



High School Graduation

June 5, 2005

Speech by Geert van der Kolk, Parent Speaker

I feel truly honored to be able to speak to you, but I do it reluctantly. It's not that I am not happy and proud today. My daughter, and you all, are graduating from a selective and demanding high school. That is a true achievement, which no one will ever question. You have it in your pocket.

Graduating from high school and leaving home is a major landmark in life, of the same order as birth, marriage, and becoming a parent. It is one of the few changes that are, and will probably always be, clearly marked, and fairly sudden. One day you live with your parents, or try to, and the next day you are on your own. This is dramatic, sometimes difficult, but most of all, very, very exciting.

This excitement is contagious, and today I feel exuberant enough to do a silly dance on stage. Instead, I have to speak.

I first visited GDS long before I had school-age children. I came to Washington as a freelance foreign correspondent. The Amsterdam newspaper I wrote for was not very big or prosperous, so I had a peculiar arrangement with them. The contract stipulated that I should only write offbeat and unusual stories. Everyday political news reached Amsterdam from the editorial offices of the New York Times and the Associated Press, through what was then called the wire. I was not supposed to go to White House press conferences or State Department and Pentagon briefings. Instead, my task was to write American stories that American journalists overlooked or ignored.

This required some thought, but I eventually came up with a plan: I imagined that I was an anthropologist from another planet. I had come to America to study the life and the customs of its inhabitants.

As I was actually trained as a historian, not an anthropologist, I first went to the library and found a book called Field Projects in Anthropology. It is a workbook for college freshmen about basic

techniques. It talks about mapmaking, photography, participant observation, and something called Collecting life histories. The anthropologist befriends an old hunter or medicine man and writes down his life story. I gave it a twist. After all, I was not really doing academic research, but writing offbeat stories for a newspaper. I thought: why not do it upside down? Find some young people, and ask them to imagine their life stories. I hoped that would give an interesting perspective on this strange country.

Since we didn't have children at the time and knew very few people in the city, I consulted the reporter's best friend: the Yellow Pages. I called at least a dozen schools. All were very polite and uncooperative. Asking students to write imagined autobiographies did not fit in the curriculum. I had almost given up the idea until, going down the list in the phone book, I reached GDS. I talked to Bob Broad, who at the time taught English in the lower-middle school. Bob listened to me, and said: Hm. Sounds like fun. Why don't you come to class tomorrow?

A pretty good article came out of it. I remember one girl's story who was going to be an astronaut, travel in a spaceship and discover a new planet with incredible plant and animal life. There she met, married and lived happily ever after with the prince of the galaxy. These kids were in sixth or seventh grade.

Another girl became a scientist and, with -- and this she stressed -- an international team of fellow scientists, discovered a cure for disease and death. Naturally, she was very happy and proud, but she was unable to finish her autobiography. She couldn't figure out what to do in all those countless extra years. Her dilemma greatly appealed to the novelist in me.

I had never before met Bob, the teacher who invited me to his class. I got GDS out of the Yellow Pages.

I didn't think about GDS for a while, until Jana and her brother were in public middle school in Bethesda. One day my wife Olina and I decided to quit our regular work for a year, rent the house, take the children out of school, and sail to the Bahamas. For the children we put together a homeschool program using self-study guides, library resources, and our imagination.

A few days before we left Kevin Barr and his wife, Mary, dropped in, with a bottle of wine, to wish us fair winds and a happy voyage. They were friends from the neighborhood. Their

children attended the same primary school. Mary, who is a sailor herself, did not think we would ever come back. She thought that we would sail on, through the Caribbean and the Panama Canal, and to the South Pacific.

Kevin was more practical. He said: So, what are you going to do for high school? We admitted that we had not given the matter a thought. We had asked Montgomery County for help with our home, or boat school. They were very polite, and uncooperative. If you are outside the county, they said, you no longer exist. Kevin believed in our continued existence. Consider GDS, he said. We didn't think we could apply to an academic prep school while living on a sailboat in the Bahamas. Kevin said: Well, do it anyway. GDS is different.

So we applied. I remember we were in Florida waiting for favorable weather to cross the Gulf Stream, and going to a small school in Vero Beach that offered a standardized admissions test. I believe it was called the SSAT. I didn't have to do the test, so I waited in the student lounge, which was outdoors. One part had a roof, but there were no walls or windows. A big palm tree grew between the vending machines. Everybody was walking around in shorts and flip-flops, in mid December.

We arrived in the Bahamas just before New Year's, sailed south, and frankly didn't think much about tests or high school or formal education anymore. The children did their home school assignments in the morning. It took them on average two and a half hours. The rest of the day they spent sailing, snorkeling, spear fishing and hanging out on the beach with other boat kids. We once had an assembly in the cabin to discuss issues (this is what you do at assemblies), and the only thing the children brought up was scheduling. They did not want less math, or English, or history. They wanted to decide for themselves when to do what.

They also wanted privacy. Our boat is only thirty foot long. Often, when we were at anchor, Jana would take the inflatable dinghy, tie it to the stern with a very long line, push off, and be adrift in her own world.

When we came back, our son started high school at GDS and Jana followed soon after.

So here I stand, very happy and proud, but speaking reluctantly.

Dutch and English are closely related, but there are differences, mainly in the use of

prepositions. In Dutch you don't talk to a person, but against him or her. Maybe the English equivalent would be that you talk onto, or in the general direction of a person. This is what I sometimes feel I have done: I have talked to my children for eighteen years, and I have said enough.

I am sure that to some extent this feeling is mutual.

I remember very well how I felt when I was eighteen: I thought it was high time for my father to keep quiet. My father was not a brilliant communicator. In his view parenting consisted of repeating a few standard guidelines:

If you make a deal, you stick to it.

If you go out together, you come back together.

A Van der Kolk always enters through the front door.

When things became more difficult and personal, he switched to Latin. He was not a classical scholar. He was a forestry engineer and a company manager. But he had a Latin phrase to cover every emergency:

When I or one of my siblings suffered a humiliating athletic defeat, he would say: *Ut desint vires, tamen est laudanda voluntas* -- although your strength maybe insufficient, your will is praiseworthy.

When drugs or alcohol came up, as they did, he said: *Mens sanis in corpore sano* -- you can only have a healthy mind in a healthy body.

He also had some general-purpose slogans for when I or my brothers or sister had a rough time: *Palma sub pondere crescit* -- the palm tree grows under pressure. And: *Per aspera ad astra* -- through trouble you reach to the stars.

At the time those phrases seemed pompous, silly and inadequate to me, and they still do. They are cliches, and cliches are the biggest enemy of a writer. They do not make me angry anymore. I now think of them fondly, because they are part of the memory of someone I loved.

I also realize that while talking to my own children, I have been repeating some of my father's

phrases. It is true that when you go out together, you should come home together It is true that a van der Kolk, or anybody with pride and self respect, should always enter through the front door.

I even added a few phrases of my own: I often, and out loud, quoted Thoreau, who called for Simplicity! Simplicity! Simplicity!

And I do believe that is a virtue. I also believe that being confused can be a virtue, because there is a strong connection between confusion and creativity. Hence my favorite quote from Walt Whitman: Do I contradict myself? Very well, so I contradict myself.

And from Edmund Burke: A clear idea is but another name for a little idea.

I realize that to my children these quotes must at times have sounded just as silly and annoying as my father's Latin exhortations did to me. They are the words of a parent speaking onto a child.

I am very glad that some of the other speakers have covered current events, politics, and changes in the world. I am a novelist, not focused on change, but on things that remain the same. I am not, like a journalist, interested in the house that burned down, but in the house next door that did not. And in the family who lives there.

The experience of family is not a current event, but a human fundamental. Writers have talked about it for three thousand years, and they will not stop, because parents will continue to speak onto their children, one generation will follow another, and there will always be a graduating class that leaves home.

Today it is your turn. I wish you good luck. You will need it. The world is, mostly, an unpredictable, unreasonable and unjust place. But it is also very beautiful, and inhabited by fascinating creatures.

I am really tempted to celebrate your graduation with a silly dance on stage, but maybe it's better to read a silly little poem:

This morning I asked my wife,

Who are the most beautiful students alive?

O, use your head.

That's easy, she said.

It's the Class of 2005.

Fair winds and happy voyage to you. This day is also a landmark for me. I will now, as a parent, officially step back.