



High School Graduation

June 12, 2016

Speech by Russell Shaw, Head of School

Good afternoon. It is my honor and pleasure to welcome you to the 45th commencement exercises of Georgetown Day School and to the graduation of the Class of 2016. Today it is our shared privilege to celebrate these terrific young women and men and to send them on their way.

As we gather this afternoon for a celebration, I want to take a moment to call to mind the world beyond our walls. Early this morning a horrific mass shooting took place at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida. I'd like us to pause now for a moment of silence to honor those who lost their lives, those who were injured, and their loved ones, and to pray together for a more peaceful world, a more inclusive world, a world which honors, values and affirms difference.

There is a passage in the Talmud in which the question is asked what should you do if a funeral procession and a wedding procession meet at a crossroads. The answer is that the wedding procession always has the right of way, because while mourning is important, we need to take time to celebrate life and joy whenever we have the opportunity.

And so, acknowledging that even while there is tragedy and heartbreak in the world, today we are called to celebrate. And there is so much to celebrate, Class of 2016.

Graduates: Together you are occupying a liminal space--as you prepare to walk across this stage and into what's next. I'll confess here that I'm a fan of that word, liminal, which means being right on a boundary or threshold, or standing on both sides of it simultaneously. Moments when you stand in a liminal space--your birth, your wedding, your graduation, are important markers. They're worth paying attention to. We should be mindful when we make transitions, when we move from one space--in your case, the space or time occupied by your high school self--to another--the space or version of you that will represent your college or adult self.

30 years ago when I spoke at my own high school graduation, I talked about the process of packing up my childhood bedroom, and deciding what I would bring with me to college and what I would leave behind. Liminal spaces are opportunities to feel pride and gratitude for what we've accomplished, but also to shed those things we no longer want or need, and to hold tightly to those things we value most. Several weeks ago, seniors, in preparation for today, I wrote to you and asked what you'll be taking to the other side, what you'll carry away from GDS with you. I want you to know that I've asked this same question of graduating seniors for each of the past six years. While I haven't conducted a detailed study, I'm pretty sure that your class responded in greater numbers, and more thoughtfully, than any class to date. I think this is noteworthy given that this hasn't always been an easy year for your class or for GDS. I think your responses have come not only in spite of the challenges we've faced together, but also because of them--because you've been called to think harder about your individual relationships to this

place, to each other, and to what's most important to you.

Suffice it to say, I received far too many responses from you to share today and I'm only able to share a brief sampling of what you will be taking with you from 4200 Davenport Street. But I want you to know that I read and valued each response I received, each message you shared with me. Thank you.

So, Class of 2016, what will you be taking with you from GDS?

Charlotte Houghton writes:

I am taking all of the things I learned. Sure, I know the limit-based definition of a derivative, I've read Faulkner and Shakespeare and Dickens, I can conjugate a verb in any one of 10 Spanish tenses, I know more about the hybridization of orbitals in an element than I ever thought existed. I'm taking the hundreds of intellectual discussions in the language office after hours or conversations at Coffee Nature I've had with Evan Smith, someone who is always prepared to teach, or talk about anything on my mind. I'm taking amazing math and science teachers, who made me want to come to class and ask questions, who made me excited to learn about genetics or probability or any of the other things we covered in class that I never thought I liked, but discovered I'm actually intrigued by. I'm taking the entire blackbox, where I learned not just how to use every saw the school owns, but more than I even realize, about life, lighting, and everything in between.

GDS taught me that there's always someone else to help, a friend, or a teacher, or someone who's neither. At GDS, I learned how to be broken, how to be so lost and hurt that sometimes even going to first period PE seemed like too much to handle. But it's also where I learned how to accept those pains, how to deal with them even if they don't go away, how to use them to make myself stronger for whatever comes with tomorrow.

I learned that nothing's perfect, that a school we affectionately call "our perfect little GDS bubble" has its own problems. And these problems change from year to year, as we change, but they don't go away. It makes me so proud when I see the people in my life working to make the world a more caring, more just, more fun place to be, even when it seems like a daunting, hopeless task. I wish I had some solution to the conundrum that is GDS, both the good and the bad, but I think it's better off being indefinable, a collection of memories, aspirations, and people that want to be there, even when it isn't easy. I may be ready to leave, but I don't necessarily want to.

Sydney Barksdale writes:

I will be taking myself. Attending GDS for seven years, I've noticed a change in who I am. This transformation is inevitable, nobody stays the same forever. But the me of right now is very content with herself and with who she is. And I definitely would not be who I am today if I didn't attend this school.

Olivia Olivia du Pont writes:

What I will take from GDS is the knowledge that the most important achievement in life is doing

absolutely everything you can to make life a little bit better for everyone you meet. So many wonderful members of the GDS faculty have not only taught me as a student, but have also taught me the most important lessons in my life, helping me begin to realize who I am as a person, and giving me endless strength and guidance along the way.

Ian Ward writes:

At GDS I've been surrounded by the smartest people I have even known. At its core, GDS does extremely well what every school ought to be able to do: expose its students to excellent teaching. But GDS has made an explicit choice to go beyond the bare minimum of teaching subjects and aims to "teach the whole person," to craft its students into responsible citizens. If at times GDS fails (or even appears to fail) at this aim, I think it ought to be remembered that the bar has been set high, exceedingly high. In the midsts of the perennially lofty graduation rhetoric about producing world leaders and crafting the next generation of global change-makers, I will remember (and I would urge all of us to remember) that GDS has done something extraordinary yet under-appreciated: it has set its students on a path towards becoming intelligent people. While this is by no means the only thing I will take away from GDS, if it were to be the only thing, I would remain proud to be a Hopper.

Laurent Guichard writes:

I will take with me from GDS the many strong bonds and relationships I have made. I will take with me memories of many hours spent at school after the day has ended to be picked up at 9 p.m. I will take with me the various lessons of morality that teachers, students, and other members of the community have granted me. I will take with me the 13 years I have spent as a Hopper at GDS and will carry them with me for the remainder of my years.

Ellie Gottdenker writes:

The most important thing I will be taking from GDS is my own voice. When I came to GDS as a 5-year-old in Joanna and Elaine's kindergarten class, I don't even think they heard the sound of my voice for the first few months. I was incredibly, painfully shy. Becoming someone who is unafraid to speak up for myself and others was not an overnight process. But each year, GDS taught me in different ways. In kindergarten, I was an angel in the Christmas assembly. In first grade, I read my "book" at Author's Brunch. In third grade, I presented my Explorer's Report. In seventh grade, I read my Ancestor Epic. In eighth grade, I discovered my voice in Clay's English class. In 11th grade, I gave a speech in Chinese in front of an auditorium full of people. In 12th grade, I spoke on various admissions panels for prospective GDS students. GDS taught me how to take my deep-seeded fear of public speaking and overcome it. I've learned from GDS not to tiptoe around what makes me uncomfortable, but rather to confront my fears, and I am so much better for it.

Shonali Bose writes:

Something I'll take from GDS is how to be resilient. As a coxswain on the crew team for four years, I faced the daunting task of waking up at 5 every morning to yell at 8 bedruggled rowers. I was often hit with a boatload of problems, and had to think of solutions on the spot, even in tough situations like boat accidents and broken fingers. By my second season, my rowers relied

on me to make practice enjoyable and trusted me to help shape them into the best athletes they could be. I was splashed with water, shivering in 30 degrees, but miraculously found a way to love what I was doing. And when the administration told us that the boys team would be suspended due to the systemic hazing going on, I was floored by the way the team was able to quickly recognize our pulpit to prevent hazing on other teams and lead by example by trying to fix the injustices that had happened as best as we could. As a team we acknowledged what we did was wrong but instead of feeling defeated and giving up, we let it motivate our journey to rebuilding the team. Because of the crew team, I know I can confidently carry myself no matter where I go, and will be able to adapt as best as I can no matter what my circumstance.

Jamie O'Brien writes:

What I will be taking with me is a love for everything that makes me different. Entering GDS as a 14-year-old, I was terrified by the idea that I would be visible. I was so ashamed of myself and my flaws that I really loved the idea of fully disappearing into the shadows, to avoid having other people see all that was wrong with me. But in the past two years at this school, partly because of my time in theater, I have been able to accept and love the parts of myself I was ashamed of before. Being awkward and weird was my worst nightmare for so long. But those traits are the reason I can make people laugh, which is something I cherish deeply now. If you told 14-year-old me that I would be performing in Fata Morgana, doing leaps across the stage in a black leotard and full Black Swan makeup, I would've probably changed schools. But that was one of my favorite memories, a time when I was able to feel so proud of that awkwardness that kept me in the shadows for so long. As I go into adulthood, I can go there saying I know who I am and I know what makes me special. To put it simply, that's a great feeling.

Michael Osaghae writes:

When I was younger I wanted to be just like Spiderman. Spiderman was a jokester, he was nimble, courageous, honorable. No one told me that I couldn't be spiderman. Rather I was allowed to dream and I was encouraged to believe in my hopes from a very young age. As the years have passed, the narrative has evolved but the foundation has remained the same. The foundation of believing in myself and doing what makes me, a Nigerian-American male adolescent about to step into a world that was never built for me to succeed, feel whole and alive. I will take with me a burning desire to learn about the world around me and challenge things as I go. GDS has done for me what it has promised so many others that have come and graduated before me. GDS has shown me that I have the capacity to usher in change wherever I may be. The belief that change can come with anyone's actions and that all it takes is for people to do what they believe is right. My time here has reinforced my desire to engage in a morally just way and uphold the rights of others. After GDS I know that I can tackle any obstacle that presents itself.

Jenni West writes:

I will take with me that tiny feeling in the pit of your stomach when you become inspired to do something and can't stop thinking about it. The feeling of your mind going a thousand miles a minute, your feet rushing to hit the pavement and get started, your fingers itching to pick up a pencil and design your latest masterpiece. From writing to athletics to art, GDS gave me that feeling constantly, as I was inspired by every member of the GDS community. Seeing the spring

musical always wanted to make me pick up a pair of tap shoes, attending a Grasslands open mic made me want to write poetry, and seeing GDS take down Sidwell at the final moment of that fateful soccer game last fall made me want to lace up my sneakers and hit the Hopperturf with the team. GDS gave me the inspiration to take on new challenges without fear of failure, and the genuine interest to follow through.

And **Maddy Clark** writes:

The relationships between teachers and students at GDS are unlike those I've seen anywhere else - GDS teachers perfectly walk the line between friends and mentors. I admire my teachers wholeheartedly and feel enormous amounts of gratitude for the time they put into making my education the most valuable it can be; we often send my report cards to my grandmother, and her response every single time is a fascination with the detail and depth of the teacher comment section - it is a rarity and a gift to have teachers who are so passionate about what they do. I've been taught to dig deeper, to ask the harder questions, to raise an unpopular opinion and then, further, to fully stand behind it, to push myself beyond what is comfortable, to be confident in my answers, and to never let my curiosity burn out.

When I take a step back, try to remove myself from the bubble and look at it from the outside, the one thing that gets me every time is the passion I see in our building. From the dedicated sports teams and the heat behind athlete's eyes during a game, to that same heat behind student's eyes during a classroom debate, to the same heat behind my own eyes when I perform in that blackbox - the heat, though directed towards different things, is universal.

Personally, I'm scared to be without my classmates and peers next year. They keep me grounded, they keep me challenged, and they keep me happy. But it is because of the passion, the heat, that GDS has instilled in us that I am confident in all of our futures. We have learned to write, to think, to explore, but, most importantly, GDS has taught us to genuinely care about things.

GDS has transformed me. It has taught me respect. It has taught me maturity. It has taught me gratitude. And it has taught me passion. I have learned to listen, to value stories and experiences that I cannot possibly relate to, to embrace diversity as a backbone and essential part of an education, to buy into things, to find humor in unexpected places, to appreciate quirkiness, to cherish the community around me, to be grateful for my education, to never stop asking questions, to encourage curiosity, to pursue passions relentlessly, and to let the space I'm in transform into home and transform me while doing so. There is no other school that I would've rather been at these past four years, ups and downs included. Thank you for making GDS home. I will miss it dearly.

Seniors, the thing about liminal spaces is that you don't stay in them. They are time-bound, which is part of what makes them so precious. In a few short months, you'll be settling into your college dorm rooms (or in 15 months if you're taking a gap year). In those dorm rooms as you unpack your laptops and lava lamps, t-shirts and track shoes, your Maya Angelou and Marquez and Milton, don't forget the other things that you are bringing with you, things that you've taken from GDS: Your memories, friendships and a sense of community, of course. But also your

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resilience, love of learning, care for others, confidence, friendships, voice, passion, curiosity and moral compass.

On Wednesday at your graduation rehearsal, I added one more thing to your list, when I gave you each a book, *When Breathe Becomes Air*, a memoir by Paul Kalanithi. Paul is bright, curious, ambitious. He studies both English and biology as an undergraduate, and then trains to become a neurosurgeon. At 36-years-old, when he is married to his medical school classmate and ready to begin a life of great purpose and accomplishment as a world class surgeon and neuroscientist, Paul is diagnosed with Stage 4 Lung Cancer and dies several months later.

Now this may seem like a rather uninspired choice for a graduation book. And yet what's striking is what Paul does between his diagnosis and death, which is to write this book. Paul's illness forces him to ask in an existential way, "what matters?" What matters beyond achievement, beyond a diploma, beyond college acceptances or graduate school or recognition or awards? What makes for a meaningful or purposeful life?

Graduation ceremonies are typically replete with an array of attempts to answer this very question. What Paul argues is that meaning can't be found exclusively in our heads, in the realm of books or ideas, nor can it be found exclusively in our hearts, in the realm of experience and relationships. Rather, purpose and meaning lives at the intersection of both, when you harness your capable minds to your powerful hearts as you move through the world. And ultimately, that's our hope for each of you—that GDS will have provided you with the tools and the will and the passion and the courage for both.

So, Class of 2016, as you step across the threshold, we're confident that you have everything you need to take with you. We love you. We believe in you. And we are very, very proud of you.