Yale Talk: Conversations with Peter Salovey

Episode 17: Graduating During a Pandemic

**Peter Salovey:** Hello, everyone. I’m Peter Salovey. Today on Yale Talk, we are looking ahead to one of the most joyous and festive moments of the academic year: Commencement Weekend. Completing a Yale degree is always a wonderful accomplishment, but the members of the Class of 2021 have extra reason to celebrate. These students have written doctoral dissertations and masters’ theses, prepared final projects and performances, and marked the last of their “bright college years” during the COVID-19 crisis.

I’m deeply grateful to our graduates and to all Yale students, faculty, and staff members for the commitment to the health and well-being of our community. They’ve all made special sacrifices. However, the Class of 2021 is not the first to graduate during a pandemic. Last year, members of the Yale College Class of 2020 left campus for spring recess in early March. They soon found themselves attending “zoom university,” completing their courses and degrees and even graduating online.

I’m joined today by two of our most recent alumni members of the College Class of 2020 who helped lead efforts to make graduating during the pandemic as special as possible. Michelle Hu was a member of the Class Day Committee, which expanded Class Day into “Class Week” with a series of daily video releases celebrating Class Day traditions. And Vig Namasivayam was the treasurer of his class. He co-led the Senior Class Council and served as a student representative on the planning committee that advised the university commencement office on developing the Yale 2020 virtual program.

Twelve months after a challenging and unusual end to their undergraduate careers, we’ll hear from them about what it was like to graduate in 2020 and what their first year post-college has been like. Michelle and Vig, thank you for joining me on Yale Talk.

**Michelle Hu:** Thank you so much for having us.

**Vig Namasivayam:** Yeah, very excited. Thank you, President Salovey.

**Peter Salovey:** Well, thank you. Thank you for giving me a little time today.

So Commencement, as the name suggests, is a beginning. So what has the beginning of your life after Yale looked like? And how has your Yale education informed what you are doing so far? Michelle, let’s start with you. I understand you studied political science and economics at Yale. What are you doing now?

**Michelle Hu:** I am currently employed as a management consultant out of New York, which is, I think, a path that a lot of Yalies end up taking, especially those who study political science and economics that are a bit more critically thinking-backgrounded, I guess. But I had the fortune prior to starting this role in October to spend a little time working for a nonprofit that works on democracy reform and kind of bridging the gap between the private and public sector called the Leadership Now Project, which basically informs and gets business leaders and executives informed, educated, and advocating for grassroots and organizations and democracy reform, which was a really great time that was largely informed by my political science background as well as my interest with the election coming up that year.

**Peter Salovey:** Vig, you were in my old department, the psychology department. And what has life been like for you since graduation and how have your studies influenced what you’re doing now?

**Vig Namasivayam:** I am also doing management consulting. I think Michelle is right on the nose when she said that a lot of Yalies do that. But the reason I studied psychology is, well, first of all, I just enjoyed every class that I took, and I had to continue. But also, I think the idea of leadership revolves around understanding the people that you work with. That was kind of my approach to psychology was using it to understand people better. I think management consulting is kind of helping me get the rest of those skills going. I’ve really enjoyed it so far. It’s been a great opportunity. I think work from home, of course, has been a little bit challenging. But going with my psychology skills, it’s given me a chance to develop into that leader that I eventually want to be.

**Peter Salovey:** Here’s a little known fact. In between my college years at Stanford and my graduate school years at Yale, for one year I worked for a management consulting firm called South Gate Associates, and we did communications consulting. I mostly was analyzing writing and speechmaking and leadership meetings, negotiations, that sort of thing.

I know our people listening, might say to you, “All three of you, so you went to college and then you started doing management consulting. Doesn’t sound like any of you had any experience in management itself.” That would certainly be true in my case. How do you answer that question, Michelle?

**Michelle Hu:** That is a very, very fair question, especially considering, you know, I’m a 22-year-old recent college grad and here I am trying to help a Fortune 500 company figure out what their strategies are. That absolutely is something that a lot of people can cast a lot of doubt into, and rightfully so. But it’s important to remember that the team that I’m on is made up of a lot of really intelligent and far more tenured people than I, who actually lead sort of that answer development and the role that we play as first-year college graduates—we do some of the more analytical work and understanding data, conducting interviews and surveys to try to do more of that data collection to help inform the broader answer. That is something that I think Yale has definitely equipped us for, and I can feel very qualified in being able to do.

**Peter Salovey:** So you really learn the skills that you use on the job every day at Yale. How about you, Vig?

**Vig Namasivayam:** I think the other thing is that we are just able to provide a different perspective. And I think as someone who has less tenure, has less experience than everyone else on my team, I still am able to provide that different perspective in some ways because of that. The liberal arts education actually at Yale has provided me with tons of different angles and lenses to view the material that I’m studying and working on through. And I think that is definitely translated over to management consulting and the way that I approach different problems and the way that I provide insight to my team.

**Peter Salovey:** So let’s talk about Yale a little bit. A year after graduation you probably have some cherished memories from your time at Yale, even if those last couple of months were a little unusual, going home for spring break and not coming back. Tell us about a special place or an activity that you really remember fondly and that maybe you want to reconnect with when you come back to campus at some point. Vig?

**Vig Namasivayam:** I think the first thing that comes to mind is the Yale Dramatic Association. I was the treasurer, my senior fall, my junior spring, and it was truly the most incredible experience I’ve ever had. You’re in a room with people who are passionate and creative about creating art, and I was always more on the administrative side, so I let the creative juices flow from other directions. But I just really appreciated the perspective and the insight that everyone brought. It was a very tight-knit community. They were just extremely passionate about the messages that they were conveying. As someone who is really into media and communication, being there and being so intimate with it was a significant development in my life. I made some great friends, and I have a deal with the president of the Yale Dramatic Association, who at the time that if we don’t like our jobs, we’ll open a production company at some point soon. So, I have a few lifetime friends and potentially a future career out of it as well. [Laughter]

**Peter Salovey:** That’s wonderful. How about you, Michelle?

**Michelle Hu:** I think it is largely also informed by the time of year that Yale College students who are still on campus right now are dealing with is the reading period, the finals period, ramping up right now. And that brings me back to where I was a year ago, or rather two years ago, I guess, back on campus. But that would be working with Branford College Council to do a lot of study breaks and different events for the community. So I think that’s one of the things that I think back on most fondly is just being able to meet late at night on a Monday evening and plan different ways to try to get the community together and give people a break. And that is also, like Vig said, been a really strong community where I’ve made a lot of lifelong friends. Still able to pop into their meetings on Zoom every now and then, which is really nice. I think that’s one of the strongest memories.

**Peter Salovey:** That’s great. I recently walked through Schwarzman Center, which is completed. It’s really ready. It’s beautiful. It’s just beautiful. Commons looks beautiful. The new space below Commons looks beautiful, lots of ancillary office space for student groups and such. But it really struck me how wonderful that space below Commons is going to be for late nights, like during reading period where you just want to hole up in a corner and work, but also have a way of getting a snack or a cup of coffee. Or, not so much during reading period, but if you’re over 21 during other parts of the year, you can actually get a glass of wine or a beer. It’s gorgeous. I think it’s going to add so much to our campus and complement what happens in the residential colleges at those times of the year as well.

**Michelle Hu:** I know our class is very, very jealous, having seen some of the plans for the Schwarzman Center, very jealous that we won’t get a chance to see it.

**Peter Salovey:** You will walk through and on your fifth reunion if you end up having anything in Commons, which during reunion time is usually incredibly hot—and the alumni who are listening to us, who’ve been back for reunions, they probably remember those are really hot dinners and Commons during reunion weekend. Well, it’s air conditioned now, so you’ll get to enjoy it. You will get to enjoy that space. Beautifully restored, really respecting the history of that iconic Yale room.

So virtual content can’t replace the experience of celebrating anything in person with family, with friends. Nonetheless, I hope you all felt celebrated and honored at Commencement last year, 2020. But thinking about all of the virtual content that you received from Yale in the last part of your senior year and then Commencement Weekend and maybe beyond, is there a part that’s most meaningful to you, something that you did online, that you did, saw, interacted with online that was particularly meaningful for you? Let’s start with Michelle.

**Michelle Hu:** As just a blanket statement, I do want to acknowledge that there was—and having been part of some of that planning for how to shift any of these celebrations towards an online setting—it is really important to acknowledge how many wonderful people put their time and energy into trying to come up with a solution with really very little lead time. We had been planning for Class Day for months in advance and then we really only had a couple of short months to try to pivot everything to a virtual setting and had amazing, phenomenal help from the office of development, Yale broadcast services, and communications. I want to thank everyone’s efforts on that.

But I think most memorable and one of my favorite virtual pieces that we were able to do to celebrate Commencement was definitely the “Toast to 2020,” which is part of our Class Week celebration. That was our Saturday component. Basically, we were able to reach out to a lot of notable Yale alumni who are willing to send their congratulations and give a toast and a couple of words of advice to our class, especially in very new and scary times of graduating into a pandemic. I think that’s where we needed a lot of words of wisdom. We had a lot of wonderful, gracious people be able to provide.

So, getting to hear words of comfort from like Neil deGrasse Tyson and Anderson Cooper was definitely, I think, something that was really neat and definitely a strength of the Yale community.

**Peter Salovey:** So many people in the Yale orbit, and they’re willing to help us on moments like a virtual Commencement. How about you, Vig? What have you found online that was meaningful for you?

**Vig Namasivayam:** Something that the Senior Class Council did last spring to supplement for the lack of senior events to the virtual environment was we did something called Alt Senior Spring, Alternative Senior Spring, where it was like a series of video submissions and TikTok competitions that were all posted on Instagram and really allowed people to stay really close-knit. So everyone formed different groups, and there were different virtual challenges every week. It was something that Senior Class Council really piloted. Michelle was a part of that.

I think it was a really good activity for everyone to stay engaged, stay involved with each other. Michelle and I had our own group. We just had so much fun making these TikToks and constantly communicating. And I think people really appreciated that. I remember the first few weeks we had 120 different groups of five people participating. So, a lot of participation, and I think people were really into that. Obviously, it didn’t completely supplement for the lack of in-person events. I think it was still a really good activity for people during such a hard time.

**Peter Salovey:** So interesting. I think we’ve all discovered something online that we really actually love and want to keep. Even though I’m on Zoom I don’t know, ten, twelve, fourteen hours every day, an old poetry club from my high school, we re-found each other. I mean, we’ve kept in touch, but it is 46 years later. We found each other and fired up our club again, including our teachers. We’ve had a great time with that this year, and I think it would be a shame to not continue that into the future.

So, everyone has experienced unexpected challenges and disruptions over the last fifteen months or so. What have you learned from your experience graduating during a pandemic that you will take with you, maybe changes in your life you’ve made or in your thinking that you’ve made that you want to keep? Something you don’t want to end when the pandemic is in the rearview mirror? How about we’ll start with Vig on that one.

**Vig Namasivayam:** Well, first of all, I’ve started exercising a little. [laughter]

**Peter Salovey:** Me, too. Me, too. [Laughter]

**Vig Namasivayam:** So that, that is definitely something I want to keep for a while. But I think another thing is just understanding and being more in touch with my priorities and how that translates to the decisions I make. So, for example, I was actually originally supposed to start my job in Chicago. I was going to move out there knowing no one in the Midwest, not having a roommate or anything like that, and just was just going to start a new chapter. And then in June or May of last year, I realized I’m going to miss my family. I’m going to miss my friends here on the East Coast. I don’t know if I’m ready for that. And I think the pandemic really spurred that line of thinking. And so now I’m in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I’m living with two of my best friends from Yale, one of whom was actually a randomly assigned roommate freshman year. And so I think I was just able to realize that my priorities are the connections I have—my family, my friends—and I was really able to make this big life decision based on that. And it’s turned out to be the best thing that could have happened to me over the past year.

I love the city of Chicago, and I hope to move there at some point. But I can’t imagine being there right now without any connection in the middle of a pandemic. So I think just changing those priorities and understanding what’s important to me and how that will impact my livelihood, I think that’s something that I’ve really learned in the past year.

**Peter Salovey:** How about you, Michelle?

**Michelle Hu:** When I think back to March 2020, the overwhelming feeling that I had was the sense of, rather like the absence of closure in the sense that we had all gone off to spring break, and prior to spring break, we had received an email, I think from Dean Chun that said, you know, like, “make sure you bring your personals just in case something happens, don’t forget your passport.” And I remember my friends and I just brushed it off is like, oh, you know, we know that there’s worries about a pandemic elsewhere, but really did not see any of this coming. And so I was actually, funny enough, in Disney World, which is now, thinking back, a terrible, terrible decision in the middle of a pandemic. But I was in line for a ride when we got the email saying that we wouldn’t be coming back to campus. And I remembered the one biggest thing that I was thinking about was, there’s so many people I didn’t get to say goodbye to. And there was an overwhelming feeling that I had of wanting to reach out to people and people who I wasn’t necessarily that close with or didn’t speak to that frequently, or people who had already previously graduated, who I really wanted to follow up and tell them thank you for being a part of my life. Thank you for making Yale the community that it was, and allowing me to have the experiences that make it so sad that we aren’t able to come back to campus. And I think the pandemic more generally, given the social distancing requirements and a lot of the lockdown requirements, has asked people, I think, to reconsider the role of relationships and people in their lives. And that, for me, was the moment where I realized I really wanted to express a lot of gratitude towards people who I would pass by on the way to WH or took for granted sitting in the dining hall. And that’s something that I became a lot more cognizant that I should be more intentional about saying thank you and assessing the role that people have in my life.

**Peter Salovey:** Those are quite lovely words from both of you and similarly themed, right? Making sure that we prioritize the people in our lives. So you are now giving the Commencement speech, and as our final question, what is the one piece of advice that you would share with the graduating students of the Class of 2021? Michelle, you get to go first.

**Michelle Hu:** The one thing that I think came across most clearly in the pandemic is that you don’t always have to have a plan, and you don’t always have to have things figured out because you never know when a global pandemic is going to disrupt those plans and shake things up. I remember my senior year, coming into it, really feeling like time is running out. I need to figure out what I want to do for the rest of my life. That so isn’t true. Whether that be pandemic or not, there’s a lot of time. We’re still incredibly young and there’s a lot of new opportunities that I think will appear out of nowhere that we might not have expected. The time that I spent with Leadership Now Project was definitely not in my plan that I had written for myself in the fall of 2019 but ended up being such an important part of the past twelve months that I’ve spent since the pandemic and was really meaningful, and I think that was an opportunity that came out of the woodwork a little bit, but has made like a massive impact on what I want to do in the future. So definitely don’t feel like you need to have everything planned out right now. Chances are the world will disrupt it if you don’t give yourself that leeway.

**Peter Salovey:** So you don’t have to have everything planned. You could be open to serendipity, open to a curveball that you then might hit. How about you, Vig?

**Vig Namasivayam:** Oh, man. Even with the extra time to think, I’m not entirely sure. But I’d say the one thing that I would tell people is that whatever you do, the last thing you do is just make sure you’re happy with it. So in case there’s a global pandemic that messes up your plans and everything like that, you’re happy with the last thing you did, the last thing you said to someone, the last place you went at Yale, the last meal you ate out, just make sure that whatever you do in those moments you’re happy with. And I think this will extrapolate to the way you live. It’s making sure that the job you have is a job you’re happy with, making sure that the relationships you have with people are strong and you’re not going to bed angry with anyone. I think this pandemic has told us that you don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow. Your whole world could be upended in the blink of an eye. And so in every moment that you have, in every second that you’re processing, just do whatever you can to make that second, that action, as positive and beneficial and happy for you as you can. That’s what I would tell the Class of 2021 for sure.

**Peter Salovey:** That sounds like great advice. Of course, you never know what the last time you’re going to do something is. So that’s maybe the point of your comment. You don’t know it’s going to be the last time you’re going to do it, so make sure you’re happy with whatever it is you’re doing.

Well, thank you, Michelle, and thank you, Vig. Thank you for taking the time to reflect on the past year and share your experiences with us. Yale graduates of 2020 and 2021, your graduation experiences have been far different from what you might have envisioned, but I hope that the ties that you formed with each other and with Yale will emerge even stronger from this extraordinary period. May Commencement be not an end, but a beginning—a beginning of the next phase of your lives and of your relationship with Yale as an alum.

**Peter Salovey:** To friends and members of the Yale community: thank you for joining me for Yale Talk. Until our next conversation, best wishes and take care.

The theme music, “Butterflies and Bees,” is composed by Yale Professor of Music and Director of University Bands Thomas C. Duffy and is performed by the Yale Concert Band.