

Dear MIT, School of Architecture and Planning Class of 2020:

I never had a high school commencement. In the spring of 1982, a war was raging in Lebanon and instead of celebrating together, each member of our senior class huddled in a basement alone, endlessly studying for endlessly postponed exams. Two weeks after we emerged from hiding, we went straight to college. Later that fall, a few of us gathered in our school principal's office for a small reception, said thank you and goodbye to our teachers, and went back to our respective colleges. It did not feel the same. We did not have our prom, our parents did not get the pomp and circumstance they deserved, and we did not really get to close that chapter in our lives. The calamities of the war made our disappointment seem trivial. Many of us ended up walking in college and graduate school commencements afterwards, but somehow none of these ceremonies could make up for that missing milestone.

I hope that the similarity with your situation, MIT Class of 2020, does not end here, because there are truly beautiful, although unexpected, outcomes to this lack of closure. Every time I meet my high school classmates, whether in groups or in pairs, whether in Beirut or elsewhere in the world, we feel that we are still there, that we never left the school in which our friendships were formed, that we are more friends than classmates, bound by a unique experience that differentiates us from the other classes and by a conversation that never ended. We also feel that our friendship was only strengthened by those pleasures that we were forced to live without.

This may not be what you signed up for or what you deserve, and you may feel at times that it is not fair. In the imagination of my generation, 2020 was the future. "Vision 2020" was a recurring subtitle to many projects we designed and papers we wrote, and the future was always high tech, sunny, and very fair, very just. The future is here and yes, you may have encountered its high-tech aspects at MIT, and lest we forget, it has been a prevalently sunny year despite everything. However, the justice part remains to be attained. I hope you will forgive the generations before you for not having met their own future aspirations, and that you will carry forth the pursuit of justice whether through climate change mitigation, social equity, or public health in your own visions for 2050, 2040, 2030, and maybe even 2021 if I know your determination well enough!

But as you advance in your noble pursuits, please remember, as Michel de Montaigne reminds us, that in Aristotle's ideal city, the lawmakers held friendship higher than justice. "Of a perfect society," Montaigne said, "friendship is the peak."

May 2020 bind you together and to MIT in a lifelong friendship.

Hashim