

Leah Seaman Jewett Speech:

Trust the Process, Create a Masterpiece

Good afternoon! And welcome to all administration, faculty, staff, fellow graduates, and loved ones to this momentous occasion. I don't know about the rest of you, but if you had told me four years ago that one of my biggest concerns on graduation day would be making sure my mask matched my outfit, I would have laughed you off campus! Yet here all are, masks on point, six feet apart, ready for the next chapter in our lives. (Breath) And now, a reflection on life from a soon-to-be graduated artist. (PAUSE)

In 1503, a man sat down in front of a blank canvas with a brush in hand and a plan in mind. His model posed patiently before him. For days, weeks, and years, this man labored on her portrait. Some claim that he worked for almost 16 years with this painting, failing time and time again to capture his model's essence. Her smile was not quite interesting enough, the composition did not work cohesively, and her gaze did not yet draw the viewer in. The artist went through many highs and lows with this piece. Some days, I'm sure he wanted to toss it in the fire and be done with the whole thing. Yet, at the end of those 16 years, Leonardo da Vinci finally put down his brush, stepped back, and gazed at what would eventually become one of the most globally renowned paintings to ever exist- *The Mona Lisa*.

When we approach the blank canvases in our lives, whether it be our collegiate careers, our athletic callings, or our professional vocations, we never truly know just how much time, effort, and energy will be required of us. Leonardo surely didn't. There is a certain amount of anxiety that comes with beginning a new chapter or a new work of art. Yet if we put faith in the notion that the creation process will get us from start to finish, regardless of our doubts and fears, then we just might come out the other side with our own Mona Lisa.

Take our time here at Marietta, for example. Our first steps in the process involved coming to college with a blank canvas as first year students, eager (or terrified) to begin creating our own masterpiece. We cautiously put lines on our canvas by joining clubs,

taking different classes, or making new friends. Sure, we approached college with a general idea of how we wanted it to turn out (having a degree being one of those ideas), but I know I certainly had no clue how I was going to achieve that goal. Yet, the more we drew—the more classes we took, people we met, and activities we got involved with—the more we started to understand what the final image would look like. By the end of that first year, we had a basic sketch laid out to build our collegiate masterpiece upon.

Then we took our next few steps, being our sophomore and junior years, and we began to put paint to canvas. We discovered what classes we were interested in, what activities we enjoyed and who our social groups were. As we looked at this marked up canvas of ours, we grew confident seeing the overall image that was slowly starting to appear. (BREATH) However, like Leonardo, we were eventually confronted by the unavoidable hiccups in the creation process. We began relying way too much on energy drinks and ramen noodles for fuel. We pulled more all-nighters than was healthy and we soon discovered that, yes, the syllabus was apparently a pretty important document to read. We realized our ‘creations’ were demanding more of us than we expected. Some of us spent more hours writing reports than sleeping. Some of us had to reprioritize our grades over trips to the Townhouse. We realized the path we were on wasn’t quite right, so we had to change directions. The whole world fell to chaos over one spring break and suddenly hanging out with our friends became the new definition of high-risk behavior. It was during those moments that some of us, myself included, considered just pitching the whole thing in the trash.

Yet, it was also during those moments of chaos that we were forced to put our noses to the grindstone (or add another layer to the canvas) and trust that somehow the creation process would eventually see us through to the other side, regardless of our doubts. It was when we began to let go of our need to be in control that we started to let our creation evolve organically. We moved on to the next stages of our process, learning important lessons along the way, like the necessity of unmuting yourself before talking on Zoom, or learning to accept some of life’s hard lessons, such as dealing with the loss of a normal, Marietta College senior year.

If the past four years have taught us anything, it is that even though creating a masterpiece can get messy and a little crazy, you do have the potential to produce your own Mona Lisa at the end of it all. The diploma soon to be in your hand is proof of that. At some point in your journey, you will realize that your piece was gradually coming together around you despite the doubts, worries, and fears that you'd had throughout the entire process.

So now here you are in the final stages of the creation process that resulted in the completion of your four year 'painting'. Like Leonardo, you took risks, experimented with different colors, and you gave more than you knew you had. Today, you finally put down your brush, stepped back, and completed the stunning masterpiece that represents your time here at Marietta College. And now you are going to begin your next creation. Perhaps you are starting a new job. Perhaps you are moving across the country. Perhaps you are going to finally figure out how to do your taxes. Any one of these next "canvases" will inevitably push you to put faith in the process of creation and trust that it will see you through to the conclusion of your next masterpiece.

I encourage and speak to all of you, when you start a fresh canvas in your life, to take step back and look at the masterpieces you have already created. Leonardo painted around 20 other beautiful paintings before the Mona Lisa came to even be a thought in his mind. Try to remember those moments when you trusted the process of creation to see you through, even when it asked more of you than you thought you could give. I can't tell you that this trust will make producing your next creation, or taking your next steps, any easier. But what I can tell you is that approaching a new chapter in your life with the trust that eventually, you will come out the other side with a work of art, despite the chaos, means that life can be a little less intimidating and a little more exciting. Be proud of the masterpiece you have worked on these past four years. Remember it often, when you begin to doubt the creation process in the future. Whether it takes you four years, or sixteen, know that you too have the potential to create your own Mona Lisa. Congratulations, class of 2021! It was a crazy ride, but we did it!