



# High School Graduation

June 10, 2018

Speech by Katherine Dunbar, HS English Teacher

Hello GDS friends, families, faculty, and, most important, the Class of 2018. I am humbled to be speaking to you today. Thank you, Seniors, very much for this honor.

So I turned 54 a couple of months ago, and I was really piling up some excellent presents. My daughter Esme (sitting right over there among her graduating classmates; hi, Ez) had given me Emily Wilson's new translation of *The Odyssey*, my husband had given me Yankee tickets, my other daughter had given me a poem, my mom—evidently angry with me for some reason--had given me a bonsai tree (which feels like as big a responsibility as having a third child). And the last of the presents was a small padded envelope that had just come in the mail.

When I picked it up, I immediately knew it was from Elizabeth, my very best friend from high school, because I was having a Proustian reaction to her handwriting. So I ripped open the package and pulled out a birthday card and a 3-pack of Peeps. (You know Peeps, those little marshmallow Easter chicks?) Then two strange things happened. First, I realized that what she'd meant to send me were Circus Peanuts, not Peeps. Does anyone even know what Circus Peanuts are? They're these really gross orange squishy candies shaped like unshelled peanuts and flavored – inexplicably -- kind of banana-y-ish, and they're always stale? I *love* circus peanuts, and Elizabeth has always teased me – rather mercilessly -- about my lowbrow tastes! So it was weird that she'd sent me Peeps instead of Circus Peanuts. And here's the second strange thing: she spelled my name wrong! Weird, right?! Kathryn, instead of Katherine. An explanatory sidebar here, though: to Elizabeth, I've always been, and still am, Kathy, not

Katherine. I turned myself into a Katherine on my first day at GDS, actually, when I was desperately searching for some way to tamp down my imposter fears – what did I know about teaching high school?! – and “Katherine” sounded much more teacher-serious than “Kathy.” So Elizabeth’s never actually called me Katherine.

But still, I felt pretty unsettled. Peeps and a misspelled name. I felt like something *really* steady – this deep friendship of 40 years – had suddenly shifted. Like two pieces – one that was us, and one that was my idea of us -- were somehow *slipping*. Not breaking apart or severing, nothing like that, but *slipping* from their perfect alignment.

But then the strangest part of all happened: I realized I was experiencing the power of our friendship more deeply at that moment than I had in a long time, and it was *because* of the slippage. Okay, hold on now because here comes some science: with that slippage comes friction. And from friction comes heat, right – and that heat, in the moment of slippage, warmed up the very thing that I – for a very unhappy second –feared was actually cooling down.

What I further realized is that we can never stop the slippage at the edge between these two enormous forces-- a thing and our idea of that thing. And frankly, we shouldn’t even try. Because, as Toni Morrison has written, it’s “at the edge, just at the fence, where the most interesting things happen.”

So what we have to do is make sure that we use the slippage’s friction-heat for good.

Let’s practice on something easy, Class of 2018. Put yourself back in your 9<sup>th</sup>-grade self. Are you putting yourself there? Okay, now more specifically: put yourself in your 9<sup>th</sup>-grade English class. First, think about who you were then—who you *really* were. Now, *also* think about the

idea you held of yourself back then. A little slippage, right? Wonderful delusions of grandeur? (I know, taught you!) A bucketful of vulnerabilities? (I *know*, I taught you!) But whatever the slippage between who you actually were and the idea you held about who you were -- I think created the friction-heat that got you to here, today. So gloriously.

And I can't think of another GDS class that has more powerfully converted slippage into heat. What a class you are.

Most stunning, when you saw a slip between the GDS you've lived for these past four years and the *idea* of GDS that we keep handing to you, you unflinchingly named that misalignment. And you turned that friction into real change. You sustained so many dynamic affinity and student groups: BSU, Triple A, Young Men of Color, FMG, GSA, BLB, Young Women of Color, Fusion, SDLC (to name just a handful of them). From your class came the vision for the Summit on Sexual Assault and Consent. It was this class that identified the need for -- and then pulled off -- a school-wide history lesson on racist language.

When you saw that slippage -- when the things you were experiencing were not aligning with the idea of those things -- you took it into your own hands to turn the friction-heat of dissonance into gain instead of loss.

The much easier response to this dissonance between the thing and the idea of the thing would have been, simply, rage. Rage feels so good. A poet I like, Atsuro Riley, describes rage as the "salts and sugars [that] slow-crust (and sharp-gemify) along meat string." I love that description. Because *isn't* rage both sweet and savory -- "salts and sugars" along the meat string? It so easily satisfies our softest *and* our sharpest hungers. But if you think of two pieces misaligning, when you set the edges on fire with rage, both pieces get so brittle, so charred, that they simply

disintegrate. So that's no good: rage brings immediate pleasure, yes, but the heat from rage alone doesn't produce change.

Another response to the slippage between the thing and the idea of the thing could be civility. That word goes down really easy – its sound is so smooth, so sibilant, with its soft-C start. Even its T at the end sounds like a gentle D -- and that's exactly why it makes me nervous. Hard problems, excruciating misalignments, can't be so easily resolved. And I'm afraid that embedded in the salve of civility is an expectation of patience. When I'm urgently working to realign something dangerously misaligned, I don't want anyone trying to placate me with pleas for patience. And I wouldn't want any of you to unthinkingly accept demands for patience, either. Strategic patience on your own terms, yes. But patience demanded of you, if you are working hard for urgent change: think carefully first. Yes, we crucially need to listen to voices that are not our own, but we shouldn't walk into that aural arena assuming that it's a level playing field. It isn't. And those with power will be happy to remind you of the virtues of patience. So be wary, be on your guard. Patience can be a display of grace, but as another poet I like a lot, Kay Ryan, writes, it can also be “the sport of truly chastened things.”

But I think you, the graduating Class of 2018, know all this already. In fact, I think I've learned it *from* you. I've learned from watching you for four inspiring years – truly inspiring years -- how to take the energy from slippage and turn it into heat: not the bombs of rage, and not the balms of patience, but heat. The kind of heat that brings about social change. The kind of heat that creates art. The kind of heat that leads to love.

And speaking of love, Class of 2018, I've written you a poem. It's sort of a love poem and sort of a goodbye poem wrapped into one. It's entitled “Yesterday Morning.”

## **Yesterday Morning**

Yesterday morning, not so early, I hear you

heading towards the bathroom

with a shuffle that sounds not quite like dragging

but holds some resistance

nonetheless.

You close the bathroom door with a pull-and-a-lift.

That damn door.

I then hear the other broken noises –

the light switch clicking on, sounding alright

but incantate-ing light from only one

of the two fixtures;

the medicine chest's misaligned mirror

clanging shut with the sound of

someone dropping a metal toolbox;

the toilet's post-flush hum-whine that could be

a violin's first note, but isn't.

You haven't let us fix the bathroom door's broken hardware

because it's part of your childhood, you say.

(You've known all along that this childhood  
would one day exist only by craning our necks backwards.)

You are – you have always been -- a moving thing  
among broken noises.

Tomorrow you will keep moving, and break the things  
that need to be broken.

And I will promise not to fix the door hinge  
while you're gone.

Thank you, Class of 2018, for everything you've given us.