



# High School Graduation

June 9, 2002

Speech by Chris Thompson, Faculty Speaker

Wes, Paul, Sandy, Marc, Moms and Dads, Grandma's and Grandpa's, Brothers and Sisters, Special Friends, Dear Colleagues, and last but not least, the much-loved and soon to be much-missed, Georgetown Day School Class of 2002...

I'm honored to speak here at your graduation. You'll be glad to know that nothing I say here today, nothing at all, is going to be on the test. The test is over. And you have passed.

This is my sixth GDS graduation and I know that it is not customary for the audience to participate in a speech, but I really can't see the very people about whom I am speaking, so I'll need to hear you once in awhile. Class of 2002, are you out there? Let's do a sound check.

Are you the best and brightest class to ever graduate from GDS?

Are these the best moms and dads, Grandmothers and grandfathers, sisters, brothers and friends anyone could ever be so lucky to have?

And are these the best educators and coaches any student could ever ask for?

Good. Now that we've taken attendance, we'll get down to today's lesson.

Two score and twelve days ago, in mid-April, the class of 2002 went forth downtown on a community service trip, to paint the homeless shelter run by the Community for Creative Non-Violence, known as CCNV. I was assigned to a corner of the third floor-the men's floor-with my colleague John Frazier and a few seniors, to paint the walls there a pastel blue, the color of blue traditional parents might choose for a little boy's bedroom. We had to move beds and possessions of the residents to get to the walls, and I couldn't help but notice in my hands the pieces of men's lives, stashed under and around the beds and lockers. At some beds there were things we might normally associate with poverty-trash bags overfilled with wrinkled, out-of-date clothes; worn, dusty shoes; pamphlets about alcoholism and other dependencies,

and the like. But near one of the beds I had to move was a makeshift closet holding some decent suits, white shirts, and ties, and from beneath that bed were polished shoes, with shoe trees in them. This man's belongings included golf paraphernalia and some decent literature...John Steinbeck, as I recall. This stuff looked not all that different from my stuff or maybe some of your stuff. It was for me a strange moment of recognition. This moment of recognition got me to thinking about these men who had fallen somehow, out of home, out of the economy, and how the CCNV had made a decision that this place was where their fall would stop. The CCNV in essence had said below this floor we will not let you fall. I watched our students painting these men's walls little-boy-blue and chatting away about movies and music and college, and somehow William Wordsworth's line "The child is father to the man" came to mind. That line, the Child is Father to the Man, is from Wordsworth's poem "My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold."

Watching our kids painting away, it occurred to me that Wordsworth in a way could have been describing one poignant aspect of how Georgetown Day School, at our best, teaches our students—to be fathers and mothers to the men and women that they are on the way to becoming. Class of 2002, during your years at the high school, we encouraged skeptical questioning, we gave you choice in the curriculum, maybe not enough choice for some of you, but choice, still. We gave you as much autonomy as we could and allowed you leave the campus when you wanted. We gave you room to grow, but to grow yourselves.

You came to the high school as children, really, but you leave, today, as intellectually sovereign young adults. The child can indeed be father to the man or mother to the woman. Indeed, you have been increasingly so these past four years. You didn't have to do all of the work you did, but you did. You didn't have to try out for plays and musicals, but you did. You didn't have to take up a grueling sport for which you were, most of you, unlikely to get scholarships, but you did. Maybe you did some of these things to polish up your college application, but that's actually the kind of foresight and dedication to purpose that is a sign of a child growing himself or herself into an adult.

Wordsworth in his line the child is father to the man was actually referring to the need for the spirit of childhood to persist into adulthood if we are to be happy in this world, that we should feel joy in the sight of a rainbow at twenty five or forty or sixty or eighty years of age, just as we did when we were five or eighty years old. In its heart the school, I think, has at least attempted

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to encourage the life of what Emerson called the piquant and charming nonchalance of youth, even as we were overtly paying a bit more attention to your journey to adulthood. The school at its best understands and tolerates, what I might call "variance in the onset of maturity" in our students, and I know I speak for more than just myself when I say that even as we encouraged you toward controlled, adult behavior, in conversations behind the closed doors of our departments we also celebrated you for the child in each of you, and we took joy in the moments when that spirit erupted. You help keep us young.

Finally, there's a third way that the child can be father to the man at GDS. During that painting trip to the CCNV shelter back in April, I was at one point up on a ladder, painting near the ceiling when one of the seniors, out of the blue, as it were, asked me a question. I won't embarrass him by saying his name, but Cliff asked: "So Chris, for a teacher, is it considered a good thing to be nominated as graduation speaker?"

At the time, about six weeks ago, I wasn't sure, actually. And I said so. I said, "Well, it's a bit odd, because I guess students nominate teachers based on who they see in the classroom, and in the classroom, and, well, you know, I teach, I tell stories, maybe some jokes, and I'm not sure I can be that way for a graduation speech, so I'm kind of afraid I'll be disappointing."

He said "Chris, we didn't nominate you because we thought you'd be funny. We nominated you because we think you can say something meaningful about a very important day in our lives."

Well. I was on the ladder and the students were below me, but the situation felt somehow reversed at that moment. I felt corrected, as I have in some of the best moments I've spent with the Class of 2002 over the past four years. Exchanges like that one, in which students and teachers, on a first-name basis, ask serious and forthright questions, and expect and get serious and forthright answers, allow moments in which the child can indeed be father to the man, offering insight or even advice, thinking and learning, side-by-side and not, despite the ladder, one above the other.

Moms and Dads, Grandma's and Grandpa's Brothers and Sisters, Special Friends, and Colleagues...One day not that long from now, we all will have entrusted the world, our world, to these children. We have allowed them to be children even as we have encouraged them to grow into purposeful and principled young adults. We have built for them staircases, which they

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had to climb. We might have built these staircases, but the work of lifting themselves to the top was their own. Today, as the class of 2002 ascends these stairs to this stage to a height from which there is no descent, a height commemorated with documentary evidence of accomplishment, let us honor them for who they have been, who they are, and who they will be in the years to come. The children they were have indeed been fathers and mothers to the young men and women they are today.

Class of 2002. You are loved, you will be missed, you will always be our own. Class of 2002, you are, as of this day, and will be forever more, graduates of Georgetown Day High School. Go in peace. God speed, and God bless!

Thank you.