



High School Graduation

June 7, 2009

Speech by Topher Dunne, Faculty Speaker

Bright Moments and Congratulations to the Class of 2009, and thank you for this opportunity. Today is a celebration, where friends, family and the GDS community gather to witness your graduation. You move on today from a familiar place into a wide variety of new challenges and vistas. It is my hope that your experience while you were here was meaningful even while it may not have always been the easiest thing.

It is also important to realize that all of this has happened before, and will happen again. You may have attended this ritual or many like it in the past, to watch friends or relatives graduate. Today it is your turn to participate and join the great cycle. You walk across and after getting your diploma the world is oddly the same, yet profoundly changed. There is a Zen saying: before enlightenment: chop wood, carry water; after enlightenment: chop wood, carry water. But what exactly is enlightening about the upcoming trip across the stage and likely accompanying photo op, whether or not it gets tagged on Facebook? In many ways the enlightenment, if it occurred at all, rests in the journey which led you to the stage to become graduates.

For some, GDS is the only school you've known, for others it is on a relatively short list. Haltingly or not, some sense of loyalty has likely developed, even if it is not very public. What is loyalty at GDS? There might be some crested blazer, Beach Boys, cornball, be-true-to-your-school connotation, but, lest you haven't already said it to yourself, "That's so un-GDS." We were never like that. An article written by Michael Schaffer (an alum from last century) for the New Republic this past fall demonstrated that loyalty to the institution of GDS exists albeit enigmatically. Schaffer writes of entering what some call "the bubble" in order to learn about being more open. This traditionally has been such an antithetical place full of anti-hero types that it is not so surprising that a loyalty to GDS plays out in arcane ways, as if every day is opposite day.

That loyalty may have been as much to each other as anything. Did you band together during your time here? Were you products of infighting? Did it take some periodic shamanic rituals

involving paper, sage, cinnamon and a secondhand Crockpot from the '70s to keep you together? Did you need zip-ties to keep from separating too soon? Or was it deeper than that? Your relationship to GDS may have started as contractual—with an application and enrollment ... but it was always deeper than that, being much more than following, or trying to bend your way around sets of rules. It was more like living up to (and interacting with) norms in some larger way as a community, where you could engage with the culture and interact with it.

The relationships that form around peers or colleagues involve trust. Did you come to trust easily? Did that trust grow into loyalty? Were you tested? Perhaps 6th period senior year? By being 10 points down at half-time in the tournament finals against some Quaker school down the street? Being asked to show up to support a friend, or classmate, in an activity, show, at a taping? To contribute to some group project? Or was it internal? Promising yourself? When you said you'd meet someone at Conie's, or pretended you would?

The "all together-ness", and many other things in the world, began to fracture as early as last fall. Who did you trust then? Who did you let down? Who let you down? Paulson? Your auto mechanic? Bernanke? Geithner? Jim Kramer? Jon Stewart? Jon Stewart while he was interviewing Jim Kramer? Or was it yourself again?

The list of people I remain loyal to and miss terribly because they are gone from GDS as students or colleagues, let alone those gone in any larger sense, grows annually. I don't see how it can't. Time moves on and despite how much you want to keep some things the same, it doesn't always, or even usually happen.

So now you are here, at a ritual which in effect casts you out. Today you are 'beyond' GDS, which can be bittersweet. Is this ritual based on truth or meaning? The truth of completion, recognition of reaching the goals we the institution set for you, or the meaning that there's a larger world out there which needs people like you to be in it.

What do you do now? John Legend, of all people, recently said "I'm ready to go right now ..." and something about a green light, which may have a graduation tie-in, but he also delivered a commencement address at his alma mater. While he politicked it up a great deal, he also mentioned about not being blind followers. In my experience you do not tend to be blind followers, sycophantic "Yes Men" but rather are ones to stand up. BE the anti-heroes, or even

heroes, you can be. Your dissent can be loyal, even patriotic.

Sophia Lyon Fahs said “It matters what you believe.” I agree, but would add: it matters as much what you do. How did you plan for time beyond today? Did you simply prove (or hope) you were better than other applicants? Interestingly worthy in some innate way? How many “Pick me pick me pick me” moments are there in a life vs. proving your worth day-to-day by doing. Fortunately, life is not a series of college applications, or high-flying prom date requests (many of which didn’t seem to be so in question in the first place). Now it is time to do things. You have choices, but it is an allocation problem: there are limits of time (the ultimate scarce resource), energy, effort. What’s “on your list”? Must-do things? Are there people you need to say things to?

I went ahead and said some of those things this spring, and became...verklemt at a theater talk back It was during an attempt to explain some of why I do what I do and how I appreciate all I’ve gotten to see you do over the years. Like many of the faculty sitting beside you now, I believe in who you are and support you in your endeavors. That won’t change with today.

But we’re still at the ritual ... So you might get to the stairway and blanch. Arjuna, the heroic kshatriya from the Mahabharata, looks before him on the battle plain of Kurukshetra, sees what is about to occur and stops, unable to do anything. Yet Krishna, his charioteer, shows him that time will march forward and events occur whether he stops or not. The world will continue and he should fulfill destiny by going forth and doing, not standing idly by. So, climb the stairs!

You may climb the stairs, descend again, leave the hall, ditch the diploma, hit beach week and never look back on us again, but I think most of you will choose otherwise; this place has likely meant too much you. Caring, worrying about the future of GDS and the world at large, or someday to wax nostalgic about some demi-godlike twilight when you went to GDS, Change came to Washington and things seemed possible; That is more likely part of your destiny.

To temper the previous allusions, memory is a tricky thing. Years hence today may be just a few flashes, if anything. In fact, most of your schooling may already be a few flashes, if anything. Respect that you don’t know everything, let alone remember it, keep learning and perhaps some of the things we went to great pains to teach you can stay alive in some form or fashion.

What will you carry away from GDS? Memories of the good may linger, but so might wrongs,

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wounds. Beware the grudges you carry—and how loyal you may become to them. Be mindful of spiritual materialism, claiming to own and clinging to beliefs, which can create holy warriors for causes, carry their regrets forward.

The mystery track at the variety show, if you remember, “Children Will Listen” from Into the Woods, stuck with me as I considered this address, even if you yourselves have already wandered in attention and are texting someone right now. Let me just say this, and it’s for everyone here: someday, despite what you may think or pledge, you’ll say something and realize that you’ve just repeated your parents, elders, teachers, someone unexpected. Perhaps you’ll be shocked, perhaps proud. In this sense I also wish you the opportunity to let family be an inclusive and welcoming construct. I got a birthday card years ago: brother, another year older, another year closer to dressing like dad...she never understood that my secret was to start by dressing like my grandfather. You may not understand or be understood, but be welcoming and accepting.

Now for some practical points: Never underestimate the power of the Aesthetic experience, of the arts to turn back or stop time; to trigger feelings and spark memory and creativity. Experience art.

Another thing, which you may have already figured out: the insights of sleep deprivation can be both real and illusory; knowing the difference between the two is a challenge you will likely continue to face in your life.

Steve Jobs said, “if you live each day like it could be your last, someday you’ll be right.” With that in mind, be bold, have dreams, make plans, then pursue them.

How has GDS as an institution benefited you? I hope we have provided you with experiences and opportunities for insight, either in class or outside it ... How has it not? Have we sheltered you from various things too much or for too long? We’ve made choices of what you did, just as you’ve had some choices—to apply and attend GDS, some courses, and now where to go. What’s next? Congratulations to the Class of 2009! So say we all!