



High School Graduation

June 13, 2010

Speech by Louise Brennan, Faculty Speaker

Faculty, administration, parents, honored guests and friends, and members of the Class of 2010—

Let me first thank you for giving me the honor of speaking here today. I must admit that writing a graduation speech is more than a little intimidating. But I keep reminding myself that we as teachers have handed you a lot of intimidating assignments over your years here, and that you've produced beautiful things in response. So now it's our turn to offer you something in return.

Earlier this spring, the English Department—like other departments—began to face up to the task of trying to hire some new teachers for next year. This undertaking seemed not just daunting, in fact, but impossible, since we—like others throughout the school—were trying to find new teachers to replace the irreplaceable ones who are leaving us this year. Nevertheless, we did see some strengths as we watched candidates teaching the interview classes. One candidate was clearly talented; she was smart, articulate, and knowledgeable. But was she right for us? Those of you who watched her teach had a suggestion: Maybe we could GDSify her.

So what does GDSification mean? When someone asks us to define the culture at GDS, we might talk about being on a first-name basis, about students and teachers conferring in the hallways, about hard courses and fine preparation for college, about having no cafeteria or about our football team. We could talk about the accepted truth around here—that everyone is a winner—where we have “the pride that comes from playing well, regardless of the score” and where we're occasionally a bit taken aback when our teams actually WIN a banner or when someone hits a grand slam. We could even talk about our only rule—that we must wear shoes. These things are all true—but knowing these facts hardly counts as becoming GDSified.

So what is it about us?

First, yes, we're smart. But we're not just smart; we're funny-smart. We're laugh-out-loud-in-the-middle-of-class smart. We could be immersed in a serious discussion of existentialism or acid rain or the use of the subjunctive or –help me out, math department: Factors? Sine and cosine?)—and we can move immediately to a funny, witty remark or even a clever cover-up of the dreaded cell phone going off (right, Alex Damato?). We're a place where there's a running joke in most classrooms—maybe about the repeated protestations of love for one of the Jay triplets, or even about when, exactly, Carlos will walk into a certain 8th-period English class. We're a place where the sport of choice—at least in the winter—might be speed chess. And in the fall we're smart enough, and funny enough, to institute the game of quidditch, with teachers dressed in choir robes and carrying Topher's daughter's wands in order to be the line judges. It's just plain fun—and often funny—to be smart here at GDS. That new teacher needs to learn just how fun it is to laugh and learn at the same time.

Second, we're people who like debate. There's almost no topic here that is beyond debate. We sometimes complain that at GDS we just talk, talk, talk, but never do anything. But I think that by talking we are doing something. We are lining up our ideas against the ideas of others, not because we are a disagreeable lot, but perhaps because we are at our smartest when someone else offers us a perspective that we hadn't yet considered. This is not just because we agree with Voltaire: "I wholly disapprove of what you say, but will defend to the death your right to say it." Rather 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" because it makes us re-examine what we believe and thus come closer to truth. My brother-in-law, with whom I am sometimes known to disagree, always reminds me, "If the two of us agree on everything, then one of us isn't thinking." In the midst of debate here at GDS, we are thinking hard—and that new teacher needs to love that debate as much as we do.

Finally, that teaching candidate needs to know that one of our favorite expressions around here is, "This may be a stretch but..." We get a special light in our eyes when we hear this phrase, and it's not because the "stretchers" we tell are like Huck Finn's – since his are always the outrageous fictions of someone trying to cope with the terrible truths around him. Our stretchers keep us alive, reminding us of the power of imagination to tell us truths that simple facts cannot always capture. One of my favorite *Calvin and Hobbes* chapters involves Calvin using up an entire roll of film taking pictures of Hobbes: Hobbes on his head, doing arabesques and

somersaults, showing off his joy and love of life. When Calvin's father has the film developed (back in the day, you know, film actually had to be sent off to be developed), he's infuriated: Each picture shows a stuffed animal sitting limply in front of the camera. Being GDSified means recognizing that Hobbes really is alive, even if that camera can't catch him in action. Our stretches seek to capture truths, not to avoid them, as Huck's do; our stretches recognize that imagination is a gift; our "stretches" are those of a runner limbering up, getting ready to run the race of his life.

So what does the teaching candidate need to learn in order to be GDSified? She'll need to learn what you already know: how much fun learning is around here; how deep, searching debate can strengthen our integrity and understanding; how stretching ourselves both in the classroom and in the world can remind us of what is possible. In fact, she'll need to "stretch" herself in order to keep up with you—and she'll need to love doing it.

So what about those of us who have already been GDSified? What about you? Where does your time spent as Mighty Hoppers leave you, especially at this moment where we are poised, with you, between past and future? Oskar Schell, in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, comments that the moment before his father started his stories was "the best moment." And 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, but Pooh doesn't know exactly what it is called.

So perhaps this is my favorite moment—when we can look back at your own GDSification and forward to your about-to-happen encounters with the world beyond the walls of GDS. It's the moment before Thomas Schell's story and before Pooh's snack, the moment before you leave us. We don't know yet what adventures lie ahead, but you are about to head out into the world, and I can only assume that you're going to try to GDSify it. So you'll play Quidditch and speed chess, you'll debate the challenges, and you'll imagine the solutions; and you'll make other people want to join you.

We've loved watching you stretch, we've loved being stretched by you, and we can't wait to see what will happen as you begin to stretch out into the world. Keep in touch so that we won't miss

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you too much.