



High School Graduation

June 10, 2018

Speech by Russell Shaw, Head of School

Good afternoon. It is my honor and pleasure to welcome you to the 47th commencement exercises of Georgetown Day School and to the graduation of the Class of 2018. Today it is our shared privilege to celebrate these terrific young women and men and to send them on their way.

Graduates: This is the first GDS graduation in recent memory in which you, the graduates, are on stage for the entire graduation. It's a good view, isn't it? You are able to see all of these people who have come here today because they are grateful for you, and love you and believe in you. I want to highlight one group in particular, and that's your teachers, sitting up here in front. As I met with you in small groups for lunch over the course of the spring, I asked you to reflect on what had been most meaningful about your GDS experience. You expressed appreciation for your friends, for great classes, for plays, teams, traditions like First Friday and Student/Staff Breakfast. But more than anything, you expressed appreciation for your teachers. Again and again, you told me about teachers who challenged you, engaged you...and knew you. You spoke of being seen by the people in front of you, seen not just for who you are but for your possibility, for who you might become. What perhaps was most striking was the breadth of teachers who have made an impact upon you. You each named individual teachers, but collectively you celebrated the impact of this entire High School faculty.

Sadly, you won't get to take these teachers with you to college, much as you might like to. And so while you won't be able to sneak Michelle Cobb or Julie Stein or Andy Lipps or one of the many, many talented teachers in front of me into your carry-on bag, there are things you will get to take with you from GDS. Not long ago, I wrote to you and asked what those things would be. 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. Thanks to each of you for your thoughtful responses.

So, Class of 2018, what will you be taking from GDS?

Izzy Verdery writes:

GDS instilled in me a love and passion for learning, both for academic knowledge and for what's outside of the classroom. In theater I learned confidence in myself and my ability to direct others, the lyrics to Beyoncé's Love On Top and Africa by Toto, how to use tools, how to stay awake for 24 hours straight, and that teamwork is hard but getting the job done is rewarding. From my classes I learned how to write a good essay, how to determine that gravity is a constant, what a case brief is and how to write one, how to read an absurd amount of Foner in one night, how to debate and not argue with teachers during class, and how to take the stuff I'm learning in the classroom and apply it to life.

Asha Yates writes:

GDS gave me the opportunity to be a leader. Not just through the Peer Leaders Program, but also through Fata Morgana and Make-Up Crew. Being head of both of those groups forced me to work on my volume, assertiveness, and decision-making ability. These may seem like small things, but they're actually really important, especially when they don't come naturally. Being a leader also taught me a lot about how others learn and work, the best types of people for me to work with, and how to compromise. I feel like I've unlocked a part of me that I never knew existed. If I need to be loud and assertive I know how to be. Had I gone to a school that didn't offer leadership opportunities I would not have "unlocked" this part of myself. So for that, I thank GDS.

Levi Freedman writes:

I will take a full set of "The Future is Now" champagne flutes and a Hopper Hard Hat from the unified campus groundbreaking.

I will take dozens of ceramic bowls and sculptures, and along with them a newfound appreciation for visual art.

I will take the friendships forged and lessons learned over literally thousands of hours as part of the cross country and track teams.

I will take a relatively unsurprising love of math and science and a slightly more surprising love for literature.

I will take the perpetual inability to address adults by their last names.

I will take a mixture of cynicism and awe for the world as it is, along with a tentative optimism

for the world as it can be.

In short, I will take knowledge. I will take camaraderie. I will take memories of both challenge and joy.

But if we're being perfectly honest, I'll probably forget some of my classes and lose some of that knowledge, fall out of touch with some of my friends and lose some of that camaraderie, gloss over the ups and downs of high school and lose some of the memories of that challenge and joy. I won't, however, lose my desire to keep asking questions. I won't lose the capacity and drive to form meaningful bonds. And I won't lose the resolve to live life deeply, to make my time and energy count for something that truly matters.

So even though GDS has given me a lot--from groundbreaking champagne glasses to newfound artistic, athletic, and intellectual passions to a deeply ingrained impulse for subtle irreverence--perhaps the most enduring--and certainly the most significant--thing it has given me has been the capacity to cultivate myself. From that I will take freedom, and for it, gratitude.

Alex Thompson writes:

I will take a drive to connect with people who are different from me- different political backgrounds, races, ethnicities, or different understandings of our world. Without GDS I wouldn't know the importance and power of diversity of thought and being.

Zoe Dockser writes:

I remember the day I walked through the MacArthur Boulevard doors for my first day of school at the age of four, my hands tightly intertwined with those of my brothers. This is how each day began, protected by my brothers, but really protected by my school. That first day I had no idea that I was stepping into a place that would become my second home. My entire childhood was spent at GDS, making friends, pushing myself intellectually, learning what it means to be a civil person in our ever-changing world.

I remember just as vividly walking out that MacArthur Boulevard door as a rising high school student no longer protected but prepared. Leaving my last year of high school, I reflect on what GDS has given me. My experience with civil discourse has given me tools to engage and impact my community. I have been surrounded by people who can converse and challenge ideas respectfully, who are open to learning and defending and changing their own opinions. As I think about leaving what has become my second home, I know GDS was successful in its mission of

“encouraging me to wonder, to inquire, and to be self-reliant, laying a foundation for a lifelong love of learning”. I will remember fondly the tough, challenging, and important conversations I had each day and the people, classes, and experiences that shaped me and prepared me for walking through the next door, and the one after that.

Matthew Osaghe writes:

What I will take from GDS is the value of inclusivity and that I will try my best to make sure everyone feels accepted and valued.

Isabel Kirsch writes:

On the women’s cross-country and track teams, the seniors have a tradition of writing motivational notes to the younger runners before meets. On my bookshelf, alongside the photo strips from prom and pun-filled candygrams from Model UN conferences, I’ve saved four years worth of these notes, written on everything from repurposed birthday cards to lined notebook paper. My first moment at GDS was boarding the bus for cross-country preseason camp before freshman year. I was terrified. I didn’t know anyone, and I’d never run before, but here I was heading to swampy southern Virginia for a week of training. By the end of the week, I knew I’d discovered an activity and team that I loved. Feeling so rewarded by my choice to get on the cross-country bus launched me down a path of happily choosing to enter unfamiliar or initially uncomfortable spaces at GDS. As I graduate, I’ll take a willingness to put myself in similarly uncomfortable situations, a confidence in my voice, and a joyful excitement about the unfamiliar that I didn’t have until engaging with my classmates, teachers, and teammates in the unique environment that is GDS.

Cecily Davis writes:

As GDS students, we often hear the words “lifetime commitment”. Whether it be a commitment to a lifelong love of learning, to the pursuit of equity and justice in all that we do, a commitment to honor the achievements and sacrifices of our foremothers and fathers who have paved the way for our greatness, it’s fair to say that the words “lifetime commitment” define life here at Georgetown Day School. I will take with me an understanding that complacency is complicity; that my thoughts and actions must not just be intentional, but also merciful; that an attempt at honoring the integrity and worth of a person is a noble, albeit daunting pursuit. which must transcend the walls of 4200 Davenport Street. What I will take with me from GDS once I walk

across the stage and turn my tassel is a commitment to a lifetime of honoring these values.

And finally, Evan Brown writes:

There's the physical footprint, a paper trail of sorts: shin guards, track spikes, math books and of course mountains of paper that I'm unlikely to ever look at again. It seems that many of these things will stay in my parents' house long after I leave for college. But this eclectic assortment of items is really a byproduct of my GDS education rather than the desired result. These items are evidence of the thousands of hours that I have spent over the last four years in pursuit of an education.

It's no coincidence that the word education comes from the same Latin root as educe [e-deuce] (to bring out). GDS has enabled me to bring out what was always inside me, to surprise myself by doing what didn't always seem possible. I've learned to embrace failure and succeed with grace. Plenty of schools do an excellent job teaching calculus or chemistry, but few teach their students to reflect critically about themselves and their relationship with the world as well as GDS. Most high schoolers around the country seem simply to be going through the motions, treating high school as a chore, a necessary and unpleasant waypoint on the path to college and a career. Yet I looked forward to each and every day of school over the past four years—GDS has shown me just how fun intellectual curiosity for its own sake can be. That drive to better understand ourselves and the world around us (and to change the world when we see something wrong) will define the rest of our lives. GDS encouraged me to be myself, to confidently and purposefully go out into the world and know that there is no goal I cannot achieve. So while I hope I have made a small mark on this community, its mark on me will last a lifetime.

Seniors, it's a good set of things to put in your duffle bags: confidence and curiosity, friendship and commitment, empathy and responsibility, critical thinking and a love of learning, values and insight and more.

At your graduation rehearsal, I gave you each one more thing to take with you from GDS--a book. *Sapiens* by Yuval Harari is subtitled "A Brief History of Humankind." The author takes on the ambitious task of telling the story of 2.5 million years of human history in 400 pages. He does a pretty remarkable job and while the topic may sound kind of wonky, the book is

beautifully written and really fun to read. (I'm guessing that between the Caps winning the Stanley Cup and prom night, most of you are almost finished with it).

Harari talks about 3 big shifts in human history. The first was the Cognitive Revolution, around 70,000 years ago. This was when, for reasons we still can't explain, homo sapiens that developed the ability for large-scale cooperation. This didn't mean cooperation by a dozen humans-chimpanzees could do that. It meant cooperation by thousands of humans, and eventually millions, tied together by shared stories or myths. And it made a dramatic difference.

This was followed by the Agricultural Revolution, 12,000 years ago. This was when humans moved from foraging to farming, allowing much larger populations to live in one area.

The third big shift was the Scientific Revolution, which took place just 500 years ago and yet has already profoundly changed the world. What's fascinating is what sparked the Scientific Revolution. The engine of the Scientific Revolution was accepting that there were things that we didn't know. That we didn't have the answers. That there was so much for us to learn.

Prior to the scientific revolution, humans assumed that we DID know. That all the answers to all the questions existed within ancient texts and traditions. If you didn't know something, your job was to consult these texts, or to find the human or wise person who was more learned than you who had the answer.

The Scientific Revolution wasn't about answers--it was about questions. There were lots of things that humans had accepted as truth, the Earth is the center of the universe or that illness is caused by god, for example. What if these things weren't true? What other things might not be true? Accepting that we don't know was the beginning of a fuller understanding of this world in which we live.

Now human beings have been around for two and a half million years and homo sapiens, our species of humans, has been around for 200,000 years. And yet think about what's happened in just the past several hundred years--a blink of an eye for humanity. We've split the atom, discovered microorganisms, landed on the moon. All because we accepted that we don't know the answers.

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There are so many things that we still don't know, answers to some of the biggest questions. Physicists don't know what caused the Big Bang. Biologists don't yet understand how brains produce consciousness. Neurologists don't know why we dream. Astronomers don't know if we're alone in the universe.

I want to contrast the uncertainty around the answers to these big questions with the certainty that many humans seem to have today about their particular view of the world. We are living in a moment where more energy is invested in finding people who agree with us, who agree with what we "know" to be true, than is invested in listening and coming to know others with a different truth. If we engage the world, if we engage science, if we engage other people certain that we have the answers, we are powerfully limiting our ability to discover, to make leaps, to solve previously insoluble problems.

As you head off to college, seniors, I ask that in addition to your critical thinking skills and creativity and empathy, you bring with you an open mind--not simply confident in what you know, but also profoundly curious about what you don't. An open mind means not only accepting what we don't know, but acknowledging that the things that we DO know could be proven wrong as we gain more knowledge, experience and learning. This openness to new ideas and ways of seeing the world will be necessary for you to solve some of the big challenges that will face your generation. In the reflection that Levi sent me, he wrote "I will take [from GDS] a mixture of cynicism and awe for the world as it is, along with a tentative optimism for the world as it can be." I understand the cynicism. And, as teenagers, it is your birthright. What I'm grateful for is the sense of awe and the tentative optimism. These will help you stay open, curious, questioning--and will help you build a future better than the one you are inheriting, a future as good as the one that you deserve.

Class of 2018, 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 2018, 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". Along with caps & gowns, the reading of this poem is a tradition I began last year. I'm calling it a tradition because I think it's a perfect send off for our Mighty Hoppers:

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.

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 2018, may you encounter joy, growth and blessing in your one wild and precious life.

You have our confidence, our support, our love, and our profound hope for the road ahead.