



High School Graduation

June 8, 2003

Speech by Topher Dunne, Faculty Speaker

Friends and family, staff colleagues, members of the orchestra pit, Tom, Paul, Peter, Ms. Mathews and members of the GDS class of 2003! Good afternoon and Bright Moments!

It is uncertain whether my role as faculty representative calls for advice in a traditional sense or something more anecdotal. To the traditional end (and unfortunately many of you have already heard this), let me simply say: Don't speak with your mouth full! Floss! Beyond that, lots of choices exist for how, why and even where to live your life. Accordingly, I hope you can do something you really want to do and love as well even if along the way you may want to do things you may not enthrall you.

From my perspective as a faculty member, I pose to you this question: what do you bring away with you from your GDS experience? There is identifiable information. Just in History we have taken pains to see that you can differentiate Daoism from Maoism, Stalin from Hitler, Dewey from Truman along with a host of other concepts and bits of information. There is, however, a sense of your experience that no statistic about your accomplishments, quantification of cultural literacy or single anecdote can convey. Suffice it to say, whether you aced your way through, slept your way through, plodded your way through or are here by the "skin of your teeth" that we as a staff commend you through this graduation ceremony for completing a critical mass of learning. We feel you are ready for the next phase of your lives. Do we hope you remember as well? Sure but we are realists.

As memorable experiences go, graduations themselves may not rank highly. My own graduation from high school was rather lackluster, I had to reflect for a while even to remember who came to the Torrington High School gymnasium back in 19-xx to send us off. Therefore, what I say and what happens here today may become "little known nor well remembered." You will, however, get a commemorative piece of paper from this ritual ceremony and periodic reminders from the Development office lest you forget your time here.

Considering your situation as an anthropologist, however, the ritual of graduation places you seniors in what is called a liminal period, that charged state when crossing the boundary from one phase or stage of life to the next. Something is happening to you right now! Whether or not you are sure, or even aware, of that fact. Look around at everyone who came here today (including yourselves) just to mark the simple basic act of handing out diplomas. That part of the ritual is simple, mechanical, and your receipt of that diploma is a "boundary event." (Many of you may already be thinking beyond this to the reception, evening festivities, beach week, summer or anything beyond right now.) Yet the impact of RIGHT NOW on yourselves and those around you is not mistakable. Well-wishers offer gifts and congrats, juniors now stand ready to rise to become seniors so the cycle will continue. Parents may be already lamenting the empty nest or making plans to turn your room into a home office. You may even be packing your bags. Two boundary events from my own life which I have shared with you over these past four years to demonstrate how rituals and events may end but their impact will remain.

In the fall of 2000, when you were much smaller ninth graders, I met my birth mother for the first time. As my wife Kathy and I drove to Central Jersey (and before you ask, it was exit eight for one hundred and ninety five) I could only think "how can I represent what I have done with my life in one meeting to someone I've not seen in thirty-xx years?" It was a great reflective moment. Fortunately that wasn't my only opportunity. The following Mother's Day, for example I got to inform her that Coach Epstein and I saw the GDS softball team defeat a Quaker school on Wisconsin Avenue to win the 2001 softball tournament. That victory also saw me get into my full Javanese costume for the Sports Banquet to honor a promise I made, but more on that issue later.

Another liminal period (which many of you may recall) came during the last review day during your sophomore year. I was paged from my sixth period European History class. The energy I felt was unmistakable, even if it was only from me and not Elizabeth, Peter, D, Tom, Andrew, Davlyn, Morgan, Bobby, Sam, Micah, Jordan, Liz, Alexis, Courtney, Peter and Tameem. Ben Safran's mom, already informed of the impending event, arrived at the Hospital to deliver my daughter Kayla. GDS is everywhere sometimes.

Put those two tales together and I say Family is what you make it! Various relatives in the traditional sense, blood, half-, step-, adoptive, in-law, "fictive kin" (considered by anthropologists as close but without sufficient title) are assembled here in order to wish you well. You are also,

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however, bound to one another from years of common experience, like it or not. This isn't so surprising; GDS was founded as a family-based school, choosing the familiarity of first names and commitment to our internal community as well as the outer community. My rather inclusive view of family in my life brings my birth-mother, crazy Slovak grandfather, John the Revelator and a host of other characters permeate explanations and discussions with my GDS family. We as a faculty join you as another familial body in various ways beyond basic classroom teaching and that's something I love about this job. You may see in loco parentis as just a Latin phrase by which the school can enforce rules, but we may take it a bit more seriously as a staff.

Honor/Stand by your commitments! Choices abound, from what you eat, wear, download, protest, support, like, abhor. Some of these choices may have seemed limited over your lives thus far, by courses you had to take, couldn't manage to take, homework you had to do, or outfits you felt bound to wear to the Sports Banquet in 2001 [well remembered there?]. These choice sets expanded slightly in your college searches. Like it or not your lives will include many more choices of greater importance as time goes by and need to remember to live with the choices themselves and their consequences. Be careful with making your choices and, perhaps for once, don't be so cynical about how "real" any choice is.

Use your power to choose! Be the change you seek! This was a class and school who saw a profound changes, many still ongoing, in the world around it over the past four years. We evaluated the 2000 presidential election together, were at school together on September Eleventh and its anniversary, went through sniper lockdown together and for the most part stopped attending classes together at least a couple of times to make a social statement this past spring. GDS students seem to have no difficulty expressing opinions, and, if I may generalize, our hope as faculty is to provide ways to defend, understand and express those opinions and go beyond expression into ACTION.

Have we left you with a warped sense of reality by stopping school at various points to discuss any number of issues, perform community service, and allow or excuse social protest during school hours? Probably. GDS is an idiosyncratic school full of idiosyncratic individuals, and I say so from the point of view of a 40's-tie-wearing-Chapman-Stick-playing-djesbenite-wayang-playing-javaphile with interests in the cultural quirks of post-colonial societies and comparative religion. Might these idiosyncrasies have skewed the perspective of the world in your education? Huh, just being in Washington will

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leave you with that, regardless of the political bent of your schooling, so I would like to think that my faculty colleagues and me, along with each of you, all pool our idiosyncrasies to see the world as a complex and wondrous place.

Where does life take you or leave you? You will soon cross this stage and be a different person of sorts, like it or not. Rituals end, but their impact remains! Life goes on and you need to choose and live with those choices. Let family be what you make it! Honor your commitments in your lives! Be free to choose! Change your attitudes, appearance, even change your names (maybe more than once!). And don't forget to let your family back in the GDS crib know what you are up to. Congratulations!