



# High School Graduation

June 11, 2017

Speech by Russell Shaw, Head of School

Good afternoon. It is my honor and pleasure to welcome you to the 46th commencement exercises of Georgetown Day School and to the graduation of the Class of 2017. We are all gathered here today with an important job and a shared privilege--to celebrate these terrific young people and to send them on their way.

Graduates: first, a note on your attire. As far as I know, you are the first GDS class in School history, to graduate in caps & gowns. This is not something your class came to lightly. Rather, it reflects values that you hold dear.

A quick note on the history of caps & gowns. They were first introduced to academic ceremonies in the 1200's, when clergy began wearing them to distinguish themselves from lay people. This may come as a shock, but, GDS does not have a great track record with producing future priests, imams or rabbis. But graduates, if we flash forward to the late 1800's, it was then that scholars began to wear caps & gowns as a statement of equity. To quote one academic who has written on the history of caps & gowns:

*Wealthy aristocratic students graduating from an American university would dress the same as a scholarship student who owned only one suit. Because they were equals in academic terms, they would also be equal in their vesture.*

Your decision to wear caps & gowns reflects your own desire to create an equitable experience for all of your class--to not create artificial distinctions based on gender or socioeconomics, but to graduate as a unified community. Given your intentionality, I have exciting news. You get to keep your caps & gowns. They're our gift to you--you can wear them for your first day of college if you want.

And yet they aren't the only thing you'll be taking with you as you leave GDS. Several weeks ago, I wrote to you and asked what you'll each be taking with you from GDS. I've asked this same question of graduating classes for the past seven years. I received far too many responses from your class to share today and I'm only able to share a brief sampling of what you wrote. But I want you to know that I read and valued each response I received. Thank you.

So, Class of 2017, what will you be taking from GDS?

**Mai-Han Nguyen writes:**

*I will take with me the knowledge that happiness isn't something you plan for, but rather find. It took me a long time to realize that planning out my so called "happy future" made me miss out on those moments I could have spent with my friends and family. I was raised with the idea that my future was the one thing I could control--that if I could secure a successful future, I would be*

*happy. Not only has high school taught me that nothing is ever under control, it also taught me to love unpredictability, to cherish moments that seemingly pop up out of nowhere--like an impromptu class trip, a ukulele jam session in the back of the art studio, or a sudden dunkin donuts treat. To be honest, I can't begin to picture our future given the current state of our country...but I think, looking for little moments here and there where you truly feel happy isn't a bad idea.*

**Ari Rosner writes:**

*Obviously I will remember the first rate academics, the memories of debating quantum mechanics over lunch with my friends or building a nuclear reactor with Daniel Luberda. But what I will really take away from GDS is how each of these experiences has taught me something that I can and have already used outside of the academic confines. The high caliber conversations that are a quintessential part of all of our classes provided me with the confidence to engage with researchers at premier institutions; the level of inquiry allowed me to pose questions, develop methodologies, refine my experiments and yes, even make an impact in the field of cancer research in a way that I never dreamed imaginable. And from a social dimension, the discussions I've had at lunch with my friends have made me a more outgoing person, and have helped me learn to become more articulate in expressing my opinion and yet still be conscious of the community around me.*

**Arielle Calem writes:**

*I'll take a special type of warmth from GDS. Let me explain: One night, after a long swim meet, my teammates and I arrived at school only to find that we were locked out. We huddled together and joked about our hair being frozen. I talked with a sophomore friend of mine, while the other seniors spoke to the freshmen about their races. After some time, we were let in. I walked into school, felt a warm burst of air, and suddenly remembered I had been outside in the cold for the past ten minutes. I didn't even realize I was still freezing outside until I walked into GDS. GDS has provided more than literal warmth. GDS' figurative warmth is that everyone is included. When my team and I were outside in the December weather, we acknowledged our situation, but decided to stick together. We talked and we complained, but we did so together. I think, especially in today's world, it is easy to forget the power of inclusivity. As a student who has been at GDS for twelve years of my life, I will work hard to make sure everyone, regardless of background or life experience, is included in any group, activity, or environment in which I find myself.*

**Leigh Bianchi writes:**

*I've learned that nothing rewarding in life is easy. My experiences at GDS have given me the courage, confidence and resolve to run toward challenges, instead of away from them, and I will always be grateful to my teachers, coaches, parents, grandparents, and friends who have inspired me, supported me, believed in me (especially when I didn't believe in myself), and, yes, challenged me. They have made me the person I am today.*

**Noah Gottdenker writes:**

*GDS has taught me that if you wish to see changes -- big or small -- either in yourself or in the world, it is your responsibility to go and make that change.*

**Paula Gil-Ordenez writes:**

*I will take vulnerability and courage. Delving into charged topics can be extremely difficult,*

*speaking your mind can feel petrifying, but GDS has given me the tools to go for it. Putting myself out there by letting people learn from my experiences as well as listening to others be vulnerable and courageous has been the most rewarding part of GDS because not only have I learned so much about myself and my peers, but I have also developed a strong sense of empathy that I don't think I would have without the supportive but risk-taking environment GDS has provided.*

**Manning Martus writes:**

*I will take my ability to think critically, develop my own opinions, and defend my beliefs. Though my time at GDS wasn't necessarily easy, I truly value the skills I have learned to stand up for what I believe in — whether that took place in an English classroom or through an article in the Augur Bit, an email exchange, or a casual conversation in the Internet cafe. GDS created an environment in which I could challenge myself, and I can confidently believe in my ability to take on a world that throws curveballs every day.*

**Philip Rozendaal writes:**

*I will be taking with me a greater understanding of social justice issues in America and the confidence to try my best to make a difference.*

**Lulu Feldman writes:**

*I will take from GDS my motivation. My motivation to learn, build friendships, work hard on the track, make a positive impact on our environment, pursue art, practice my soccer skills, be a good person.*

**Silas Morsink writes:**

*I'll take with me a box filled with running shoes and shin guards, spiral notebooks and Faulkner books, "GDS Soccer" jackets and one sweatshirt that says "State Champions." A stray ping pong ball, a powerpoint on Parliamentary Procedure, a quarter from the floor of the Forum, a CPR certification, and even some college admission letters. I'll keep the box for a while, first in my room, then in a basement. Then, one day down the road, I'll throw it out.*

*What I really take with me from GDS won't be a notebook, a transcript, or a medal. I'll take a deep reverence for American democracy, honed through Richard's pestering questions and impossible tests. I'll take an uncommon willingness to engage on the basis of ideas, without regard to someone's appearance or title. I'll take an ability to advocate for myself, not just to stand up for what I think is right, but to refuse to sit down. I'll take a unique camaraderie with seven groups of boys that tirelessly worked together to win a little blue blanket called a MAC banner. I'll take the realization that it's not the banner that's important, but the connections made and moments shared in its pursuit. I'll take an insatiable desire to answer the question "why?"*

*But the thing that will stay me most of all is gratitude. For my teachers, yes, for my coaches, yes, but most of all for my classmates. Because I got to spend my four years of high school with 125 remarkable kids. 125 kids who were nice to each other, who cared about each other, and who vigorously pursued their passions all the while encouraging others to do the same. And for that I'll be thankful for as far down the road as I can see.*

Seniors, it's quite a packing list: empathy and curiosity, motivation and friendship, courage and vulnerability, critical thinking and a love of learning, values and perspective and more.

At your graduation rehearsal, I gave you each one more thing to take with you from GDS--a book. The Abundance by Annie Dillard is a collection of essays, the first of which is called "Total Eclipse", in which Dillard recalls how she was transformed when she experienced a complete solar eclipse in 1979.

Now a total eclipse is rare. The last one was in 1991, when I was graduating from college and none of you were alive. The next total solar eclipse will take place in the United States on Tuesday, August 22 of this year, a little more than two months from now. Some of you may have plans to travel to Idaho or Kansas or South Carolina or other locations on the eclipse's path to experience it firsthand. For those of you who don't, your next two chances to experience a total eclipse in this country will be in 2024 and then in 2044. You'll be 25 years old for the first one, and 45 years old for the second.

Reading Dillard's essay will make you want to experience a total eclipse. She writes, "I had seen a partial eclipse in 1970. A partial eclipse is very interesting. It bears almost no relation to a total eclipse. Seeing a partial eclipse bears the same relation to seeing a total eclipse as kissing a man does to marrying him, or as flying in an airplane does to falling out of an airplane. Although the one experience precedes the other, it in no way prepares you for it."

Perhaps the same could be said of a graduation. Going to school precedes graduating--and yet graduating is something else entirely. You are launched into a new context, a new setting, a new kind of independence. Graduation is an opportunity to reflect on who you are, what you value, and then to consciously and intentionally choose your path forward. Graduation can serve as a kind of waking up.

In many of her essays, Dillard writes of the power of experiences that wake us up, that sets life apart from the day to day. These experiences can come in the form of celebrations, like a wedding or a milestone birthday...or like today's. They can also come in the form of a loss, such as a painful failure, the end of a relationship or the death of a family member. We are formed not simply by celebrations, of course, but also by the hardships that we encounter on the way there. Take a moment to think back on some of the moments of loss or challenge you encountered in high school. How did you make your way through, over, or around them? Another author, Tom Robbins, writes beautifully about the importance of these challenges in his book Even Cowgirls Get the Blues.

He writes:

*Perhaps a person gains by accumulating obstacles. The more obstacles set up to prevent happiness from appearing, the greater the shock when it does appear, just as the rebound of a spring will be all the more powerful the greater the pressure that has been exerted to compress it. Care must be taken, however, to select large obstacles, for only those of sufficient scope and scale have the capacity to lift us out of context and force life to appear in an entirely new and unexpected light.*

*For example, should you litter the floor and tabletops of your room with small objects, they constitute little more than a nuisance, an inconvenient clutter that frustrates you and leaves you irritable. Cursing, you step around the objects, pick them up, knock them aside.*

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*Should you, on the other hand, encounter in your room a nine thousand pound granite boulder, the surprise it evokes, the extreme steps that must be taken to deal with it, compel you to see with new eyes. Difficulties illuminate existence, but they must be fresh and of high quality.*

Seniors, as you prepare to move on from GDS, I of course wish you much success, success which I believe you will find. I also wish you worthy obstacles, obstacles that challenge you, that wake you up, that bring your values and priorities into clear relief. There's no doubt that you're graduating into a world that has its fair share of meaningful obstacles. Whether those challenges call into question your own rights or the rights of others, whether they are about issues of equity or the fate of our planet, whether they are expressed in 140 characters, on the front page of a newspaper or at a march, they will call on you to decide what it is that you value. My hope for each of you is that you'll find work of purpose, values-driven work, work that engages you in taking on meaningful obstacles, and in so doing, in leaving a world that's a bit better than the one that you are inheriting.

Class of 2017, as you head off to college and beyond, I'm confident that you have everything you need to take with you. And I know I speak on behalf of all of your teachers when I say that we love you. We believe in you. And we are very, very proud of you.

### **Closing:**

I'd like to take this last opportunity to say, on behalf of the faculty, staff, and administration of Georgetown Day School, a final congratulations to both the graduates and the family and friends who have helped us arrive at this moment.

And now, Class of 2017, I want to invite you to be present, to pause and look around, face your parents, faculty, family and friends—look at all these people who have showed up for you today. Collectively, we are for you, we believe in your tremendous capacity, we are proud of you. And to the rest of us here--our responsibility for these graduates does not end today. These talented young people will need our ongoing support and guidance as they discover the world, make their way in the world, and change the world. Our work isn't done.

In closing, a poem by Mary Oliver called "The Summer Day":

### **The Summer Day**

Who made the world?  
Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper, I mean-  
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,  
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-  
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.  
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.  
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.  
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.

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I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do

with your one wild and precious life?

Class of 2017, we wish you all good things for your one wild and precious life. You have our confidence, our support, our love, and our profound hope for the road ahead.