



High School Graduation

June 9, 2019

Speech by Jeffrey Goldberg, Parent Speaker

Good afternoon. Russell, Katie, trustees, faculty, parents, family, friends, thank you. And to members of the class of 2019, congratulations. This is a great honor for me, and quite humbling. To follow such speakers as Russell and Katie, Marjorie Brimley and Shonali Palacios is a rare privilege.

And to follow such a speaker as William Goldberg is mainly just disorienting.

Russell, your comments remind me of the first time I met you. It was before you had even started as head of school, we were at a barbecue, and you were in a sling. You had just hurt yourself in a body surfing accident in San Diego. And I remember thinking, what is body surfing? And, also, why would a person do this? I mean, Peter Branch never body-surfed.

I remember that Russell spoke a little bit that day about his excitement for the new job, and about his love of teaching, and of course about his largest goal, which was to become the Donald Trump of school construction.

I remember something you said then, Russell – and you’ve said it since then, and it rings very true. To paraphrase, you spoke about the idea that great educators have to love both the developmental possibilities of a child and also who that child is right now. You said, “When we see and love them as they are, it’s then that they can become who they are meant to be.”

Of course, no one exemplifies the spirit of this idea more than Marjorie Brimley.

Marjorie, you are a treasure. It was no secret to many of us that you are one of the smartest and kindest members of this community. And you’ve shown us again today that you are also one of the bravest and most eloquent. We know how deeply you love this community and our children, but I hope you understand just how much everyone at GDS loves you.

Shonali Palacios. I met you several years ago, and I knew right away that you were smart,

incisive, funny, poised and curious.

Your comments today were wonderful. I was struck by something you said, how important it is for you to figure out for yourselves what you truly care about. You reminded me of something that one of the founders of The Atlantic, Ralph Waldo Emerson, once said. He wrote, “To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.” Good work, Shonali.

William Goldberg. What can I say? In so many ways, you are just like a son to me.

Your comments on the importance of community were moving, and eloquently stated, which is somewhat surprising given that you largely rejected the offer of help in writing your speech from an actual professional editor who happens to live in your house.

Just so everyone understands, right now we are all living inside William’s nightmare. He’s actually holding his breath, waiting for my speech to finish. Unfortunately, for him, I plan on talking for about three hours. Eventually, he’ll just faint and start breathing involuntarily.

I’m kidding about the three hours. It’s going to be five hours.

Out of sympathy for William, I’ve cut out all the embarrassing bits here, where I talk about my pride in his achievements, my satisfaction in seeing him grow into a mature, responsible leader, the joy I felt in watching him become one of the top Jewish shot putters in the greater Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. I won’t be talking about any of this today.

So there’s one bit of housekeeping business I should mention.

I’m not sure the graduates know this, but it is customary for each of you, when you receive your diploma, to give Bobby Asher a small tip as you walk by him. Just slip him twenty bucks. But if you still need a recommendation from him for something, a hundred bucks would probably be better.

I’d also like to talk about your parents for a moment. And I’d like to talk about them in the context of gratitude.

Please do not worry -- this is not going to be one of those “practice gratitude and wear sunscreen and don’t iron your clothes while you’re wearing them and please proofread your cover letters” sort of graduation speeches. I have a lot of free advice that I’m not going to give today. Though in point of fact you should wear sunscreen and believe me, it’s not a good idea, even when it seems like a good idea, to iron your clothes while you’re wearing them. And trust me, please, as someone who receives thousands of cover letters and resumes a year, spellcheck is your friend.

But I do want to say a word on behalf of the principle of gratitude.

Many of your parents are living lives of substantial achievement, in their careers and in their communities, but I want you to understand something important about us. No matter what we parents have achieved, you are the crowns of our lives. I want to say this again – you are the crowns of our lives. You are our greatest achievement. At the end of this ceremony, please say out loud to your parents, or anyone who brought you to this day, what you’re thinking and feeling. We love you more than you can possibly understand, and your words will be the only gift we ever need from you.

As you might imagine, this is a joyous day, and also a somewhat difficult day, for all of us. For Pamela and me, this is the end of an era for our family. We sent our oldest child, Talia, to GDS seventeen years ago, and this is our last hour as GDS parents.

Now, Pamela, who has been far more integral to the workings of this school than I have – she’s chaired the PSA and spent six years on the Board of Trustees and is a general, all-around stalwart of GDS – is a person of great composure and dignity. I, on the other hand, am an emotional wreck and there’s a chance I could melt into a puddle any second. This would be quite an exciting thing for William if it happens.

Pamela and I first visited the GDS lower school in search of a kindergarten for Talia. We actually got lost looking for the place, and we were 20 minutes late.

But it all worked out, and then it worked out for Elisheva, and then for William. And so here we are now, seventeen years later.

Seventeen years translates into:

- a dozen dance assemblies;
- 149 chorus concerts;
- three trips to Jamestown;
- three mud-filled Turkey Runs;
- numerous events of indeterminate purpose in the multipurpose room;
- three authors nights;
- three traveling biographies;
- 50 or 60 track and field competitions – which are, by the way, how we discovered that other schools have grass;
- a hundred plus soccer and lacrosse matches;
- dozens of fall play and spring musical performances;
- 43,000 curriculum nights;
- three senior quests;
- and 39 tuition years.

And we're grateful for every last thing. Except for the 39 years of tuition payments.

We're celebrating the achievements of the Class of 2019 at a hinge moment in the history of our school. The focus of this community these past couple of years has been on the unification of the campus. It is an astonishing thing that the school, under Russell's visionary leadership, is pulling this off. This project, which will allow more children to benefit from a GDS education, is an important signal that our school has faith and confidence in its own future.

But I want to argue that this immense project should not cause us to forget what is truly important to the vitality of a school. These new facilities will help GDS fulfill its mission, but the most important part of any school, a part we ought to celebrate more than we do, is its teachers.

As alumni, you may very well not remember the classrooms and the gyms and the art rooms. I don't have a good picture in my mind of the layout of the kindergarten classrooms. But so many years later, I can see as clear as day, Joanna Phinney and Elaine Ogden receiving our children with love, and knowing that our family was in the best hands. Elaine retired a while ago, and is now a GDS grandparent; Joanna is retiring today, after 29 years of service, and she's here with

us, and I just want to say thank you to her.

I asked Talia the other day, Talia, who is 22 now, for a dominant memory of her early years at GDS. It took her no time at all. When she was in 5th grade, she broke her arm, and she remembers like it was yesterday Judy Brown sitting by her side during tests, patiently taking down the answers Talia could say but couldn't write. That is GDS. Elisheva, two years out of GDS, will never forget Nick Ryan, who encouraged her endlessly to master the difficult work of ceramics, and our children will never forget Andy Lipps, who proved that Goldbergs are somewhat capable of learning math.

It is not, I should note, an easy job, teaching here, or anywhere. Acclaim is intermittent, especially in a city that rewards more ostentatious forms of success; pressure is constant, and the pay will not make you rich. To be successful here, a GDS teacher has to master the dark art of Parent Expectation Management. Admittedly, it's not as bad here as certain other schools I won't name, but teachers don't come to this school because we parents are consistently delightful.

To be a successful teacher at GDS requires a unique combination of rare skills, deep love, and superior values. Those who thrive here possess an uncommon form of intellectual confidence, one that allows a person – even one with great knowledge and authority -- to value students who have the temerity to challenge them in class, and to embrace the idea that even elementary-age children have real intellectual agency. Much of what makes this school so different is found in the faculty's commitment to rigor – just watching the transfer of pure intellectual adrenaline from teacher to student here is something to behold.

Teachers here understand that respect is not earned through the deployment of distancing titles. As Kevin Barr told me, "Mr." and "Mrs." buy a teacher about 24 hours of respect. Then you're on your own. What earns teachers here permanent veneration – the veneration so many of you have received from the class of 2019 – is enthusiasm, knowledge, commitment, confidence and, most of all, love. This faculty is what makes GDS great.

Class of 2019, your teachers have prepared you very well for the life that is coming. But the world you are entering is, in so many ways, a fractured and unhappy place, and before I close, I do want to give you one piece of advice. This concerns the navigation of certain dangers

inherent in our unique political moment.

Something many of you will be facing next year is a kind of radical conformity imposed on students at so many of the colleges and universities you are attending.

I believe that GDS has prepared this class to respectfully and substantively grapple with ideological difference. You are, I hope, appropriately skeptical of all orthodoxies, and you are obviously highly literate and trained in rational thought.

The larger issue is the state of the country itself. And the advice I will give you is this: Reject cynicism. Cynicism is a cousin of nihilism. And nihilism will destroy everything good that has been built in this country, including this institution.

When I look around, I see what you see – I see in this city a president who respects neither the laws nor the norms of our democracy; I see a chaotic Congress and I see our institutions, and even the idea of empirical truth itself, under siege. When I look further out, I again see what you see - the resurgence of racism and misogyny and anti-Jewish hatred and anti-Muslim hatred and homophobia. I see Americans who no longer speak to each other, and no longer like each other. But I want you to remember something – the core ideas that animate this country, our common creed, are worth saving.

This point was underscored for me recently at the Smithsonian's African-American history museum. I missed this at first, but Pamela pointed it out to me. There's a statue of Thomas Jefferson on the ground floor exhibit, and looming over Jefferson is a brick wall, and on this wall is inscribed the names of some of the hundreds of people he had enslaved. The sin of the man, the exhibit suggests, is larger than the man himself. But looming over both Jefferson, and the brick wall, are the words of the Declaration of Independence.

The Declaration reads: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

The point the curators are making is obvious. The sins of the man are great, but his ideals – unreached by him -- are greater.

America is imperfect. It's always been imperfect, even during long moments of progress. In fact, it will never be perfect, like any human endeavor. But in difficult times, it is hard to remember that the American project, the idea that a common aspirational creed unites us all, is something worth saving. At GDS you've learned to value difference, and you've learned the importance of idealism, and you've also learned about the ties that bind us together.

I am not asking you to save America – go have dinner with your families first – but GDS has uniquely equipped you to take on the biggest missions in our society. As you move out into the world, I hope that you will embrace optimism, I hope that you will work for justice, I hope that you will propagate the truth, and work to make this country the more perfect union that it is meant to be.

On behalf of all the parents, and indeed, everyone in this room, I want to tell you again that we're so proud of you, and that we love you very, very much. Thank you.