



High School Graduation

June 4, 2006

Speech by Topher Dunne, Faculty Speaker

Welcome to all and sincere thanks to the class of 2006 for the honor of being your faculty representative at their graduation. I only hope that some of you haven't already complained to your neighbor that you hoped I'd bring Steve Cutts along with me this time too.

Here's a piece of practical advice as you depart. While cultural mores abound, please remember that manners in the outside world don't usually equate with manners at GDS.

Today you don't need a replacement. You are here at an inclusive ritual, where all of you will play a part. The staff walked in with you, as we have gone with you, sometimes leading and sometimes accompanying, on various explorations and adventures together these past two to thirteen years. We didn't sit quietly and watch you enter then offer a quick goodbye. We didn't don various regalia and lead a march in as a means of proving status just as we don't want you to do the same. You will leave this ritual space on your own. Our trip ends here (the staff being condemned, like Sisyphus, to begin rolling the rock up the hill once more, only by now it is likely graffiti-ed with 2007). You have a ticket out waiting up here. I'm not sure where else this ticket will take you beyond 'across the stage.' You won't even have to show it to get into the reception. Nevertheless it is why we are here today.

Beyond the armchair anthropology in approaching this ceremony, I was sitting in front of my iBook and pondered, What does graduation and a GDS diploma mean? You have reached a level of ability and understanding...or at least minimum academic performance according to our standards both as individual faculty members and together as an institution. More importantly, you have gone through the process that is GDS. For me I find it more important to see how you think about and approach issues and problems rather than what information you garnered from your FReP, your knowledge of phyla, irregular verbs or the like. It is also highly likely that some of your most memorable lessons happened outside a classroom. In many of these cases you have educated one another, which really distills the GDS process to an elegant core.

Soon, however, this process, and your journey together, will end. Your part in this ritual is to cross this stage, and don't worry, I'll be among the group holding out a hand if you aren't sure where (or whether?) to cross. It may feel like a perfunctory walk, only to hit you with significance later. It is, however, liberation, a movement toward the light. It marks passage between one phase of life and the next.

Most of the rest of life tends to have ambiguous endings rather than planned ones, so I urge you to see the comfort in rituals like these. Contrast this ceremony with when you leave for home, the beach, supper, whatever. How many people will you leave with a meaningful goodbye? How many get a "see you later" to avoid a meaningful conversation? For that matter, how many just get "see you at the beach?" We likely will not all be together in the same place again and in any event you certainly won't see each other or us as often as you have for the past two to thirteen years, so contact and communication with each other and those of us still at GDS will become a much more active and deliberate choice as soon as you cross this stage.

Let's face facts, in all your actions and even with all of your academic excellence it is highly likely that you have committed a variety of errors in getting to this point. We, as a faculty, have been painfully aware of at least some of them. Although you probably don't want to broadcast your errors, they are a part of you. While some errors can be genius, like penicillin or jazz, most are slips of execution or judgement.

Whether you've unsent an email with errors in it (or even accidentally hit reply all and proceeded to type a personal message), backed out of a scheduling commitment since you couldn't manage your calendar properly, or not given another person a chance, the errors you commit are yours to own. Don't dim your light by being evasive. Acknowledge, accept and move on. Grow. Getting things wrong can teach us how to get things right.

But there is a gray area. Some actions may look and feel like errors but leave you uncertain. They may be the unpopular thing, or the relatively risky thing, even the thing you later realize to be a huge mistake. Here I refer you to the term dharma, which is not easily translated from Sanskrit. It can be enclosure, the great norm, moral imperative. It functionally comes down to what you realize to be the right thing to do in a situation, not just some litmus test of rules. I hope one of the major implicit lessons of our curriculum is to instill a sense of dharma in you. In the past I have been both praised and basically dismissed for the 'error' of doing what I believed

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and thought was right. There are norms of living that I hope GDS has helped to instill in you that can be more dynamic and vibrant than any set of rules.

I hope you have taken time these past weeks to take stock of what you have done in your time at GDS. If not perhaps you can ignore me for the next few sentences and do so. What shall you do now as graduates? You are young, generally unafraid to be at least somewhat foolish, and, I hope, still open to new ideas. Steve Jobs, someone who thinks different and is on my heroes list because of it, said "Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life." Find your path, be the social change that you seek. Go do something!

The past two to thirteen years have been as formative for you as the next several will likely be. Time may try to settle you in your ways and patterns, but consider this. You never know when enlightenment will hit, so at least try to be open to new perspectives and ideas. You may be on the stage thinking "why am I playing this?" I should have made a list; cake or death? Or it could be two weeks after the final Russian History paper that you realize how you should have answered it. (Yes, some lessons come too late because enlightenment doesn't necessarily follow a timetable.)

Our job as a progressive school is to provide structures and institutions with integrity so that our example (as people) as well as our lessons (as teachers) can let you develop into yourselves. Your job as progressively educated individuals is to demonstrate that integrity and set examples of your own. "Death is ignorance, vigilance is immortality".

When I describe GDS to others who may not be familiar with the institution it quickly takes on overtones of a magical place. It is more than the suspension of disbelief for two hours where some wicked big puppet becomes real and eats the meshuggeneh plant store owner with the untraceable accent and then the entire world. GDS can be a place of magical realism, where the honors and accolades of students and the institution abound and depth and significance become commonplace. Are we, a school of sixty years, still hungry? Have we spent more time securing and protecting a reputation by shoring up our curriculum or seeking out truths and valuable lessons? Where is the balance? What is the tradeoff? For that matter, does it have to be one thing or the other? Consider that balance as you make your educational choices over the next four to twelve years (yes, another degree can keep you in school).

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Lots of great stuff happened for you at GDS, providing relationships, opportunities, and memories beyond the mainstream. You have basked in the glow of its magic and I hope that some of that magic stays with you. I also hope that as the institution grows and ages it retains that power to enchant. Learn from your mistakes and do what you think is right. So say we all! and congratulations and bright moments to the class of 2006.