



High School Graduation

June 8, 2008

Speech by Peter Branch, Class of 2008

It is my honor and pleasure to welcome you to the 37th Commencement of Georgetown Day School and to the graduation of the Class of 2008. It is always the welcome culmination of many days and years of effort on the part of families, the GDS faculty, and the students themselves. Sentiments of pride and regret mingle as we all recognize that few things will be the same but that an outcome for which we have all awaited has finally arrived. From the moment a child is born, he or she creates both a sense of loss and of joy. With heralded first steps come a certain amount of freedom and a loss of dependency which parents ironically mourn. How much more does the departure from home to college yield nostalgia for those days of adolescence and dirty socks which parents have just barely learned to tolerate?

It is especially hard to let go of this bunch of characters because they have been so good together and so supportive of GDS and other members of the community. However, no sooner than I went on sabbatical than they charged into the first assembly proclaiming on their t-shirts, "We run this ship!" At the After Prom, their t-shirts boasted, "We ran this ship!" I had warned Kevin of the possibility of mutiny but since he had never read about it in *Moby Dick*, he didn't see it coming.

Many of these students have been together since their very early years at GDS. Indeed 30 members of this class of 115 started in the prekindergarten or kindergarten. Five of these soon-to-be graduates have survived their years at GDS as children of faculty members. And, setting a record, this class contains 5 sets of twins. Perhaps it was inevitable that these students would share strong relationships. During their high school years, they have annually bonded over a special Thanksgiving meal, a tradition unique to this class. They also initiated a class bonfire in December. It is probably impolite to note that they also bonded together when they lost in the finals of the Powderpuff football game to the upstart Junior Class. The Dean of Students comments that "we could not have asked for better examples of leadership, good judgment (most of the time), sensitivity, and school spirit than we enjoyed from the Class of

2008.” She even remarks that “they maintained the cleanest space in the Forum this year,” though the competition for that title was not very intense.

The Class was instrumental in competitions outside the school. Their leadership was key in many sports accomplishments throughout the year. For the first time in the same year, women’s varsity soccer won both the ISL A Banner and the ISL A tournament. Women’s varsity basketball tied for 2nd in the A Division and then won the A tournament. Women’s varsity softball came in 2nd in the A Division and then won the A tournament. Men’s varsity soccer placed 2nd in the John Warring tournament. Men’s varsity Cross-Country took 2nd in the MAC Championship. Wrestling placed 3rd and Men’s Track & Field placed 2nd in their respective championships. When the Men’s 4 x 100 meter relay team took 1st place in the Potomac relays, they were renamed by local press, “the 4 Hoppers of the Potomac-alyipse.” Several members of this class were named to all league teams for their sports, among them a young woman for the second time, a feat accomplished by only 2 other GDS athletes in the past 17 years. But the award GDS and the scholar/athletes of this class can be most proud of is winning of the ISL Sportsmanship Banner, which has never before been received by a coed day school.

Concern for others and the community has been strongly evident in this class. In community service, 36 seniors recorded 100 to 150 hours, 8 served 150 to 200 hours, and 14 worked over 200 hours, with one young woman providing 522 hours of commitment. Their work has been local and international, practical and activist, and individual and collaborative. The GDS trips to the Horn of Africa, to New Orleans, and to a Navajo reservation have been models of ways in which our students can learn in cooperation with and in service to others.

The Class of 2008 will be remembered by their initiation and enhancement of some movements that have the potential for long-term impact on GDS. With their advisor, seniors helped activate the Environmental Club and sponsored the high school’s successful first Environmental Awareness Week. Likewise, other student pushed the effort to Save Darfur. And seniors led the 3rd Annual White Privilege Conference at GDS, which attracted students and adults from throughout the region. Your involvement and leadership were also essential to our key assemblies, diversity events, and cultural presentations. Most of all, your example of civility set the tone for student life.

In the classroom, you demonstrated an interest in inquiry and learning which enhanced the

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educational experience for your classmates and teachers. You are an intelligent group willing to take on challenges. Of those of you who took Advanced Placement exams in your junior year, eighty four percent earned a score of three or higher, sixty three percent received four or higher, and thirty one percent achieved the top score of five. In taking the SAT I with critical reading, math, and writing, you scored four hundred and ninety points above the national mean for college-bound students. A quarter of the class received recognition by the National Merit Scholarship program.

Your skills and talents have been acknowledged by the one hundred and sixty nine different colleges and universities which accepted at least one GDS senior. As a result, you will be going to seventy four different schools throughout the United States and Canada. One of you will take a gap year in France, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The variety of these choices is both healthy and a measure of your thoughtful effort to find a school that is the right fit.

I hope the families of this class have had a chance to see some of the publications for which your students have been responsible: the Augur Bit, the Menagerie, Grasslands, and Babel Fish. Each has exhibited the skills of organization, quality of work, and attention to detail which is required to engage the reader. Likewise, the artwork of this class has been remarkable as the April Art Exhibit demonstrated. In the Congressional Art Awards, three members of this class have received honorable mentions and one was first-place winner for 2008. Five seniors have been National Scholastic Art Award Gold Key winners, one receiving two such awards in two years.

The Blackbox Theater was enlivened by your dynamic participation in the performing arts. In the fall drama, *Our Country's Good*, in the winter One-Acts, and in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, you demonstrated your intelligence, your sensibility, your dramatic and comedic sense, and the value of effort and training. Likewise, your choral performances conveyed the strength and spirit of our programs. The Lab Band and Jazz Ensemble, together with the Orchestra, gave ample opportunity for you to express your love of music, both in improvisation and in classical presentation. That the Dance program has benefited from the new studio and from association with our resident company was clear in the dance and *Fata Morgana* performances.

So many other clubs, organizations and events were blessed by your participation and

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leadership. The Math Team, strengthened by senior brain power, placed in the top five percent of schools in the National Math Contest. Two of you placed first and second in the Jim Mayo Scholarship for the Arts in theater monologues. Model Congress presented one of the largest teams in thirty years. Cabaret Night to benefit MetroTeen Aids was a success in its first year. And many more group and individual efforts on the part of this class have made GDS proud of all you have offered and accomplished.

Before I let you go, I have to confess my jealousy of the Class of 2008. Now it is only natural for the old and infirm to envy the youth and energy of the next generation. But this class stands at a unique moment in the life of our country. For the past weeks, we have been hearing much of the historic nature of the primary contest between Senators Clinton and Obama. We are now facing an even more historic contest between Senators Obama and McCain. I apologize for my remarks to the Libertarians and the Ron Paul devotees, of whom, given GDS, I am sure there are at least a few.

I envy this class because you will have the great opportunity to be engaged as freshmen in college in the dynamics and excitement of the fall election. You will be faced with dialogues and debates, not only over the comparative merits of the contestants but over the difficulties and opportunities of our political, economic, cultural, and social systems. Many of your current assumptions and beliefs, including ones you have been taught by your parents and GDS, will be challenged. You will learn things about yourself and others which may be troubling but often will be life-enhancing. Don't hide from these challenges. College is a time for entertaining new perspectives. But, on the other hand, do not easily abandon your own beliefs and values. Just because an idea is new or popular does not mean it is right. Surely you have learned that lesson at GDS. And be prepared for ideas to be expressed with less civility than you were expected to maintain at home or at GDS.

The Election of 2008, because of its unique character and because of the sense by both parties that it could be a watershed election, is likely to be hotly contested. Issues of race, gender, age, religion, and class have all been raised so far, and often in an ugly and mean-spirited fashion. But none of these so-called historic characteristics of this election is new. Twelve presidential elections ago, a skinny and very naive kid from a public high school in Northampton, Massachusetts, wandered into an elite private men's college. There I found that the reformist senator from my home state, whom my father opposed, was also opposed in the most vicious

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fashion for his political and religious beliefs by conservative boys from some of our best private schools. I began the election as a lukewarm Republican by birth and ended up an argumentative social activist. During those next four historic years before my graduation from college in 1964, I watched the election of our first Catholic president, the Bay of Pigs, the rise of the Civil Rights movement, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the assassinations of both President Kennedy and his assassin. However, I was unaware of the beginning of our undertakings in the Vietnam civil war which would so shape the subsequent four years and lead to the historic election of 1968.

No one can accurately predict your future, or even your next four years. All of you have the capacity to make a significant difference. I was reminded of the truth of that well-worn graduation remark by the recent death of Edward Lorenz who developed the chaos theory in which the flapping of a butterfly's wing can have a significant effect on a tornado. Engage yourselves in the issues of the moment, whether political or scientific, whether economic or cultural. Your energy and integrity are needed. One thing we do know about the future is that it is coming. Some determinists argue that its shape is already certain. As a historian, a humanist, and a grandfather, I cannot agree. For good or for evil, humankind has had too great an effect on our past not to be able to affect our future. Take hold of that responsibility as soon as possible. You have so much to offer.