series hosted by the Baha'I club, we would further ponder these questions and supplement our discourse with gleanings from sacred texts across all religions. The synthesis of these ideals revealed that science and the faculty of reason allow us to pursue truth. Religion and the faculty of faith bestow conscious knowledge and inspiration to practice good deeds. The common denominator of my studies in neuroscience and philosophy was a desire to reconcile, which I found in my faith. This was true harmony between science and religion.

Columbia prepares us and trains us to be leaders in our respective fields-- leaders in thought but also in practice. I believe this means our ultimate goals for humanity's prosperity and social justice lie in the twin pursuit of developing virtues and tools that scientific advancements affords us. These allow us to obtain more abstract goals, such as the unity of mankind, eradication of racial prejudice, and the true equality of women and men.

As Abdul Baha says, the arts and sciences are the most praiseworthy powers of man, for through their employment and exercise, the betterment of the human race is accomplished and the development of the virtues of mankind is made possible. Looking back, I can attest to the fact that I've witnessed the Columbia community flourish in these different aspects, and I feel privileged to be part of this community. I want to thank my family, professors, dear friends, and colleagues I've made over the past four years and, of course, the Baha'I club and New York City Baha'I community for making Columbia the edifying experience it has been. Thank you so much again for this honor, and I look forward to the rest of today's beautiful ceremony.

KHADIJA BALNDEH: [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]. My name is Khadija Balndeh. I am a student at the School of General Studies.

As a non-traditional student, one of the questions that lingered in my mind as I step my feet on the corridors of Columbia University, one of the best educational institutes in the world, was whether I'll be able to strike a balance between work and the demands of this great institute. [NON-ENGLISH], three years later, I'm completing my bachelor's in human rights. This is my story, but it's also the experience of the majority of you in this hall, I believe.

How is it possible, if someone may have asked? With confidence, I will say it was a combination of factors. Critically important among this is a friendly and accommodating environment created by the Muslim Student Association.

I feel included, accepted, and this meant a lot to me. At this point, I crave your indulgence to give round of applause to all the founding members whose tight lid effort culminated in this and, of course, all of you for working to maintain and improve these standards. This is important because in the words of prophet Muhammad, may peace and blessings be upon him, he does not thank a lot he who does not thank the people.

Challenges will always be around us, but we must be strong, resilient, and persistent. You must always be around people that appreciate you, inspire and motivate you, that can bring the best out of you. Life at Columbia was made more worthwhile thank you to the solid bond I have shared with all of you in this. What I'm thankful for is the programs at our building. I am thankful for the prayer space, a space that I can always escape to after classes. Shirivsti and the amazing students that are always there and ready to listen to me while I recall my ordeals. Special thanks to Sister Amina, our chaplain, for always been kind and gracious.

I won't forget to mention Chaplain Ian and Chaplain Yonah for the amazing multifaith and dinners and Tessa for organizing many programs, the yoga classes which I love, which helped me relieve stress and relax more. I am thankful for the sisterhood I created within these walls, a sisterhood that will last a lifetime. I am thankful for this great institution and the people in it who challenge me intellectually and help me contextualize my experiences.

I am thankful to my peers who came from different backgrounds for being open about their backgrounds and letting me learn more about their communities through them. I am thankful for our weekly halaqas that increase my knowledge and iman. I am thankful for the endless opportunities that this institution offers. I am thankful for the various clubs on campus who create space for those who are often sidelined and build connections between our different struggles.

I am thankful for everyone who I have come across at this university who shaped me in one way or another and who constantly gave me a reason to continue pushing when I found a reason not to. As you grow older, Audrey Hepburn, an actress, said, you will discover that you have two hands-- one for helping yourself, the other for helping others. So brothers and sisters, I encourage all of you to never stop helping because all we got is each other. [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH].

PRESENTER: [A CAPELLA SINGING]

Walking down 29th and Park, I saw you in another's arms. Only a month we've been apart. You look happier.

Saw you walk inside a bar. He said something to make you laugh. I saw that both your smiles were twice as wide as ours. Yeah, You look happier, you do.

Ain't nobody hurt you like I hurt you Ain't nobody loves you like I do. Promise that I will not take it personal, baby, if you're moving on with someone new.

PRESENTER: [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

PRESENTER: [SINGS WORDLESS TUNE]

PRESENTER: [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

PRESENTER: Happier, you do. My friends told me one day, I'll feel it too. And until that, I smile to hide the truth. But I know I was happier with you.

LAUREN PHAM: Good Morning. My name is Lauren Pham, and as I graduated from Barnard College, I'm delighted to reflect on some memorable moments with you. I have spent most Thursday evenings for the past four years with Columbia Catholic Ministry, chanting these words in adoration of the Eucharist, which means thanksgiving, and is the real presence of Jesus Christ.

[NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]. Oh, grant us endless length of days in our true native land with thee. [NON-ENGLISH] is a word I've been thinking a lot about lately. It refers to a place to belong-- a country, homeland, native land, fatherland.

Although I wanted to be many different things throughout my time at Barnard, I eventually came to rest on one thing. I want to be like my father. My father studied computer engineering in college.

So when I finally decided to study computer science, I told my dad on Father's Day I love that I am like you, and I am proud that I am like you. In addition to my major, there are other ways I'm like him too. In times of crisis, I work hard to accomplish what is within my power and surrender the rest to God.

I'm also like my mother, who has taught me that in every moment, we can choose to make even an ordinary action a radical gift of love. The likeness I have to my parents is a gift, and it is also a memory and a reminder. I'm like my father, and I'm like my Father, God, the Father in heaven.

The catechism of the Catholic church section 23311 says this. God is love, and in himself, he lives a mystery of personal, loving communion. Creating the human race in his own image, God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation and thus the capacity and responsibility of love and communion.

God gave me to the loving community of my family because I also belong to him as a beloved daughter. Because I'm beloved by my parents, my three brothers, and my sister, my grandparents, and aunts and uncles and cousins, I can imagine just a fraction of what it means to be beloved by God. I know that I will always belong with my family.

This is a testament to their strength and faith because they themselves have not always unconditionally belonged to this part of the world. My family on both sides is part of the Vietnamese diaspora community. Homeland is a concept I and many of my fellow members of the Vietnamese Students Association, or VSA, have struggled to understand as overseas Vietnamese.

It is also exactly in those conversations about our struggles to find belonging that I have found belonging among friends, all of us pilgrims looking for a place to call home. Fellow graduates, I am honored to have shared four years of hopes and dreams with you and to share my parting hope with you now. My hope is that you cherish your belonging.

Commit to memory the experiences of loving communion you have shared with the Columbia community like mine with the Catholic Ministry and the BSA. Remember, celebrate, and emulate those memories in the future communities you are embraced by. Every time you participate in loving community, you are saying what I said to my dad on Father's Day-- I'm just like my father.

You are bearing your exact likeness to God, who is a loving communion of three persons in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. We can love and be loved because he is love, and he made us to be like him. Today, I celebrate and thank the Catholic Ministry and the BSA, as I have mentioned.

I also want to thank two outstanding professors-- one of my first professors, Professor John Pagano, and one of my last professors from six semesters in the Vietnamese language program, Phuong Chung Nguyen. I also especially want to thank my scholarship, friends and advisors from the Jack Kent Cook Foundation, father Dan O'Reilly, and two of my best friends and fellow graduates, Scott Saskia Ghosh and Uade Akiri. In our belonging, our longing to belong, and our likeness to those who have been important parts of our lives, whether they be our parents, our family, our professors, mentors, or friends, we remember that we are destined for a community.

We are destined for an eternal, loving family. Every place of belonging hearkens back to our eternal heavenly home, and I wish you many glimpses into our home through loving communities, both past and present. Thank you.

JEWELNEL DAVIS: Let us observe a moment of silence to give thanks for family and friends who have supported our graduates through their years at the University. Let us also remember with gratitude each of the lives impacted during this unprecedented pandemic. May God give comfort, rest in peace.

May it be so. May it be so. Hear these words of benediction. Stand, Columbia alma mater. Through the storms of time abide.

May a grateful generation hail thee as we hail thee now. Thanks to all of the students who participated in this baccalaureate service. Your words brought light to valleys and rough places. May God be with each of us, near and far. Godspeed.