



High School Graduation

June 12, 2011

Speech by Russell Shaw, Head of School

Good afternoon. It is my honor and pleasure to welcome you to the 40th commencement exercises of Georgetown Day School and to the graduation of the Class of 2011. Today we are privileged to celebrate these tremendous young men and women and to send them on their way.

Graduates, I have been grateful to get to know you this year. On the first day of school, I stood in the Forum to speak to the High School. It was then that you introduced me to the Senior Run-In. You were the Georgetown Day Fire Department, storming the high school with the spirited effervescence that has characterized your class throughout your years at GDS. You placed a fire hat on my head, sprayed the underclassmen with water guns, rang bells, and generally created quite a ruckus. It was a warm welcome for me to my new school.

I've watched you this year, seniors. I've watched you congregate in the senior corner, your classrooms, the College Guidance Office, the gym, the soccer field, the theater, the art studios, and in every corner of our school, often until late in the evening. And I've been struck by the fact that GDS is your home. You didn't actually sleep at school, at least not as far as I knew, except for the occasional catnap in the library or on a hallway couch. And yet you inhabited your High School fully, you made our School lived in, you cultivated a sense of community that made 4200 Davenport Street a vibrant and comfortable place to be.

Given that you've made GDS your home, it follows that you are preparing to leave home, multiple homes, really. As you prepare to leave our home, to head off to college and adventure and, in short order, adulthood, it's not too soon to think about packing. I still remember packing for college the summer before my freshman year. In fact, full disclosure, I packed for college...the night before college. I had a huge steamer trunk that I filled with everything imaginable as I prepared to head across the country. Think Harry Potter. When I finally managed to get the trunk closed, it was so heavy I needed two friends to help me get it into the back of the car. I soon realized that the bathing suits that I'd brought from California weren't

quite suited to New England. What I needed was an overcoat. And boots.

So, Class of 2011, mindful of the dangers of procrastination, I'm going to help you with a packing list right now. In preparation for making this list, I asked your teachers what they would like to send you away with as you prepare to leave GDS. I asked you the same question.

I received a wealth of answers from both groups, far too many to share here. I know your teachers always want you, their students, to take center stage, and so I've decided to yield most of their time to you. I will share a few brief suggestions from your teachers, however.

Winston gives you advice to take with you. He writes, "Your biggest asset in life—more than your alma mater, your degree, your connections—will be your ability to get along with people. Without this, you won't have any friends and you'll never get hired. Most important, you'll never get a date. Now wouldn't that be a shame."

Barbara Bergman sends you with advice as well. "You need to call home at least weekly or risk finding your parents waiting at the door of your dorm room."

And Richard Avidon recommends that you take along with you, "your innocence. You might think you already lost it, but check the lost and found...everything turns up there, eventually."

So what are the things you wrote to me to say that are packing for yourselves?

Hunter Fortney will bring, "a few friends that I have known so long they could count as siblings (a plus for an only child); a pretty decent education, I must admit; memories of a school with a soul; and, most important, a few wonderful items from the lost and found." (Perhaps he found his innocence there).

Rachel Coyne writes, "I'm taking my Hoppers. I don't know what I'm going to do next year without one. I write down my homework but I also write down when I'm visiting my sister in Pittsburgh and what time my TV shows are on. I love the feeling of checking off my finished English paper and counting down the days until the last day of classes. Now I'm going to have to find a new place to organize and record my life. I'm also taking the AstroTurf in my soccer cleats and my sports bag. Whenever I see the little black pellets I think of the hot, summer days of soccer preseason and the cold, winter afternoons of lacrosse games. More important, I think

of the teams I have loved being a part of at GDS and will remember as I move to a different school.”

Eva Stevenson shares: “I wanted to tell you that I will not be at my graduation ceremony. Do not worry—I am not anticipating being arrested. The reason I will not walk at graduation is that I will be in Uganda working with a women's microfinancing organization. This organization is called Women's Microfinance Initiative (WMI) and so far the organization has had a one hundred percent success rate and has even spread from villages in Uganda to villages in Kenya. I will be working in a small village called Buyobo alongside my cousin who has been living there and working with WMI since September.”

Eva continues, “I will always remember studying in the first integrated school in DC, and learning by the values that this school was founded upon. I will always remember the phenomenal teachers that I have had—the ones who have opened my mind up to entirely new worlds of ideas and have challenged my many preconceptions of this world. I will always remember the activists I have met at this school—both students and teachers—people, who like me, (I know this sounds clichéd, but it's true) really do want to change the world.”

Ben Ernst writes, “My extracurricular life at GDS was wrestling. The GDS wrestling program has given me more than I can possibly realize at this time, and played a huge role in shaping me into who I am today. GDS wrestling taught me that with most things in life, you get out what you put in. GDS wrestling conditioned my mind and my body, giving me self-control that I was previously lacking. I know how bad it feels to lose and how amazing it feels to win. I learned how to follow, listen, and learn from people older and more experienced than me, and how to lead and teach those younger than me. I learned how good it feels to be recognized for my dedication and that it is 100% worth the work and sacrifice.

“GDS made me feel at home away from home, and I will miss it. But after spending half my life in the institution, I will be forever GDS. GDS will never leave me, the very culture of the place is branded on my values and personality, and I will wear that brand with pride for the rest of my life.”

Chris Pecaro: “More than the hideously good education I've received in any academic field, I've learned at GDS how to think and live for myself, and learned to love across the boundaries of

identity that so often impede good friendships from ever flourishing. After growing up in a school that was rigid in atmosphere and wonder-bread-white in its demography, going to GDS has been a godsend. The art programs, of which photography and theater I can speak with authority, are some of the best around not because of ample resources or even because of the top gun instruction, but because of the hands-off attitude that defines them. Frankly, I've been treated like a kid in a sandbox. I've been able to create and innovate and fail without an adult telling me no, and it's made all the difference. I'm going to Columbia next year with the full intention of becoming an artist (more specifically a writer) at an age and era when most kids have had their artistic dreams and aspirations thoroughly beaten out of them, and it's entirely a result of the encouragement I've received from faculty here at GDS.

"My best friends here are Jewish, I have a black girlfriend, and to say it as simply as possible: it's just not a big deal, as should always be the case. The same can't be said for too many schools, and I am more than aware of how lucky I am to have attended a place like GDS. Two guys can walk down the hallways here holding hands, and rather than receiving taunts or over-exuberant encouragement, no one bats an eyelash. More than anything we learn from our classes, if we can learn to love each other we can change the world. I came to this school stunningly ignorant as to how to do so, and I leave with a fair degree of expertise."

Finally, seniors, what am I giving you to put in your steamer trunk? I'm giving you a book—actually, I gave it to you at graduation rehearsal on Wednesday and for those of you who didn't get one, I've brought extras here today. The book by Colum McCann, *Let the Great World Spin*, won the National Book Award in 2009. It is based loosely on the story of Philippe Petit, a French high-wire artist who gained fame for his tightrope walk between the twin towers of the World Trade Center on August 7, 1974. Petit didn't have permission for the walk, and spent more than six years secretly preparing for what he called "the artistic crime of the century". He learned everything he could about the towers which, when he hatched his plan in 1968, were still under construction. He had to figure out how to get a 450 pound steel cable across the 200 foot gap between the towers, how to take into account the ways the towers would sway in the wind, how to get a 55-pound balancing pole up on the roof, and other details. He obtained fake IDs for his co-conspirators and himself, identifying them as building contractors, dressed in disguise as construction workers, and used this cover to scout the rooftops and hide supplies. On the morning of the walk, he used a bow and arrow to shoot a fishing line from one roof to the

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other, and then passed larger and larger ropes across the space between the towers until his team was able to pass the heavy steel cable across and use guy lines to anchor it.

Petit walked out on the wire at 7:15 AM on that Tuesday morning, and spent 45 minutes sitting, lying down, kneeling, and even dancing between the two buildings, more than a quarter mile above the ground. Police waited for him at both ends of the wire, and helicopters flew overhead. When he finally hopped off the wire and back onto the rooftop, he was arrested. The charges were ultimately dropped, however, as his act had captured the imagination first of New York City and then of the world.

I want to be clear that I'm not encouraging you to be high-wire artists—your parents would never forgive me. Petit's feat does, however, embody a number of things that I wish for you. The idea of dreaming big, of recognizing the combination of the hard work, preparation, perseverance, and collaboration that is necessary to realize your dreams, of boldly pursuing those things that you love and being joyfully present when you are doing them. Along with this book, these are things that I hope you will bring with you to college and, more important, to your lives.

And Class of 2011, I want to invite you to be present now, to pause and look around, face your parents, faculty, family, and friends—look at all these people who have showed up for you today. We are for you, we believe in your tremendous capacity, we are proud of you. We know that you will pack well, and that you have everything you need for the journey ahead.

And to the rest of us here, parents, teachers, family, friends—our responsibility for these graduates doesn't end today. I know I don't need to tell that to the parents who have just written their first college tuition check. These talented young people will need our ongoing support and guidance as they discover the world, make their way in the world, and change the world. Our work isn't done. Class of 2011, you have our confidence, our support, and our profound hope for the road ahead.

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