



High School Graduation

June 7, 2015

Speech by Anna Goldstein Howe, HS English teacher

Hello out there! Good afternoon to all of you—faculty, staff, administration, parents, relatives, guests, friends—and, most importantly, Class of 2015. It is great to be here with you all today.

Class of 2015, on this momentous occasion in your lives, I am honored to be up here, speaking to and with you. When I learned that I was going to be speaking today, I had to do some thinking on what you wanted to hear from me—on what you and others were expecting. I think you chose me partly because you know how much I love to talk—and because we have had such great conversations. And that’s not just for those of you who have been in my English classes because, in my experience, the conversations happening in the hallways and stairwells of GDS are often just as profound. But I also realize that you would expect humor from me—and maybe some unscripted, outrageous, provocative claims to really... shake things up. We have shared a lot of that over the years, but as I warned some of you back at school, that’s not what you are going to hear today. This occasion calls for something more. Traditionally, it calls for clichés and platitudes. I believe that I am supposed to begin by considering how this is a commencement ceremony and that the word “commencement” means “beginning” —so though this is the end of your time with us at GDS, it’s the beginning of the rest of your lives... blah blah blah. Not going down that road. Ultimately, I decided that you asked me to speak today because of how much we have enjoyed stories together. I am a storyteller as well as an avid listener of stories, and so are all of you. There seems to me nothing better in life than to share in some good storytelling and story-listening and then talk about it and pick it apart and ask questions and argue endlessly... you know how it goes.

While we can’t have an exchange from stage to audience right now, I hope I’ll throw out a couple of ideas that you won’t forget the second I step down from this podium and that you may even mull over tomorrow as the adrenaline of today leaves your bodies and you settle into the rhythm of summer.

When I was in high school, I was outspoken and irreverent. I didn’t like following rules and I

was... hard to contain. I know, that's very difficult to imagine because of how unassuming, quiet, rule following, and demure I am today. As fate would have it, I returned to my high school, nearly a decade later, as a so-called "adult," to teach alongside my former teachers. I was humbled and a bit self-conscious, and so I gratefully allowed them to mold me into a teacher. I saw my work at my alma mater as part of my finally growing up—as a redemption of sorts. When I stood before my seniors as they graduated that year, I warned them to put aside their adolescent cynicism, to enter adulthood realizing how much they still had to learn and to be open to it. Many years and a couple of schools later, I stand before you in a different posture. I am an experienced teacher now, older, and I'm a mother. This lends a new perspective, and I find myself with a different message. Now when I look back to that rebellious teenager I once was, I see that she actually understood a lot more than she later gave herself credit for. Her cynicism was, in many cases, warranted. Her commitment to unmasking phoniness and sniffing out hypocrisy was right on—as is yours. Right now, today, there is so much that you actually get. Don't discount that. Hold on to that, because you will need that confidence later. You actually see things more clearly today than many of the so-called adults around you. So when I get to the end of this speech, the part where I'm supposed to define you and then list off all of our grand expectations for you...well, take that part with a grain of salt.

So let's get serious. Whether you arrived at GDS fourteen years ago or just this past September, you sit here at this moment as a graduating class, like many have sat here before you; and as you walk across this stage today, you will join the ranks of adults that can call themselves GDS alumni. This is more than a badge—it is a shared inheritance of an uncompromisingly intellectual and ethical institution. I think right now it's important for us to reflect on what it is that makes being a student and graduate of GDS so important. And so I think we should bring up the GDS bubble metaphor that's trotted out so often—and maybe it's time that we deconstruct it and—dare I suggest—put it to rest.

(To the students) Bear with me while I first try to present the premise.

(To the audience) It goes something like this: GDS is a bubble. The bubble signifies a separate world—a utopian, rarefied world that is starkly different and even at odds with the "real world."

First of all, I have to comment on the imagery. Bubble? Really? Well, I'm no scientist, but I'm pretty sure that a bubble is a sphere of liquid that's filled with gas. Hmm. Not loving the comparison. Science aside, the imagery of the bubble conjures up childhood innocence, magic, and fragility. Bubbles are ephemeral. Bubbles are not grounded. Bubbles always burst. This also seems to me nothing like GDS. Does the foundation you've built while studying at GDS—reading closely and critically, considering multiple sources while piecing together our pasts, writing analytically, composing music and poetry, solving abstract mathematical equations, observing scientific phenomena, acting in plays, speaking in multiple languages, glimpsing other cultures, competing on the athletic field, connecting with our outside community in authentic service projects...do all of these experiences seem childlike and ephemeral to you? Full of just air and no real substance? I hope not.

At GDS people from all different walks of life can learn together and laugh together and develop amazingly close relationships based on their many points of found commonality while still seeing and celebrating how different they are from one another. But, according to this metaphor, that's not what the "real world" is like. The Real World. Capital R. Capital W. The one you are allegedly about to enter. So let's talk about this Real World. When exactly do you enter this supposed "real world"? Is it waiting for you as you cross this stage? Is it tonight when you go home to sleep? Is it in the fall when you go off to college or to some amazing adventure during your gap year? Is it when you graduate from college? From grad school? What if you don't leave school until you're 30? Is that when you'll enter the Real World? Because all of this implies that school is not the real world, that school, in part, keeps you from entering the Real World. School is the bubble. But what about when you follow the passions you've developed while you were living your lives through all of these schools and finally embark upon a career? Is that first "real job" when you leave the bubble? If there's anything that our GDS education has taught us, it's that there is no one set of experiences that can be held up and validated as "real" while others' lived truths are dismissed as less so. Following this logic, then, our experience at GDS is no less real than anyone's experience at any institution. GDS is not a bubble—GDS is an intentional community, where the realities of the outside world, no matter how tragic, ugly or horrifying, demand our attention, discussion and action—and we give it. The fact that we learn together here and make it joyous—that on any given day you can walk into a classroom and overhear intense debates on the heaviest of topics, while right next door you can witness the playfulness and deep respect that all of us have for each other—that isn't unrealistic. That's not

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hot air. That's what learning should feel like everywhere! And places where it doesn't feel that way are no more "real" than we are—they are just places in need of some of this. They need us. They need you. You need to scatter throughout the world and make other institutions great. You know what's possible.

As you graduate from GDS today, it's important to understand both the freedom that this allows you as well as the responsibility that this requires. You have been given a gift that can never be taken from you—the gift of a foundation of knowledge, a way of seeing the world, of questioning it, engaging with it and feeling empowered to do something about it. This gift carries a weight. It means that you have to pay it forward in some way. What way? That is for you to decide. And that's the freedom part. An education like this one should endow in each of you a sense that you are important, unique, and special. Just think about it: there is no one else in the world that is just like you. You, each of you, are the only ones.

So, storytellers, it's time to write your stories! You are walking into a world that has, in many ways, been perverted by generations before you. A world crippled by poverty and hatred and division—but also a world that possesses indescribable beauty. You need to seek out the beauty and find ways to overcome the ugliness. That's a lot to ask—and I don't expect you to answer that call from me or from anyone else. In fact, I don't want you to worry about what any one of us expects. Look to yourself to find the answer. I am not going to stand up here and tell you to change the world—it's too tall an order and it's not mine to give. What I want you to do is take what you have been given and write your own stories—ones that don't include eye rolling about injustice, ones that don't include hate and dominance, ones that don't include people being trapped by race or by gender or by class or by sexual orientation. You get to write the story now, so write what you'd like to read.

Oh, and keep reading—had to fit in that plug here: keep reading literature. It can save you.

Class of 2015, it may not always seem it, but we trust you. We have been here, watching you, teaching you, learning from you, always so proud of who you were—and now, who you are. We're not just proud of what you have accomplished on paper, not just proud because of the diplomas that you'll receive today or the awards or the college acceptance letters. We're proud because of who you have shown yourselves to be—in the small moments, the quiet, private times where you weren't performing, when you thought no one was watching. We were. And we

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were amazed.

So go out there—you're ready—and always know that you can come back... to visit.

Come back to us to be reminded of how much you are loved. Come back to remind yourselves of who you are and what is important.

We love you. Thank you. Farewell.