



High School Graduation

June 12, 2011

Speech by Richard W. Roberts, U.S. District Judge for the District of Columbia, Parent Speaker

William Coleman III joined an organization and told the following story at his induction ceremony. Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister of Great Britain during the second World War, accepted an invitation to be the speaker for the graduation at Eton. At the appointed hour, he strode to the podium, looked about at the graduates for a long moment, and finally said: "Never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever give up." He left the podium, and that was it. It brings to mind advice I heard Dean Kurt Schmoke of the Howard University School of Law say he received once about public speaking: "For your words to be immortal, they need not be eternal." There's something attractive about that when you contemplate what to say as a graduation speaker. What my trainers told me when I was a young trial lawyer was: "If you want to be seen, stand up. If you want to be heard, speak up. If you want to be appreciated, shut up."

But you know what? The Georgetown Day High School Class of 2011 has never been known to just "shut up." You have not craved appreciation; what has marked you is that you have wanted to be heard. So you do "speak up." You have wanted to be seen. So you do "stand up." And I hope you carry those traits forward into your college careers and beyond, because you have delivered some valuable messages to this community. When Fred Phelps brought his ragtag few to picket your school with his message of hate and homophobia, you spoke up and said "No. We treasure every member of our community." When the people of Haiti and Japan suffered the crushing devastation of massive earthquakes, you stood up and collected supplies for your sisters and brothers there. When the economy tanked and squeezed GDS's financial ability to ensure an economically diverse student body, you as a class dug down into your pockets and reached up with a class gift that shouted out "Yes" to diversity.

And sometimes when you have stood up and spoken up, they have been things of sheer beauty and wonder to behold. When you act with Laura and Jim, and sing with Katie and John-Michael and Ben, and dance with Maria and Jan, and perform concerts with Kevin, and excel on the field and the court with Kathy's and Bri's teams, and build sets with Will, and capture imagery with

Nicholas and Laura and Michelle, you display a grace and strength and creativity that mark you as jewels. And when you have stood up and spoken up, urged on by Kristin and Susan and Kevin and others, and filled those trophy cases with science and debate and academic competition awards, we kvell, knowing we are sending out into the world some of the finest minds, too, that the world will see.

Your fine minds will be put to the test after you leave the relative cocoon of your homes and of GDS. You have been blessed with this rare combination of environments that has supported your independent thought and critical analysis. Here, we value creativity. We celebrate difference. You practice expressing yourselves to the edge of your reasoning. You have captured this spirit in adopting your mantra "Keep GDS weird."

Not all of the world beyond is this way, however. You will encounter institutional pressures to stay within your channels, to reinforce the status quo, to conform. Minds less flexed than yours will construct obstacles to advancing principles important to human dignity and to the prosperity of the human spirit. They may make your road more challenging and complicated. Prepare for these discomfiting moments by remembering that you are not alone. Many before you faced down these pressures, and many yet to come will conquer similar challenges. Some before you have spoken with their words, and some have spoken with their actions.

Think of this world, this country, only fifty years ago last month. Hundreds of young women and men, very close to you in age, faced down the might of the state and the bile of the Ku Klux Klan. They encountered the lash of fire hoses, the incendiary heat of firebombs. They were taunted and vilified by those intent upon preserving the oppression of Jim Crow laws in interstate transportation terminals. But the Freedom Riders knew it was wrong, and from the ashes of that first day in May of 1961, they rose up to say "the Freedom Rides will go on, one way or another." And so they did. You and I today do not have to walk into an eatery at National Airport or Union Station or the bus terminal and see seating signs saying "colored only" or "whites only." The Freedom Riders grew this country.

And think more recently of the worldwide economic meltdown we have seen and the voices we have heard. Very complex. A Michael Lewis article spoke of how the construction industry normally accounts for about 10% of a country's gross domestic product. Ireland's had swollen to 25%. Developers absorbed a fifth of the entire Irish workforce and went on an orgy of building

thousands of new houses. Irish banks had more than tripled their real estate lending from the norm of 8% up to 28%. But, money for other businesses was drying up. Something was going on. A very young guy named Morgan Kelly, an economics professor in Dublin, was troubled. He knew that there were not enough people in Ireland to fill the new houses, and there was no international demand for them. He saw that Ireland's banks shoveled money to developers like it was a family affair: if they liked the man, they didn't bother to evaluate his project. Morgan Kelly spoke up and warned about how the real estate bubble would burst and the banks would crash if the cycle continued. The reaction? Banks derided him as unpatriotic. Journalists echoed the banks and refused to publish Kelly's articles, labeling him Dr. Doom. "You're either for us or against us," went the refrain. The public relations office at Kelly's university tried to find someone in the economics department to write an attack piece on Kelly. In the face of vacant skyscrapers and empty housing developments all around, Ireland's bank regulator parried the obvious toxicity of the bank loans Kelly cited and declared the banks fundamentally sound. The prime minister wondered aloud why complainers like Kelly don't just commit suicide. But Morgan Kelly stood firm. He spoke up more. And when the Irish legislature guaranteed the loans as if they were debts of the state, it sank Ireland but raised the status of Morgan Kelly as a prescient patriot. Irish citizens who did heed his warnings against buying real estate thanked him for protecting their life savings. The counsels of government eventually listened attentively to his every assessment. Kelly is helping to grow his country.

Now, it's your turn. All of your family members, friends, teachers, and administrators gathered here today to watch you accept your diploma will be looking toward your pioneering moves going forward. And on this day, June 12, 2011, the centennial of the day my late father was born, June 12, 1911, I am sure he is smiling down upon all you pioneers of the class of 2011, and upon his graduating grand-daughter Jillian, and her super athlete constant companions Dominique and Dwight, and Danielle and Connor and her host of other buddies whom Vonya and I get to see at the house. And hopefully Dad's smiling down upon his son who has been given the honor to address you today. Russell Shaw, thank you again for this honor.

Class of 2011, we don't ever want you to "shut up." I challenge you to gather your skills, harness your creativity, speak out and help grow this world. Leave it a far better place than the one you found. Let those efforts be the markers you leave behind on the path you travel. Let them illuminate the greatness you have pushed this world to achieve. Like Churchill reportedly told

the Eton graduates, never give up. And to paraphrase Robert Browning, another Englishman whose quote my mother often recited, "your reach should exceed your grasp—or what's a heaven for?" Go for it Class of 2011, and good luck!