



# High School Graduation

June 8, 2014

Speech by Lousie Brennan, Faculty Speaker

Faculty, administration, parents, honored guests and friends, and members of the class of 2014—

So we're leaving. And it's both exciting, and—at least for me—a bit daunting. We may have complained about the GDS bubble at times, but it's a pretty nice bubble. We've come to love it, in fact, and maybe even to take it for granted. We've breathed its air for some time now, and—so the science department tells me—when we breathe the air of a place, it makes its way into our cells. In short, GDS is now in our bones.

So what exactly does that mean? What parts of us are so deeply “hopper” that we don't even notice them? How has living in the GDS bubble created our values and our ways of thinking?

If someone asks us to define the culture at GDS, we may talk about being on a first-name basis, about students and teachers conferring in the hallways, about hard courses and fine preparation for college and no cafeteria and our famed football team. But I'm talking about something even deeper in us—it has to do with how we think and what we value.

First, I think there's a unique attitude toward learning at GDS. Yes, we work hard, and, yes, we get into great colleges—but what distinguishes GDS from other fine schools is how much fun we have when we're learning. As I've said often, at GDS we're smart—but we're funny-smart. We're laugh-out-loud-in-the-middle-of-class smart. We think it's fun—on a certain senior prank day, for instance—to sit on the floors of our classrooms (since the desks have somehow disappeared). The learning is just as real, and perhaps there's a sense of old-school GDS about it. Anyway, there seems to be even more laughter than usual—and there's a lot of laughter on a “normal” day. For example, we could be immersed in a serious discussion of existentialism or acid rain or the use of the subjunctive—and we can move immediately to a witty remark or a hilarious personal story, and then back to the serious subject. We're a place where there's a running joke in most classrooms, where the sport of choice—at least in the winter—is either speed chess or

pickleball. It's just plain fun—and often funny—to be smart here at GDS. And I strongly suspect that we'll carry that sense of fun with us wherever we go.

Second, we're questioners. As all of you know (though it comes as a surprise to people at other schools), each of our classes is filled with questions. These are not just the clarifying questions that one might find at other schools; they are probing questions in which we try on new perspectives, where we test out what we think is true. As teachers we try to ask you hard questions, and you invariably ask us questions that make us re-think our own premises. It seems to me that we are at our smartest when someone else offers us a perspective that we hadn't yet considered. We line ourselves up with Socrates who says that the unexamined life is unfit to be lived by man, and with Walter Lippmann who argues that the "opposition is indispensable"—or even with my brother-in-law who says, "If the two of us agree about everything, then one of us isn't thinking." That ability to ask great questions—of others and of ourselves—is definitely part of our hopperness.

Third—and here I'm definitely speaking from my own heart—we love putting whatever truths we discover into words. Some of you may have felt a huge sigh of relief when you turned in your senior paper, but I'm going to argue that you also felt the pleasure of having written something that Oskar Schell (from Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*) would have called, "both beautiful and true." Julia Fisher's recent article in *Georgetown Days* reminds us that GDS turns out great writers—and at a higher percentage than any other school in our league. She recounts a story (which may be apocryphal, but which most of us have heard related to us by more than one alum). "Some years ago, a new GDS graduate headed off to college, where he was asked to write a paper. He knew how to do this. He remembered his lessons from his teachers, but, more vividly, he knew he loved to read and to write, and that he had something important to say. He wrote the paper and turned it in, just as he had done at GDS. A couple of weeks later, the professor handed the essay back with an A and a question: 'Did you go to Georgetown Day School?' " That's a story that is likely to happen to all of you.

So that's who we are; so of course that that's who we'll be in the "real" world. We'll still laugh while we learn; we'll still ask questions of ourselves and others; and we'll still capture our thoughts in words that move the world in new ways. We've breathed the air of this bubble, and it's in our bones.

Given that fact, what advice do we need to offer ourselves as we stand on this threshold today? What will help us hold on to our “hopperness” as we move forward? To answer that question, I turned to you, the class of 2014, and asked you to offer advice to your future selves. What do you want to remind yourselves as you leave the GDS bubble?

First, you said, remember to “change your mind.” This one should be easy for hoppers since we are in the habit of questioning, but it’s good advice to remember. One of you put it this way: “Change your mind as many times as you want—your opinions, what you want for lunch, your career. Do it for as long as it takes you to be sure that it’s the right thing for you.” Emerson warned that “consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds,” and our minds are definitely not little.

Second, a number of you said, “read to your children.” Margaret Atwood once remarked, “I was one of the lucky ones; my mother read to me,” and one of you put it even more forcefully: “Read to your kids every night before bed, go broke paying for private schools, teach them to love learning. There is nothing more important you can give them.” I don’t know about the going broke part, but we do know the value of reading. Neuroscientists are currently documenting what many of us have believed for years: reading expands the brain, develops new pathways, lets us experience ourselves and the world in irreplaceable ways. A recent *NY Times* article acknowledged that “Amid the squawks and pings of our digital devices, the old-fashioned virtues of reading novels can seem faded, even futile.” But, its author asserted, “new support for the value of fiction is arriving from an unexpected quarter: neuroscience. Reading great literature, it has long been averred, enlarges and improves us as human beings. People who frequently read fiction seem to be better able to understand other people, empathize with them and see the world from their perspective.” We know from our time here at GDS that great literature crystalizes truths that can be elusive, inspires us with the music of language, and lets us see deeply into our own humanity. So keep reading—no matter what your career may be—and read to your children as well.

Finally, you said—and this is perhaps my favorite advice of all—Build your own happiness. We know that we did not earn many of our privileges, and, in the same way, that we cannot simply inherit happiness. As one of you put it: “Happiness does not appear suddenly, put into your hands from fate or time or as a gift from your friends or family as we might have imagined.

Instead, we work at it, imperfectly, less like building a palace and more like carving out a statue of ourselves.” That’s advice that is “both beautiful and true.”

So there you go: We know who we’ve become here at GDS; we have dreams for how those selves will grow into our futures. Today is the moment in between, the moment when we pause. Pooh, when Christopher Robin asks him what he likes best, replies, “ ‘Well, what I like best . . . ’ and then he has to stop and think. Because although Eating Honey is a very good thing to do, there is a moment just before you begin to eat it which is better than when you are, though Pooh doesn’t know exactly what it is called.” That’s what makes me love this moment today—when we can look back at our own hoppiness and forward to our about-to-happen encounters with the world beyond this bubble. It’s the moment before Pooh’s snack, the moment before you and I leave.

But it’s not a moment of sadness; after all, we’ll always be hoppers, won’t we? As you probably remember, in another of A.A. Milne’s stories, Piglet asks Pooh, “Will we be friends forever?” And Pooh says, “Longer than that.” We could just as easily say, “Will we be GDSers forever? Longer than that.”

So we’re ready to go. Because sometime soon someone will say to us, “Did you go to Georgetown Day School?” And we’ll say, “Of course.”