



High School Graduation

June 10, 2012

Speech by Don Baer, Parent Speaker

Thank you, Russell, for this great honor. And for giving me something to worry about—I mean look forward to—all these months.

It will be a miracle if I hold it together emotionally up here. Recently, my friend and our former Board President Carolyn Martin, whose own son graduates today, reminded me how hard this would be; but she also tried to make me feel better: She noted that the only parent speeches that have actually been memorable are those when the parent does choke up. So, if the standard of greatness is how much I choke up, there is a chance this will rank up there with Henry V on St. Crispin's Day, Lincoln at Gettysburg...who knows, maybe even John Belushi in Animal House.

I know some of you are worried, too, that, because I was President Clinton's speechwriter, this might run a tad long. I did once help him with the longest State of the Union speech in history—eighty nine minutes. Not exactly our finest hour...and a half. I was relieved later when he gave another one that ran ninety one minutes—and I had nothing to do with it.

I am aiming for shorter today.

So, I want to state right now the only thing you are likely to remember. Georgetown Day School Class of 2012: To all you artists, actors, athletes, scholars, musicians, debaters, community servants, and all-around outstanding kids, to my beloved Green Devils [you know who you are]—and to every lovable Hopper who has meant so much to us: Let's face it—You are the greatest graduating class in the history of high school.

Thank you, and have a great life. Just kidding. Not done with me yet.

I wish I could give a shout out to each person here who deserves it—but we would be heading into President Clinton range.

So, thank you to the amazing teachers, coaches, college counselors, principals, deans, directors, staff, and, of course, ... to that rocking flash mob [Tonys are tonight]. To borrow from Russell at Senior Night: Every one of you who has inspired, cared for, and simply loved our children, we will hold you in our hearts forever. Tom Yoder and Kevin Barr, thank you for guiding the high school with such devotion. To Russell in particular and to our dedicated board: I wish my children could be here for the next ten years, because, with your leadership, the best is yet to be.

On a very personal note: To all the generous families, our friends, who have nurtured and literally fed our son Adam all these years, we owe you big time—as in six feet, five inches big time. And Adam has asked me to thank his friends for years and years of tolerating his Lactose intolerance. [I warned you it was a very personal note.]

To you parents, I feel a deep sense of responsibility about speaking to your children. So, I want to say to the children we all share in this community: You should never stop appreciating what your parents have done for you, but we are grateful to you too. Seeing your moms and dads has made us better women and men—more exhausted, yes—but better, and we mean that.

Speaking of doing better, one heard a story about five people flying in a twin engine plane, when they realized both engines had given out, they were going to crash and they had only four parachutes. Five people, four chutes.

The first person to speak up was the pilot. "Only I know the engine's design defect," she said. "And I have to survive so millions of people don't die in similar crashes." So she took the first parachute and jumped.

The second person was the President of the United States. "Whoa," he said. "This is tough. The world faces dire crises. If I were to die, it could bring the whole thing down." He took the next parachute and jumped to safety.

The next person was former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, a very important—and self-impressed—man. "I am the smartest man in the world," he said. "It has been many years since I was in office, but I still constantly give sage advice. My death would be a huge tragedy for the world." Then he took the next bag and jumped.

That left two people, an old priest and a GDS student. "My child," the priest said, "I have lived a long life, sacrificing for my fellow human beings. I want you to take the last parachute and save yourself." And the GDS student said to the priest: "Father, my man, no worries. The smartest man in the world just jumped out of the plane with my backpack."

I tell that story for a few reasons. One is I can only remember two jokes- and let's just say the other one would not be right for this crowd.

Also, if your family is like ours, then your parents need a better reason to explain why it is bad to lose your backpack—again—than simply saying: "Because I said so."

Beyond that, this story touches on something more meaningful I want to discuss: You should never worry that you will ever be all alone in life.

Today, with all the excitement, I know it is hard to imagine you might ever feel alone. And, I promise, many, many happy things are going to happen to you. You will have enormous success. One of you could win an Oscar someday. The girl behind you could be a future President of the United States. The guy to your right could be a future Nobel laureate. Okay, maybe not that guy, but certainly one of you.

But, moments of doubt and disappointment will also come—hard moments. Or, as one of the great philosophers of our times—Conan O'Brien—has observed: [quote]"Nietzsche, famously said, 'Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger.' But, what he failed to stress is that it almost kills you."

So, a few lessons from the plane story that might help.

You are not alone in facing uncertainty about your future. More often than you will know, many people struggle with vast change, out of their control—and sometimes even within it.

This definitely applies to your career. I suspect, as children of Washington, you are already thinking about your careers. First off, stop it. For crying out loud: This is graduation day, so chill out.

Still thinking about it, aren't you? I want to tell you to find your passion and stick with it. If you

can, then more power to you. But, every walk of life is changing at warp speed. So, in the face of the certain uncertainties in your life's plan, it is worth remembering two truths: First, you are going to have ups and downs. And, second, you will almost never know until years later which are the ups and which are the downs.

I started my career as a lawyer in New York—for three years, five months, and three days. It was pretty clear after about a year that law, however noble a profession, wasn't for me. I was frustrated about letting precious time pass without getting on to work that mattered to me—but afraid to take the leap. Yet what I learned in those extra few years as a lawyer gave me a grounding that has helped every step of the way. I learned I could leap and not crash. And, more crucial, one day in my final months at my law firm, I was lucky to meet the most important person I ever met in my life—the person who has been my wife almost 25 years and the mother of our two wonderful sons.

One thing about never being alone is that, sometimes you should make yourself that way anyway—away from the frenzy of the crowd, just like that GDS kid who stayed calm. We are living in the Age of Social-media, networks, everything. Much good comes from this. Yet, it is worth trying, perhaps every day, to be alone for a bit—in silence, in solitude. Collaboration is critical, but so too is thinking by yourself, for yourself.

Another reason you will never be alone is because the world isn't going to leave you alone. It will expect you to help make it better, indeed to lead it to unprecedented solutions for unexpected challenges.

I heard a recent report on public radio about the Raw Deal this year's graduating class faces. You know about this, as the first one for which all four years in high school have been in the shadow of our economic downturn. But, as one senior said at the end of that report: In some ways, every generation gets a Raw Deal. Think about the Class of 1932, graduating into The Great Depression and the rise of fascism. Or the Class of '72, with Vietnam and social unrest. Those classes, and in some ways every one before and since, turned what seemed like raw deals into better deals. It has never been perfect, and we have made plenty of mistakes. But every one of us is blessed to inhabit the world those who came before us could only imagine. You—especially you with your talents and opportunities—have the gifts to imagine and to create

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yet another better deal for the world.

When you do, I hope you will avoid the fate of that smartest man in the world and stay humble. At another graduation last month, our family watched civil rights leader John Lewis receive an honorary degree. He once helped lead a revolution and was nearly beaten to death, has served in Congress and stood up for what is right for decades. But all he said for himself at graduation was: "I only try to help. I only try to do some good."

The people who founded your school as a place of searching, who were bold enough to make it the first integrated school in the nation's capital, still had a humility about progress. They understood progress—in the world and in life—is a long journey, not a fixed place: After all, the place they named Georgetown Day School has never even been in Georgetown—I guess Tenleytown Day School was taken. They knew we would still be working, years later, to do better to understand and appreciate one another. Their message still matters: Be patient with one another and never stop pushing ourselves further. In that tension, it seems to me, lies the best of GDS.

GDS also means you will never really be alone, as long as you remember you have everyone here—especially those classmates you sit with now. None of these people will ever give up on you. So, don't give up on them either. Believe me, especially for your parents: All you ever have to do is throw us a grin, raise an eyebrow, or mumble a syllable or two, and we will always be there. Because, everyone here, old and young, through whatever happens, we are all in it together.

That is how our family has always felt at GDS. This is our last official event after eighteen years—or, as I count them, twenty seven separate tuition years. For all the "nobody's different from you and from me" Assemblies, the classroom inspiration, the sports triumphs and defeats, the Black Box and Blues Alley performances, the Ethiopian adventures, the sports banquet Popeye's fried chicken, and even the gym's audio system—for all the joy and the friends who have been there through all the ups and a few downs: We will hold you in our hearts forever.

Class of 2012, I want to leave you with the best goodbye I ever knew- actually not a goodbye at all, but a hello to every day's possibility. It is a simple way to say what I have talked about: That life holds many things you can count on and many things you cannot control. What matters, as

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much as anything, is what you do about it all—how you stay strong facing the challenges, while always holding onto your sweet, kind side as well.

I learned this little farewell early, from my own father, who said it to me every morning I could hear his voice. So I have said it to our sons every day they could hear mine. Here it is for you: "So long. Good luck. Knock 'em cold. Be good young men and women. Be careful. Don't get hurt. Have a good day. And we love you very much." And one final important thing, especially for the extraordinary Class of 2012: Always remember that GDS kid on the plane and the difference between a parachute and a backpack. Congratulations, Class of 2012.