



High School Graduation

June 12, 2011

Speech by Bobby Asher, Faculty Speaker

Thank you to the Class of 2011 for allowing me the honor of speaking today, and thank you to my parents who are here today and who once again bought me a new suit for graduation

As you all must know by now, GDS is a special place. Having graduated from a nearby high school where only properly attired boys attend and where students' last names are more commonly used than their first, I know personally what an extraordinary place GDS is.

When outsiders initially encounter the world we call GDS, the first thing they seem to notice and the first thing that seems to hang them up the most is that, in addition to teachers calling their students by their first names, here students call their teachers by their first names.

At GDS students are encouraged to challenge authority. Here students learn to become advocates, change agents. At GDS, we shun convention and celebrate the unconventional. At GDS, our mascot is a grasshopper, and we don't even have a football team. Well, we did this year—a co-ed flag football team, and they got spanked by the faculty team at Country Market Day.

At GDS it really is more about the process than the product. While talking about how much GDS changed has persisted throughout my nearly two decades at the school, one thing has not. And I witness it—every day—our students simply love to learn.

That said, however, there is one thing that has changed, relatively recently. GDS seems to have become the school of choice for the country's leading conservative (and neo-con) journalists. As the son of a Sidwell alum who spent almost 50 years writing for The Washington Post, I particularly love the image of David Brooks calling Charles Krauthamer and David Frum to hear more about their kids' experiences at GDS.

As much as we try here to focus on asking the right questions, at GDS, as at any school and in

life, it can often be more about knowing the answers, about being right.

Students “know the right answers.” When they do, they raise their hands, and we call on them. Properly prompted, they proudly share their knowledge and righteously revel in their rightness.

Sure learning is important—I feel like it’s somewhere in our mission—but being right earns students points. Points get you into college. Points make you happy. Even better, points make your parents happy. I know this because as a teacher, above all, I am a distributor of points.

Being right—both in school and outside it—simply put, is fun. We all know the feeling: those glorious moments of I told you so. Is there a better feeling as an adolescent than to prove your teachers or your parents wrong, to outsmart them, render them less than, or, better yet, leave them scratching their heads in awe?

These triumphs, both large and small, really do make us feel good. Recent research tells us that the dopamine surge we experience when we answer a question, solve a problem, or win an argument—when we feel right—is real and it is addictive.

While being right, more often than not, has gotten you where you are today—on the verge of receiving your high school diploma—I am going to talk today, a little bit, about the importance of being wrong.

We all know what it feels like to be wrong. And let’s face it—it isn’t all that fun.

As readily as we admit to being fallible—“to err is human,” we say. “Everybody makes mistakes,” our parents tell us—Sasha and Malia did. Heck, even Hannah Montana knows “nobody’s perfect”—it is nowhere near as reinforcing or as pleasurable as being right. In fact, it can be an autonomic nightmare, sending shockwaves throughout our bodies—making our hearts pound, our blood pressure rise, our stomachs churn, and our beings flag.

One of my favorite stories involves a reporter from the *Village Voice*, Ross Gelbspan, who was assigned to cover a press conference in 1972 about the *Limits of Growth*, what was then and what is still the best-selling environmental book of all time. Its author, Donella Meadows, warned that three factors—increasing population, increasing pollution, and diminishing resources—were converging and about to hit a point of exponential takeoff. As foreboding as her ominous

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forecast was, the reporter was struck by the grim predictions Meadows was making and the fact that she was pregnant. Somehow, he wrote, “she maintained personal hopefulness in the midst of massive gloom and doom.” So impressed he was by this notion of optimism and renewal in even the bleakest of times that he used it as the kicker to his story. The voice printed his article on the front page. The only problem was (and you probably guessed it by now) Donella Meadows was not pregnant.

Where I went to school, believe it or not, being wrong could be similarly traumatic.

I will forever remember my 11th grade pre-cal class. My teacher Mr. Donald Brown—we knew his first name only because he was the author of our textbook—was notorious for recognizing and seeming to celebrate his students’ wrongness. “That is so wrong, Asher, so thoroughly, so emphatically, and so ponderously wrong. Boards!”

“Boards” meant you had to return after school to wash the blackboards (this was the pre-white board, pre promethean era). And, not surprisingly, he had a certain way it had to be done. Obviously the board had to be erased prior to washing—pretty standard. But after erasure the errant responder had to execute 3 separate washings—first a cold-water sideways swabbing, followed by a vertical warm-water cleansing, and finally a second horizontal cold-water rinse. It was done correctly—like homework and classwork were supposed to be—or it was done all over again.

On Mt. St. Alban, mistakes were obviously frowned upon—punished even—and we quickly learned that there wasn’t much room for error—at least in a precalculus course where the teacher also happened to have authored our textbook.

GDS, as most of you know, is a different place. Not only is it safe to argue about the quadratic formula or the Arab-Israeli conflict, GDS students will debate—and we do have the strongest debate team in the country—everything from the merits of community service to the appropriateness of certain moves on the dance floor. There aren’t many schools where an advisee (let’s call him “Spaz Lotenberg”) will spend an entire activity period strenuously arguing the case for grinding or grumping or whatever it is you do at dances.

I had a similar encounter a couple of weeks ago. Without my saying a word about the nature of our meeting, I asked a particular senior who had been getting considerable and consistent air as he drove over the speed bumps in the parking lot, why he thought I had called him into my office. Quickly he hypothesized: “You might perceive that I am not in control of my car when I drive, but I am.” Sure you are, Kevin.

It was moments like these—when I, like my adolescent adversaries, felt so plainly and unmistakably right that it scared me a bit. These situations where I was so right and they were so wrong, actually made me fearful. I was, dare I say it, becoming one of those obstinate, intractable, incorrigible autocrats. I was becoming a high-school administrator.

This “crisis of (over) confidence” led me to read a book about it over spring break. It was aptly and succinctly titled *Being Wrong*. In it, Kathryn Schulz analyzes everything from the importance of being wrong and its implications to the emotions we experience both when we and others are wrong.

Ultimately she concludes that being right, or should I say, overindulging the feeling we are right, can be inhibiting, even dangerous.

And I’m not just talking about speeding through the parking lot or playing music or hanging inappropriate posters in the Forum. I’m talking about blind belief in economic principles that can lead to worldwide economic crises, I’m talking about the existence (or non-existence) of weapons of mass destruction.

But let’s not get too serious here...

What I found most compelling—and most useful for us here at GDS—was a section of the book in which Schulz writes about the assumptions we make about those who don’t agree with us, who don’t share our beliefs.

The first she calls the ignorance assumption; i.e., the reason you don’t agree with me is simply that you don’t know what I know. Once I explain my views to you, you will enthusiastically and unequivocally adopt them.

The second is the idiocy assumption—that, even though I’ve explained to you why I believe

what I do, you don't agree with me. Thus, you must not be as smart as I am.

Finally, my favorite of the bunch, the evil assumption—that, if you know what I know, and you are as smart as I am, and you don't agree with me, you must be evil. If we assume that people who are wrong are ignorant or idiotic or evil, it is no wonder we are hesitant to confront the possibility of error in ourselves.

Being right might be gratifying, but it is also static. Being wrong is hard and humbling, but it is dynamic. It encourages a journey rather than a destination, a sense that we have not yet “arrived.”

In short, what I am asking you to do is to challenge your own assumptions, not just those of others.

We live in a global world, where the stakes are perhaps higher than ever. We are going to need people in the room willing to explore every option, to acknowledge multiple perspectives, to appreciate differing viewpoints.

In short, we need, you guessed it, diversity.

It is human nature to surround ourselves with people who share our beliefs. We live in the same neighborhoods, attend the same schools, and work in the same or similar fields.

I guess what I am saying is that it will be up to you guys to reach out, not only to acknowledge and understand the views of others, but perhaps even more important to reconsider your own.

Confidence is an asset, and GDS has certainly fostered it—in all of you. “Take away our willingness to overestimate ourselves,” writes Shulz, “and we wouldn't dare undertake half the things we do. We get things wrong because we have an enduring confidence in our own minds; and we face up to that wrongness in the faith that, having learned something, we will get it right the next time.

In acknowledging our fallibility, notes philosopher Richard Rorty, we endorse “the permanent possibility of someone having a better idea.”

I'll close with some advice from one of my favorite philosophers of the 21st century, Mr. Tom Yoder, who shared with me an important anecdote about being wrong. Several years ago, led by members of the Class of 2011, a number of students—a large number of students—showed up to picture day wearing fake moustaches.

In an administrative panic, Tom, a navy man, reflexively order the operation shut down. After a lively exchange with students and careful consideration and consultation, in his characteristically thoughtful way, Tom did the unthinkable: he changed his mind. And an important era—the moustache era at GDS—began.

So, Class of 2011, congratulations. Embrace being all that it is to be a Hopper: love and live to learn, celebrate diversity, continue to question authorities of all kinds and to have the hard conversations, dare to err, and, in ways small and large, continue to make the world around you a better place.

We are counting on you.