



High School Graduation

June 10, 2007

Speech by Kevin Barr, High School President

Our former director, Gladys Stern, used to say that the purpose of education, and especially a GDS education, was to make you fit company for yourself. Such a notion puts equal weight on the worth of the individual and the worth of the education he or she receives. So, I have been thinking about what you have learned during your four years at the High School that might make you fit company for yourself and others. If I were a math teacher or an art teacher by trade, I probably would have come up with a different list of the useful lessons your teachers and the books you have studied tried to impart, but being an English teacher by calling, my list runs as follows.

In ninth grade you read the story of Cain and Abel and learned that you probably shouldn't kill your brother and then bury him, expecting that God or your parents wouldn't notice he was missing. You also learned from Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* that if you are invited to play in the house of a creepy old woman who has not looked upon the light of day for twenty years and seems not to notice that her wedding dress which she never takes off is turning yellow, you should leave immediately for London. Zora Neale Hurston in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* made it clear that following your dreams even if they take you to the horizon and back is better than staying physically safe in a situation which denies your essential self.

In tenth grade William Wordsworth shared with you the sad fact that we come into this world trailing clouds of glory but in our mania for getting and spending we lay waste the natural gifts God gave us. Of course, you also learned from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* that just because your wife wants you to be king and three half naked ladies suggest that it's in the cards, knocking off your best friend, various retainers, the old king, and half of Scotland probably is not the best way to gain political advancement. In eleventh grade your reading of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* should have made it clear that one's worth as a human being has nothing to do with one's skin color or one's class and everything to do with how one treats other people.

This year William Faulkner in *The Sound and the Fury* taught you that even freshmen at

Harvard can have very bad days. And you might not have known three months ago when you read John Milton's epic poem that today you too would be, like Adam and Eve, cast out of Paradise or at least a reasonable facsimile of it as far as schools go. Unlike Adam and Eve, though, you will always be welcomed back. But like them you will have to make your own way now, with the world all before you. Providence may guide you, but the choice of where to go and what to do when you get there will belong entirely to you.

So as you step away from us remember some of the essential lessons that your books and your teachers have tried to teach you: walk with a little humility, assume responsibility for yourself and others, in dark times remember there is always someone who loves you, and a good joke, as long as it's not at anyone's expense but your own, is a mighty good thing. That last one is taken from Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, which you didn't read, but really ought to.

So out you go, fit company for yourself and others. We will miss you.