



High School Graduation

June 13, 2021

Speech by Bobby Asher, GDS Faculty

UNMUTE MYSELF? This whole Zoom thing is new to me.

Before I begin I gotta say I'm a little nervous. I mean it's nerve wracking enough to be live in front of 400+ graduates and parents (some of whom have invested extraordinary amounts of time, energy, and, shall we say "other resources" to support their beloved children), but to know that there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, and given my TikTok celebrity status, maybe even millions of live streamers at home and around the globe, well it's a lot of pressure. So a quick thanks to two of my seniors (Addie and Alex) who presented TED Talks this spring on the neuroscience of choking. Hopefully with their guidance, I'll be up to the task. And another quick thank you to a fellow senior and her parents—Thank you to Charlotte and the Khuzamis for allowing me to shoot baskets in their driveway during the early months of the pandemic. I actually snuck a picture of Charlotte's dad clearing puddles for me with a leaf blower after an afternoon shower.

Ok, so here we go...

"Look up and Look Out." It is something my wife Trish has said on countless occasions to our three daughters. In fact, it's really more of a family mantra: "Look up and look out."

That's how I want to begin my talk today. And while my wife means it on a more metaphorical level, reminding our girls that there's a whole world out there, and that it's about being aware of and appreciating others, rather than focusing on ourselves, I think it has special meaning today.

So I thought I'd begin by asking you to do that—literally—right now. Look up and look out. During this most special of occasions, take the time to see who's around you. For those at home, maybe scroll through the Zoom audience and take notice of the people who are sharing your virtual space. We are here today not just as individuals, but as a community, connected. As diverse as we are phenotypically and culturally, we are bound not only by our geography but also by our shared values and by our common beliefs. And, after 14+ months of physical and

social distancing, today we are together—not alone in a room, trying to muffle our voices so that our siblings or parents can attend virtual classes or meetings.

After all they've been through—and all we've been through—the class of 2021 has made it. And, it has not been easy. No graduating class has shown more resilience, more resolve or more courage. And much as I hate to do it, I can already feel the eye rolls, your efforts and accomplishments have been, dare I say “unprecedented.”

For those of you my age and older—which is becoming an increasingly smaller crowd—you might not know that it has become commonplace for people to take a minute before class or before a meeting to pause for a moment of mindfulness, to ensure that we, as individuals, are present.

And while I think those moments are great—I really do—I am hoping that we remember that it's equally important, maybe even more important, to set aside even more time to connect with others—to catch up face-to-face, to share experiences, and to swap stories, or maybe even a joke.

What did one cicada say to the other? Last time we saw the Class of 2021, they were “knee-high to a grasshopper!”

Oh, wait, that wasn't actually a joke—it wasn't even funny. So I'll give it another shot—

What do you call an insect that jumps over a mirror? A glass hopper!

At this point, many of you at home are probably hitting “stop video” and heading to the fridge for a snack or cuing another episode of *The Office*, *Grey's Anatomy*, or *Ozark*. Thankfully, at rehearsal, I heard Katie remind the seniors NOT to bring their cell phones with them, so I hope at least some of them are still listening.

While I am guessing in certain ways this graduation morning has been similar to many that have come before it—families rushing to get ready, barking instructions and insults at one another, arguing whether to roll down the windows or turn on the AC, explaining to grandparents and relatives what it is to be “vegan,” “CIS-gendered” or “non-binary” or perhaps even jockeying for a better seat near the stage, wondering why so-and-so got to be on the aisle, getting here today

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feels different.

You seniors have faced dual pandemics—a terrifying novel virus that has ravaged the globe and a barrage of violence against black and brown people that has helped fuel a long-overdue racial reckoning in a country with a long history of interpersonal and institutional racism. These uniquely challenging circumstances have left you at times as anxious as you were angry, as upset as you were outraged, and as determined as you were distraught. And, yet, you've continued to show up—not just to class, but to life.

My good friend Rob, who does a fair amount of hiring, begins every job interview by asking a simple question: “What's your story?” What he wants to learn about a candidate is not what's on their resume or in their cover letter, but what makes them who they are, what has shaped them, what influences how they show up. It's not in the way that my father used to say half-annoyed “what's your story?” As in “Why are you late?” or “Are you planning to return the car at any point?” but rather which experiences or aspects of your identity have impacted who you are in the deepest, most profound ways.

With that as a backdrop, I want to ask you to think for a moment about what your story is as I share with you a couple of stories about two figures who've influenced me and my life. And to make the process a bit more interactive, especially considering how passive and isolating some of the past year has felt, I am going to ask the seniors, if you are actually still listening, that you try to form images of the people I describe in your head as I talk. My guess and my hope is that those images will shift as I share particular details—and that you will see how much peoples' stories matter.

First is a story about one of my heroes, a person whose story, whose example, has very much inspired how I try to show up every day. Born outside the country, this man came to the US during a very different time. A gifted student and athlete, he attended a renowned New England prep school and after that went on to an elite American college that has produced some of the most influential figures in our history. Not as famous as some of his fellow alums, he has dedicated his life to education—both his own and, more importantly, that of his students—including (even if he doesn't know it) me. As much as I admire both his intellect and his wicked sense of humor, he has taught me more about seeing the humanity in others, about taking the time to learn their stories, about seeing folks for who they are and what they bring

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rather than who they're not or what they lack. I wish I'd known him when he was younger herding goats and eating mangoes as a boy in Jamaica, and or when he arrived at Logan International as a teenager in his paper-thin Members Only jacket, I sure am glad I got to call Chris Levy both colleague and a friend. And I love that I get to see his entire family every day now that his wife, a kindergarten teacher at GDS, and his kids spend their days right across the street.

I'd like to tell you about another person who's impacted my life, but, unlike Chris who shares my love for sports and science, she's someone with whom I have less in common—she doesn't even like dogs. Like Chris, she also attended elite private schools, but hers were here in the DMV. Raised with her sister by a single mom in a small apartment in the suburbs, she attended both middle and high school on financial aid. And though she loved her schools and her friends, she felt disconnected at times from some of the more affluent students whose families could pay all the bills on time and who didn't necessarily have peanut butter and jelly or mac n' cheese for dinner. After her graduation, she went off to college again on financial aid, earned her bachelor's degree and, after that, she worked full time while earning her master's. Not long after, she returned to GDS, where she opened my and, more importantly, each of my daughters' eyes to the world of education and advocacy around consent and sexual assault, as she mentored each of them in their various roles in GDS's Policy Institute. Amy Killy, like Katherine Dunbar and Andy Lipps, and Belinda and Nadia and Lisa and John, and Pam and both Bills and countless other adults in the GDS community, changed my daughters' lives.

I could tell you about many others at GDS who've impacted my life (and in the cases of Sue and Richard who pretty much saved it during my first year teaching). I could talk about service-learning trips to East Africa with C.A. and dozens of GDS kids over the years, or with Eduardo and Moris in Puerto Rico or how Carlos Soriano, also from maintenance, drove my father to the hospital when he and his family were staying with my parents in Delaware.

So why the stories...

Our stories connect us. They connect us to other people in ways that facts and resumes do not. They help us, as humans, the most social beings on the planet, do what other species cannot. It is our extraordinary capacity for understanding, for empathy that separates us.

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We are not the fastest species or the strongest. In fact, in a one v. one vs. a saber-toothed tiger, my moneys on the tiger. Our greatest attribute as humans is our extraordinary capacity for cooperation. We can share ideas and ideals, visions and values, experiences and expertise. And like no other species, if we choose, we can do it all on a grand scale.

While I'm guessing that some of you have learned about "comparative advantage" in the context of international trade, I'd like to introduce a concept that I thought I coined in preparing for this speech. I decided to call our distinctly human abilities to empathize and strategize collectively not "comparative advantage, but, you guessed it: "cooperative advantage."

Funny thing, though, when I googled "cooperative advantage" to make sure it was an original Bobby Asher concept, it turned out it is not. In fact, according to an article published just last year in MIT's *Sloan Management Review* "cooperative advantage" at least in business is a term that has been around for over a century.

"During a period from 1900 to 1930 called "the golden age of Black business," write Leon Prieto and Simone Phipps, "African American leaders define[d] cooperative advantage as... a people-centered approach to engendering a spirit of care and community, meaningful dialogue, and consensus building, for the benefit of employees, customers, and community."

As disappointed as I was to learn that my idea was not actually original, I was still super excited in that nerdy kind of teacher way. Here was the connection I wanted to make. That, in life, as in business, it's not all about the competition. It's actually about "the cooperation." It's about being and working together in ways big and small. In order to take full advantage of our capacity to connect, as my good friend and fellow educator Marlo Thomas would say, "we need to get proximate."

And you all have, class of 2021—both virtually and in person. You witnessed over and over the killings of not just George Floyd, Philando Castile, and Rashard Brooks (among others). And when I say witnessed, I mean you've had to watch people being murdered, people taking their last breaths on television and on your phones. Like those in Minnesota and Missouri, in Georgia and North Carolina, here in DC and across the country), you've had to experience the excruciating pain of powerlessness. Recent attacks on the AAPI and Jewish communities make

us wonder if any group is immune.

But you've taken to the streets, you've organized and attended protests. You've written articles, lobbied Congress, even founded non-profits. Most importantly, you've shown up—for yourselves and for others.

Part of your GDS education implores you to learn people's stories, to reach out and have real conversations, and sometimes, simply to listen—particularly to those who don't look like you or who might not share your stories.

In closing, I know I am supposed to give advice, but you all don't need it. Instead, all I offer is a few “reminders”:

“Look up and look out!”

“Get proximate.”

Stay curious, ask questions, read books, listen to podcasts, and learn peoples' stories.

Think and rethink about all that you encounter and all that you believe.

Stay connected with your friends, your families, and your communities.

And continue to show up for yourselves and for others, especially those in need.

Congratulations, Class of 2021. You are uniquely poised to make this world a better place. You already have.