



High School Graduation

June 9, 2002

Speech by Philip Ungar, Class of 2002

"We sing of Georgetown Day School, where each of us is free,

To be different from each other, and celebrate our rich diversity"

So begins the hallowed anthem of the green and white, as passed along to us by Jackie Marlin in Middle School. Today, the Class of 2002 has gathered to celebrate an abrupt end to that freedom. Four years of hard work, stress, dedication, and parental expenditures manifest themselves in a framed piece of paper with our names printed on it. What does this "diploma" represent? On the one hand, it embodies the academic struggles and triumphs of its recipient. For some, this can be flaunted as a trophy for receiving good grades at a competitive private school. Competitive school in this context means an exclusive learning environment for the offspring of well-intentioned baby boomers. For others, who were less academically inclined than their colleagues, the diploma serves as a badge of survival. Many thought high school would be a four-year party back in the carefree days of the FREP, but the emotionally traumatizing nights before the Senior Paper was due culminated an entirely different experience.

But this sacred parchment, bedecked with fancy typeface, Latin slogans, and grandiose signatures, is not merely a testament to the student's ventures in academia, no sir. This is the last chapter of our childhood. We must bid farewell to the awkwardness and monotony of our teenage years. The new friends we meet in college—in my case the throng of devoted followers—did not bear witness to our own particular fragile years characterized by acne and orthodontia. They have their own bittersweet past to overcome, but we will all meet each other on a level playing field. The flaws and hardships of youth give it substance and therefore make it more memorable. As the Venetian romantic Casa Nova remarked after his death-defying prison escape: "Without intense experiences it is impossible for a man to properly reflect on his life." The same holds true with adolescence. Sure, we all wish we could spend our carefree days fishing barefoot at the abandoned quarry, but without authority figures to defy and rules to break

there would be nothing to look back on, the time would be wasted, frittered away in a daze like an eighth period class on Friday.

But what of the institution where all these childhood memories have their root? Many of us I know, are happy to be leaving-of course some of us still go back to the weight room every day. But GDS seems to be getting a bad rap, not with the public, but from within the school itself. For all the whining that is done, one must take a careful look at the contents of these complaints: too much homework, no partitions in the bathroom, too short a lunch break, a paucity of parking spaces, and no football team. And the most puzzling question of all: if the school was 5 million dollars in debt, why did it buy those foam gladiator sticks for the PE Department?

If these are the primary grievances students have against the school, it suddenly doesn't seem so bad. And who among you can say he or she would prefer the coat-and-tie approach at the Cathedral schools, or the overall lameness of Sidwell Friends, to the open-campus-sandal-and-tie-dye-wearing attitude that we have all come to take for granted? And can any of those schools say they were the first integrated educational institution in the Nation's capital?

When I woke up this morning, I wasn't exactly sure what I wanted to say in my speech. How could I characterize the graduating class, what one word could I use to describe this remarkable cohort? The clock kept ticking and I kept thinking in vain. It was getting close to graduation, almost time for my Dad to tie my tie. But it occurred to me, there is no one word that can define this grade, and that is the beauty. We are blessed, more so than any other class in recent memory, with a wealth of talent and a diversity of personalities. Musicians, skeptics, athletes, communists, artists of the highest caliber, nihilists, poets, dreamers and apathetics. It is this great variety that has prevented our grade from becoming bitter and stale.

Before me I see future CEOs, Senators, cynical film critics, environmental activists, and used car salesmen. We must all define success individually, and strive to achieve it. If we find that all our goals cannot be accomplished, then we can take a page from our parents and live vicariously through our children. Perhaps the grades below us will continue some of our traditions: the clandestine senior sleepover, the endless hours spent painting masquerading as community servants, and the election of the grade's two best-looking students to deliver graduation speeches. But it is the individuals who will be remembered, for better or for worse.

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When I am an old man with arrogant, pretentious intellectual children of my own, I will see my classmates in their faces. In closing I would like to thank the parents, teachers, and administrators who contributed-whether positively or negatively-to the journey that has been the last four years. To my classmates, we all made it, and that's good enough. The Grateful Dead sang it best, and their words seem appropriate now: "What a long, strange trip it's been." Thank you.