



High School Graduation

June 5 2005

Speech by Rika Drea, Faculty Speaker

Peter candidly informed me that I'm one of the shortest faculty speakers he can remember and I should bring a phonebook to the podium. There, that's better...

Friends, faculty, family, and the class of 2005...

Nine years ago, I found myself in a similar position as today - about to deliver parting words to a graduating high school class. And the same problem that plagued me then, plagued me on this graduation occasion: what should I wear?

I know, the question sounds trivial (and it is clearly laughable), but those of you who know me know that speaking is rarely an issue—but dressing nicely?

Shortly after learning I would be speaking today, I decided I would wear a green dress. Green for GDS, of course; dress for its one-piece simplicity and therefore my inability to ruin it prior to or during graduation. Plus, I figured that by wearing a dress I could avoid some of the embarrassing questions I deal with in school such as: when a tour comes to my class, a visiting parent is likely to say, "This is a very interesting class - where is the teacher?" or as students in the first two weeks of school, even students in my own advisory group, are likely to ask me, "Hey freshman, which school are you from?"

Fortunately, as English teachers are wont to do, I decided to take my seemingly insignificant fashion dilemma and inflate it to quest-like proportions and then offer an analysis of the situation that verged on comical, but still, deep within, held some metaphorical value.

I pondered my wardrobe considerations and the graduation address and how I could tie them into an epic structure.

The speech has an invocation, or greeting, and then it charts, briefly of course, a path to enlightenment—the pieces of an epic—at least the pieces I deemed epic-worthy—were all

there.

So, let me tell you about my pursuit of this green dress. I was in a store and I had gathered a small band of green hopefuls. As I stepped into the fitting room, an aged woman approached me.

"Dear, how does this shirt fit? It's not too loose, is it?" she asked.

"No, it looks very nice," I replied.

"That's good," she said, "I have a hard time seeing."

A thought—a very English-teacher-like thought—raced through my head: here I was in Filene's Basement—a veritable Hades, if you will. Was she my Teiresais, my blind prophet, come to tell me not only how to dress but also what knowledge to pass on to the graduates?

"You know," she went on, "it is important to look sharp because as in life..."

Yes! I anxiously awaited her words. And frankly, I'm glad that she couldn't see well, because had she seen my eager look she probably would have been a bit concerned...

"Because as in life," she continued, "...oh my, could I wear this shirt with brown pants?"

"What!, huh, no, ma'am. That shirt would not go with brown pants..."

I suspect that your intellectual and social journeys through high school have not been much different: moments arise when it seems like all answers are about to be had and then, whoosh, the moments pass and you're left feeling unchanged and possibly even short-changed.

Like those times when it seems as though a teacher is about to impart some grand piece of knowledge and instead it turns out to be a—paper assignment. Or when a friend seems poised to ask the perfect question and instead it turns out she just wanted to borrow your ipod. Or when a graduation speaker seems to offer wisdom and instead she tells a story about a green dress.

Confronting the times of personal and communal tension—when what we want somehow doesn't overtly correspond with what we receive—is a test we will always face. Instead of seeing

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these discrepancies as moments of frustration, though, we should see them as moments of amusement.

It appears as if life is a series of inequalities that we struggle desperately to make add up evenly. Yet, while balancing works well in within a controlled environment, it does not always work well in life. A checkbook, for example, would balance perfectly if it wasn't for those once in a lifetime U2 tickets that appeared on eBay for four times their face value.

Of course, you've learned this year that some imbalances - eh, chemical imbalances, shall we say—aren't in our best interests.

Nonetheless, overcoming a struggle, or climbing a ladder makes for a much more interesting journey to the top than merely ascending a sloped plane.

Returning for a moment to my Odyssey for a green dress, I'll remind you that I'm somewhere in Hades, feeling let down that my blind prophet was unfulfilling. But, like Odysseus, I know there is someone else in the underworld who can help me, if only by checking on my personal well-being: mom.

My mom endured three green-dress shopping adventures with me. My dad, like Odysseus' dad, decided to stay home - he too must have known of how dangerous it is to shop with competing generations. My mom and I squabbled over dresses yet, just as great Odysseus wanted to see and hug his mom in the underworld, so too did I want to consult with my mom in the bottom floor of Hecht's.

As much as we trust ourselves, our personal faith is always renewed with the approval and the affection of others. Personal opinion can only get you so far—it's knowing that your thoughts will have an impact on something greater than yourself, or on someone who cares about you, that heartens us.

And seeing the effect of individual decisions on broader populations is a lot of what school is about. We study the details of a variety of subjects and then we explode these nuances and try to fit them into the (so-called) bigger picture. The more we learn, though, the more likely our discontents are to grow. Why, we wonder, if a better method exists, don't we use it?

The worth GDS affords each individual makes this question of what is "better" or even what is "best" a difficult one. The personal attention and concern that make GDS GDS is also what makes it a challenging learning environment.

Most of what we've hoped to teach you, though, is the reality of differences, be they good or bad. We've tried to show you how to approach moments of discontent and, hopefully, how to advocate the best practices for the greatest number. We've constantly asked you to take the personality of your knowledge and apply it to a community. In other words, we've asked you, how will you live with what you've learned?

I'll offer a confession of my own discontent as an answer - before last year, I dreaded teaching English Eleven, no offense Louise. Or Kevin. Or Peter. Or my then English Eleven students.

In any case, something about the supposed tidiness of the course offended me: How could we box American Literature into a series of rhetorical moves?

So I did what any professional teacher would do: I brought my grievances to class. Most impressively, you alleviated them; sometimes with humor, but most often with purpose - a drive to find something greater behind the structure with which we were dealing.

And it's your class's sense of purpose—sometimes business-like, sometimes heartbreaking—that makes you wonderful and memorable. It's your willingness to confront the avoidable issues—the issues of diversity, of privilege, and of social and academic standards—and to push your communit—and yourselves—if not towards consensus, at least towards new paths.

Yes, purpose doesn't get you everywhere, but it keeps it you moving. Besides, without a sense of purpose, how could you all have possibly banded together and littered the lounge with balloons and, truly my personal favorite, how could you all have taken every desk out of the school and emblazoned your class year across the field.

Life offers great value in both moments of serious debate and moments of a less serious nature. See both sides and you'll know your work is true.

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There will be difficult times, though; times when the negative sides of imperfection seem to rule.

My freshman year roommate and I, although academically similar, were very different people. We inhabited a room about the size of one and half cubes (or say a box about eight feet by fifteen feet). She had an enormous quantity of hair products. I won't say that these products annoyed me, but these products annoyed me. We rarely shared a word let alone a laugh. Could we ever become good roommates?

About two weeks into school, we realized that sharing a small confine in silence was not ideal (we were a little slower on the up-take than the cubonauts). So, we started to do little things for each other—set a CD to a favorite song or take the trash out before it overflowed onto the floor. We laughed about how unlike we were—she a biology major who studied every night, me an English major who played ping-pong every night.

Sometime near the end of the year, I mustered the courage to ask her about the hair products that had transformed the top of our only dresser into a small city of bottles and tubes. Surprisingly, she didn't know why she had ninety percent of the products. She suggested that we celebrate the revelation with a purge of the dreaded products. We really weren't that different after all...

The discrepancies in life rarely reveal an insurmountable gulf. Keep in mind: myriad personalities await you. Your definition of success amongst these personalities may vary drastically, at least upon first glance. I can't help but think, though, that the moral compass GDS has tried to instill in you will most likely point you in the right direction.

School is something you complete. Your education is something you experience - in the lounge, in the black box, in the library while eating and drinking, in the classroom, and in life beyond GDS. Sometimes in the hustle and bustle of GDS, you all miss your own greatness and you pass it on to us—well, today, at least, we pass it back to you all.

Still, not every change in life is going to be smooth or even worthwhile. Anticlimaxes are a part of life - consider the popularity of Viagra - but hey, these moments too will pass...

You are leaving on the verge of great physical change to the building. Hopefully, this change will be metaphorical—like my dress—and have entertainment value—like my dress—possibly social

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value, but the change will remain primarily a superficial one—a marker of a new turn in the quest rather than the end of the quest.

Nonetheless, when you return to GDS, some of the idiosyncrasies of your old school that you knew so well may be gone. You may feel like Odysseus does when he returns home to Ithaka after twenty years away: confused and even a bit scared. "Can I still call this place home?" Odysseus wonders.

As a petulant Odysseus pouts over his changed land, Athena reminds him that he can easily make Ithaka home again provided he takes heart, takes action, and, to quote the wise Athena, provided Odysseus no longer acts like a "great booby."

So he reunites with those he loves, rekindles his attachments to the place he knows is part of him; a place that is his home. His epic is complete and "his heart is glad."

Change is not in what you wear or where you are because you're always going to have to change—your outfits, your environment, your goals. Instead, though, change is in how you wear it—and I know you'll wear it well.

Thank you and congratulations. We honor you.