



High School Graduation

June 10, 2007

Speech by Bobby Asher, Faulty Speaker

Thank you, Class of 2007, I am sincerely honored.

Now if I were a teacher at St. Albans, where I went to high school, today I'd be standing before you in my graduation robe, perhaps a bit jealous of my colleagues whose multi-colored hoods and sleeve bars, signifying their various advanced degrees, would make my plain black bachelor's robe—simple, but slimming—appear rather ordinary.

But this is GDS, and I'm wearing a suit. It's a new suit, by the way, that my parents bought me for the occasion, so I guess I should be thanking them, too.

Congratulations, graduates. Getting to today is really no small feat. You've fought through tremendous difficulties, struggles that only your generation understands.

Many of you have had to make your way, navigating the mean streets of Chevy Chase, Potomac, and McLean. All of you soldiered on in your car seats, as you headed off to your pre-arranged play-dates. You endured chaffing from your bicycle helmets and avoided trans-fats. You steadfastly braved the isolation of the dreaded time-out, and a few of you beat all the odds and even survived peanut allergies.

Today is a day of reflection. Although for some of you, it's not your first day of reflection at GDS, thankfully, you don't have to report this one to colleges.

As a father of three daughters myself, none of whom has reached the middle school as of yet, I'm not sure how qualified I am to be giving advice to parents of teenagers. In fact, I'm not sure how qualified I am as a father at all. I remember, during my oldest daughter's first year at GDS, a conversation we had in the car on the way to the Lower/Middle School...

Seeking to start my day with a little affirmation, I asked her, "Who's the toughest guy in the

world?"

Without hesitation, she responded, "Brian Bobo" (her PE teacher at the time).

Although it wasn't exactly the answer I was looking for, I understood her position.

Daunted, but determined, I pushed on, "Who's the second toughest guy in the world?"

This time she paused for a moment.

"Jesus Christ?"

Clearly it was time to cut my losses.

Still, I do feel that while today is primarily about the students, it is also a day for parents, and, having learned my place, I will turn to a couple of better-qualified sources.

Several weeks ago, on the advice of a mother at Prince William Forest, I picked up a copy of *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee* by Wendy Mogel. [By the way, when a mom recommends a really good book about parenting, it's kind of like a "friend" offering you a breath mint]. At any rate, I was struck by one passage in particular. In it, the author advises us, as loving, sensitive parents, not to measure our children's mettle by their moods, their grades, or their social standing. "Look," she says, "for your child's capacity for reverence, for gratitude, and for compassion."

In one of my favorite books, given to me by my wife (I seem to have a lot of people encouraging me to learn more about parenting), Tim Russert offers his advice: "We must teach our children that they are never, never, entitled, but that they are always, always loved."

And now for the students, for the Class of 2007, I do have a message.

The education you've received at GDS isn't meant to be the same as that you could have received at scores of high schools—in DC or across the country. You've been given an education that says it's not enough to have a skill. Not enough to have read all the books or to know all the facts. We might tease ourselves occasionally, but at GDS, values really do matter.

*Speech by Bobby Asher, Faculty Speaker
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Among of host of ideals, GDS places a premium on freedom.

And by this, I don't just mean the opportunity to go to Subway or Quiznos for lunch or to choose between the chicken shwarma or the Lebanese Celebration at Café Olé.

At GDS we grant you far greater freedoms, and, it is by design—part and parcel of what we do here.

Recently I was struck as I reviewed a column in the *New York Times* written by Thomas Friedman. Originally I had chosen the article for my ninth-graders because it talked about China's place in the rapidly "flattening" world.

Interestingly, in a country that has enjoyed unprecedented economic growth, Chinese educators are now calling for a new national strategy, one designed to make China a so-called "innovation country." As hard as they have worked to develop their industrial sector, the Chinese have failed to impact the world economy in any pioneering way. Theirs is an economy based on mass production of commodities typically designed somewhere else. What holds China back, Friedman argues is freedom—or lack thereof.

"It is very hard," he argues, "to produce a culture of innovation in a country that censors Google." Rigor and competence, without freedom, will take China only so far.

As I read the article a second and third time, it dawned on me, what Friedman was talking about in its ideal sense was GDS—a school that emphasizes both "rigor and competence" and freedom.

I always laugh when people talk about GDS being too loosey-goosey. As everyone one of these graduates before you can attest, while our students are granted a considerable amount of freedom, they work uncommonly hard. Our curriculum is nothing, if not rigorous. Heck, our kids staged a sit-in to protest the shortening of library hours.

As Friedman writes, "Freedom without rigor and competence will take us only so far."

And herein lies the challenge: in a world with so much freedom and so many possibilities, it becomes increasingly difficult to make decisions—particularly when one comes from a school

that doesn't always make them for you. The process can become even more menacing in the information age—in the high-speed world of the Internet, of Yahoo, Wikipedia, and Ask Yves.

In fact, when it came time to write my speech, pressured by my seniors who said, "Don't worry, you just have to be funny," my first impulse was to get on the Web.

I googled "Funny Graduation Speech" and got seven hundred and forty nine hits in a quarter of a second, and I didn't even click on the "I'm Feeling Lucky" button.

After about two hours of jumping from site to site, I finally found what I was looking for—I believe it was About.com that had the best advice:

"During the graduation ceremony, you want to say a few words to the eager audience...Very often, people don't realize that a funny graduation quote always works with audiences. Use one to add mirth to your speech. After googling "mirth" to figure out what it was, I eagerly scanned the list of "funny graduation quotes," I'll share the first two.

1. Your schooling may be over, but remember that your education still continues [Not funny]

2. A graduation ceremony is an event where the commencement speaker tells thousands of students dressed in identical caps and gowns that 'individuality' is the key to success. [Funny, but we don't wear caps and gowns]

So much for the Internet. A few summers ago, on the advice of my now ninety-six-year-old grandfather [Apparently even he seems to think I could stand a measure of self-improvement], I read a book called *The Paradox of Choice*, by a guy named Barry Schwartz at Swarthmore.

In it, he put forth the idea—supported with loads of research—that most people are terrible decision-makers. Most of us often don't know what we want, and the prospect of deciding often causes us not only jitters but real anguish. "Unlimited choice," he writes, "can produce genuine suffering."

In a nutshell, what Schwartz is talking about is someone like me at the Cheesecake Factory. I'm

assuming that most of you have been to the Cheesecake Factory, but then again, given that there are probably 10,000 restaurants in the DC metropolitan area, maybe I'm wrong. At any rate, it can be an absolutely overwhelming experience. First of all, the menu is spiral-bound. It has seventeen subsections. In addition to thirty two varieties of cheesecake (I counted), they offer twenty six different appetizers, fifty five some-odd entrees, fifteen salads, and eighteen different smoothies. The panoply of possibilities is paralyzing [How'd you like that for alliteration?].

Should I get the Jambalaya Pasta or the Bang-Bang Chicken and Shrimp? The Thai Lettuce Wraps or the Tex-Mex Eggrolls?

Invariably, I order the Shepherd's Pie, and spend the rest of the meal eyeing everyone else's plates, convinced I've made the wrong decision.

In an effort to help us, Schwartz talks about the difference between "maximizing" and "satisficing." A maximizer, he says, is someone who "can't be certain that she has found the best sweater unless she's looked at all the sweaters," "She can't know that she is getting the best price until she's checked out all the prices."

Schwartz's suggestion is that we should all become "satisficers"—sweater-purchasers "content with the merely excellent as opposed to the absolute best." People who find joy in their Shepherd's Pie. It is a remarkably tasty dish. And the portions are generous enough for two really.

What Schwartz worries about is that the overwhelming amount of choice—the thirty seven varieties of dog food, twenty-six brands of soup, and fourteen types of bagged lettuce at Safeway—is turning us all into maximizers. Maximizers, he says, are prone to misery and depression.

In a world of shopping malls and cable television, Amazon.com and Wal-Mart, E-Bay and E-Harmony, how in the world does one choose a career or a mate, let alone a major or courses from a college catalogue?

In my AP Psychology course, we take a version of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, a personality test based on some of Carl Jung's ideas. After completing a battery of

multiple-choice questions, test-takers receive their all-important letters, which indicate the degree to which one is an I or an E, an S or an N, a T or an F, or a J or a P. For today's purposes, I'm going to focus on the J/P distinction.

One's Jness or one's P... (Well, the extent to which one is a P") reflects the manner in which a person makes decisions.

Js, or Judgers, are people who tend to like having things decided. Js prefer a planned, orderly way of life; they like to have things settled and organized, they feel more comfortable when decisions are made. Js like to bring life under control as much as possible.

Ps, or Perceivers, are people who'd rather avoid making decisions. They tend to focus on taking in information rather than on making decisions. They like to delay final decisions in order to get more information. Ps prefer a more flexible and spontaneous way of life.

Now, while I know there are a number of Js out there—you, with your color-coded, annotated Hoppers and your orderly, prioritized To-Do lists.

We Ps, however, struggle with decisions. While you map out the week, the year, and your lives, we feel confined by plans. We see them as restrictions, limitations on possible choices.

"Sure I'd love to go to Mark and Katherine's for dinner on October 17th," I say. But what I'm thinking is closure. While I honestly can't think of anything I'd rather do, now nothing else is possible for that evening. Nothing. Can't even go to The Cheesecake Factory for Shepherd's Pie.

In GDS fashion, I'm not really sure what I am telling you to do, or whether we as teachers really should tell people what to do. Somehow after four years of what I call "appropriate ambiguity," you're probably not ready for a directive.

And as a self-proclaimed "P," I want to appear "loose and casual" and allow you to "stay open" to possibilities.

So, in closing, I want to offer you some comforting information, followed by a brief story. First,

the information.

Making decisions is difficult, but, as Christopher Caldwell writes, we tend to lose sight of our human resilience when we make big choices. People are constantly amazed that so many things they had dreaded—from misguided relationships to faulty career moves—often, as they say, "turn out for the best."

We have an enormous capacity for happiness. The surprise isn't how often we make bad choices; the surprise is how seldom they defeat us.

And now for the final story.

It's from a graduation that took place several years ago at a small school in Vermont. Because the school had only 14 graduates, each student was given a few minutes to speak. One of the graduates began her speech by acknowledging how much the school had challenged and inspired her individuality. During the middle of it, in an attempt to express the spirituality of the day, she removed her graduation robe and concluded her speech—completely and unabashedly naked.

Within hours, the tabloids began calling everyone in the town in search of a photograph or a videotape. Apparently when the young woman dropped her robe, the audience was so shocked that no one captured the moment on film—no one except the professional videographer who'd been hired by the school to record the ceremony. Quickly, he became a very popular guy.

Having just recently opened his video-production company, the sought-after photographer was in debt, married, and anxious to start a family. But he couldn't because he had NO money and his wife needed surgery. Suddenly the tabloids were competing to buy the tape, and the offering price soared to \$100,000. Could the stars have aligned more fortuitously? Here was his golden opportunity. And you know what he did: he turned them down—all of them. He just said no. When asked about his decision, he responded without hesitation. "It wouldn't have been right," he said. "It just wouldn't have been right."

So, Class of 2007:

Embrace Your Freedom.

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Make choices.

And maintain your honor.

Thank you and congratulations.