



High School Graduation

June 9, 2013

Speech by Martin Bullock, Faculty Speaker

Russell, C.A., Nancy and Gloria, Hilary and Michael, parents, grandparents and siblings, family and friends, and teachers of these graduates – welcome to the Graduation Ceremony of Georgetown Day School's class of 2013. This is a special graduating class, beloved by many but especially by me, and I am thankful for the opportunity to speak today. If for no other reason than this: today is the first time, in my six years of attending GDS graduations that I actually arrived on time!

They lock you out if you are late – did you know that?

Seriously though, I don't mind telling you that in my 14 years of teaching high school, being selected by YOU to speak at your graduation ceremony is the highest honor I have received, and I am truly grateful for it.

It is also a heavy responsibility, though, and has caused me no small amount of anxiety. I sought advice from graduation speakers of years past, but it wasn't that helpful. Louise was trying to be helpful when she gave me her insights and copies of old speeches to read, and Topher and John Burghardt were trying to be helpful as they gave me sage advice. In the end, though, it all just made me feel even more nervous. How could I hope to come up with a speech as meaningful and as beautiful as theirs? Lost, I turned to Sarah (as I often do) and she gave me some great advice (as she always does) and I found my voice.

I am sure many of you have had that same experience.

I know that most graduation speeches tend to focus on looking forward or looking back – optimism for the future or nostalgia for the past – those are the most common themes. For the class of 2013, there is a lot of material in those two themes.

Surely you have a lot to be optimistic about – you are about to join the ranks of some pretty

awesome alums! Oscar winners, Grammy winners, Pulitzer Prize winners—peacemakers, trendsetters, commentators...Let's face it—with the talent, intelligence, and determination in this room, you guys are pretty much destined to run the world! Imagine walking into the National Gallery in a few years to see the latest works of art by Juvon Coventry, or the thrill you'll get when you hear that superstar Tiana Walker has just been named to head the panel of celebrity judges on the 33rd season of American Idol? And will anyone be surprised to see an aging Barack Obama sporting a "Darwin for President" T-shirt? These are just a few examples of the achievements you are all capable of.

Yes, there's plenty of optimism to go around, but there's no shortage of nostalgia either. During your time at the high school you have taught everyone the meaning of triskaidekaphobia, you've played laser tag against an ex-Marine—AND WON, and you've had some REAL class meetings where you hashed out social issues that most grades would prefer to avoid. Finally, this year you managed to get Chris Levy into a kiddie pool in the middle of the forum! Who else could pull that off but the class of 2013? You won't be forgotten any time soon—that much is certain.

So, although the past and the future are promising directions for this speech, I would rather talk to you about the present. The here and now. We have a tendency to overlook the here and now, but that is a risky proposition, because, no matter how comfortable your past was and no matter how bright your future may be, the present is all you really have. If that sounds a little too ominous, you can flip the script a little: no matter how awful your past was, and no matter how daunting your future may be, the present is the one thing you really have. Sometimes, dwelling fully in the present is a great comfort. It behooves us, therefore, to be mindful of it and to experience it completely.

Those of you who have had me as your teacher know that I like to start every class with a moment of silence. In the hectic pace of a GDS day, I find that just a brief moment of silence is enough to hit the reset button and prepare our brains for learning. After all, before my class started, a student may have just sprinted up the stairs to the third floor all the way from L2 because the elevator was already above capacity. Or another may be hoofing it back from Safeway with a bag of steaming hot chicken tenders in his hands, or maybe an ice cold can of Refreshers. Or perhaps you just took an AP French test and you aren't even THINKING in English, much less ready to LEARN in English. In times like these, a moment of silence can play

a critical role in your learning. It gives you a chance to be mindful of the present.

As important as it is, though, being mindful of the present is really hard for humans to do. It is especially hard for people like us. We spend most of our quiet moments planning and strategizing, working on moving forward. “Where should I apply to college?” or “Which career path is right for me?” The wiser ones among us probably also spend time reflecting on the past—learning from mistakes, considering the effects of choices we have made. “I should have known this would be one of the essays on this test,” or maybe “Well. I’ll never try that dance move again!”

On the rare occasions that we have to sit in silence and be alone with our thoughts, most of us suffer from a condition some Buddhists refer to as “monkey mind.” Instead of placidly considering the world around us as it is right now, our minds prefer to jump into the tree canopy of our thoughts and swing from vine to vine. The human mind can be trained through practice, however, to dwell in the present. Some of you may already have experience with this if you have done yoga or meditation.

Before I started using the moment of silence in my classes, I actually used an image given to me by my yoga teacher about twenty years ago. She told me to think of my mind as water and my body, or my life, as a chalice holding that water. If the chalice is agitated, the surface of the water will be rough, choppy and broken. If the chalice is still, however, the surface of the water will be smooth and calm. We must look upon the surface of that water to see reflections of truth in the world, and we can only do that if the chalice is calm and the surface of the water is quiet. Only then can we savor the details that make moments like this one so important.

Graduation from high school is a rite of passage and it is worth paying attention to, because after today, you can no longer be considered a child.

Look around you for a moment. Make note of exactly where you are in this room...in this city...on this planet. Who is sitting next to you? Where is your family sitting? Why are we all here? This is one of the first of many important moments in your life that you are old enough to pay attention to, so if you have never practiced mindfulness before, today is a good day to start.

I’ll share an image with you that might help, if you’ll allow me to geek out a little. In chemistry,

we call moments like this “transition states,” when the reactants have just come together and the products are about to be formed. In math, you might think of it as the inflection point in a function—the point where a curve changes from concave down to concave up. However you choose to look at it, it is clear that today, right now, is a time to make note of.

Well, let’s do that. Together.

In just a moment, we’re going to try our own moment of silence. It may feel awkward or strange at first but remember—this is important. It’s important for everyone in this room. Everyone in this room is experiencing a transition of some sort. For the parents...it may be the transition to an empty nest, or it may be the first time one of your children moves on to adulthood. For the teachers...this may be your first graduating class at GDS, or maybe your last. For the students...it is one of the most significant milestones in your life so far.

After today, you are truly no longer a child.

So...

In the stillness that follows, try to be aware of exactly where you are, of what your senses are telling you at this moment. Is your stomach grumbling with hunger, or maybe tight with anxiety? Are your shoulders tense or relaxed? Can you hear people fanning themselves with the Graduation Program? In the stillness, your mind will wander toward the past or to the future, but gently rein it in—focus on now.

After a period of time, I will break the silence and we’ll continue with the rest of the Ceremony. But for now, it’s time for us to have our moment of silence.

Thank you. And congratulations, Class of 2013.