



High School Graduation

August 2, 2020

Speech by jon sharp, GDS Faculty

Greetings, graduating class of 2020, friends, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, and the rest of us. We come together today to celebrate the astonishing achievements of this class of students before us. I greet you today from the woods of Alabama, which has two implications. First, you're going to have to forgive any technical difficulties that may emerge over the course of this speech. The WiFi down here is basically two possums fighting over a Confederate flag. And second, it is imperative that we mark the unprecedented nature of the moment before us. This thing that we are experiencing is unlike anything that has come before us, and hopefully will never be repeated during our lifetimes.

I am humbled that you have chosen in this moment to ask me to speak. And I'm struck by a sense of privilege as well as disaster. It is a privilege beyond words to be able to speak to this astonishing group of young people, but it is an unmitigated disaster because you deserve the world. And instead, as your graduation gift, we have given you a dumpster fire.

Now, it can be lost on no one that part of the reason why I was chosen to speak in this moment is that many of you hoped I would take the opportunity to burn it down. Unfortunately, that is not something that I can do in this time or in this place. Fortunately, you have chosen Gigi and Margaux to speak with your voice in this celebration, and I will leave it to their capable and incendiary hands to reduce everything around us to ashes. Arundhati Roy said, "Another world is possible. In a quiet moment, I can hear her breathing." It is my fondest wish that we could be together in this moment so that we could all collectively hear Gigi and Margaux breathe fire on this world and transform us.

If you've been in one of my classes, you know that at the end of the day, all that I ask of you is that you be real with me. Since you have humbled me with this grand opportunity, I will offer you the mutual respect of being real with you, for if this is a story of privilege and of disaster, it is also a story of resilience and responsibility, your resilience and our responsibility. Conceived in the aftermath of 9-11, your generation was born into a crucible. You were thrown into a war that is not a war and lived out your entire lives, only to graduate into yet another. I came before you

three years ago to say that the second American Civil War was already underway. I take no pleasure in returning three years later to point out the way that it is metastasizing in front of our very eyes.

In the time that elapses between when I record the speech and when you view it, thousands of people in this country will die. That is a tragedy, but it can also not obscure the fact that leading up to this speech and throughout the history of this country, thousands upon thousands have died from the chronic pandemic that is anti-Black racism. Black Lives Matter. I say this not because it is the slogan of the moment, nor because I am ensorcelled by the spectacle of Black death and suffering that surrounds us in our current environment. I say this instead because there is never a moment in which it is inappropriate. I say this instead because there has never been a moment in all of our history, in which it has been possible to take the statement Black Lives Matter for granted. Sit with that for just a moment.

You thought you were going to get jokes. I don't blame you. Part of the other reason that I was chosen to speak in this moment is because people think that I bring the funny. However, if you were expecting amusing anecdotes about sourdough or an extended pitch for my OnlyFans, you were mistaken. I say not merely no in this moment to those things, but hell to the no. There's only the truth now. And the truth is that we're living through a thing that your grandkids will tell their grandkids about.

When we study the genuinely transformative moments in human history, we are frequently called upon to imagine, what would we do in those moments? What would you do if you were on the front line? What would you do if they showed up at your door? When you ask yourself that question now, you are asking: What will I do today? What will I do tomorrow? We are living through one of those times, and it is tragic. But at the same time, it offers us a possibility. Arundhati Roy said another world is possible, but I offer you this instead. Another end of the world is possible. The world that comes, the world that is to come, will be the world of your making.

That is a terrible responsibility. That is an incredibly inappropriate thing for us to have handed you. You should be celebrating carelessly. You should be moving on to the next stage of your lives without concern for the world around you. This is one of the few moments when you should celebrate yourselves exclusively and only. However, you have been tasked by history. You have

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been tasked by the failure of those who came before you. And I look at this and I know that you will triumph. There is no task that is too large for the group of students that I know as the graduating class of GDS in the year 2020.

I can give you an example of why this is true. Now, I'm going to butcher the science on this, because I'm a history teacher and not a science teacher, but one of the things that gives me respite in this moment, one of the things that I take pleasure in, not simply as a palliative, but as a goad to move us forward, is that the connections that we have formed at GDS will never, ever be broken. Quantum theory tells us that when two particles have become entangled, that that entanglement remains. Regardless of how much time passes, regardless of how much space intervene, it is never possible to genuinely and definitively separate those particles again.

We're all particles in this, my friends. And while we have failed you on many fronts, we have also trained you well. I have the benefit of working with some of the finest colleagues in the world. And I have the benefit of working with some of the finest students in the world.

The reason that I cannot destroy this world for you, the reason that I will not burn it down, is because this is the world that has produced you. That world cannot be all bad. However, it is no longer exclusively our world. This is your world. This is the world that you will inhabit. This is the world that you will make. Is it brutally unfair for us to place a burden like this in your laps at precisely the moment that you should be celebrating? Yes, undoubtedly, and we will live the rest of our lives in light of the failures that we have brought to your doorsteps. However, you will triumph. If I've ever been certain of anything in my life, I am certain of that.

I'm grateful for the opportunities that you have given me, not just to speak in this moment, but to get to know you, to get to think alongside you. It has been one of the great privileges of my life. Thank you.