



High School Graduation

June 13, 2021

Speech by Russell Shaw, Head of School

Good morning, everyone. Welcome! Welcome to the 50th commencement exercises of Georgetown Day School and to the graduation of the Class of 2021. Graduates—here we are, the big day. You get to claim so many firsts—the first class to have a Senior Walk, the first class to graduate on the field of our unified campus, the first class to graduate wearing masks... And, you're the 50th graduating class in our School's 75th year! You are a noteworthy group.

I want to begin this morning with a story. My son Caleb graduated from GDS last spring, but this is a story from when he was 3 years old. Caleb came home one day from preschool and said, "Mom/Dad, I want to have a playdate with Ethan." We said, great. Caleb is our oldest and this felt very exciting to us. Here we were as parents setting up a playdate! We felt very grown-up. So my wife Shira looked up Ethan's parents on the preschool roster and emailed them. Ethan's mom wrote back enthusiastically—"Thanks, we'd love to!" We told Caleb, you have a playdate with Ethan! He was out of mind excited. When you're three, you have no sense of time. Five days may as well be five years. So every day, Caleb would say, "Is it today?" No, it's not today, we'd explain, it's Saturday. Wednesday. "Is it today?" The promise of this playdate was the promise of great things. We cleaned Caleb's room. We made brownies. Caleb made endless plans for what he and Ethan would do. Finally, Saturday arrived. Caleb was on our porch waiting impatiently and at last, a Volvo station wagon turns into our driveway. Caleb is bouncing up and down, and we have to hold onto him to keep him from running in front of the car. We wave at Ethan's mom, she waves back. She opens the backdoor and unbuckles the car seat. And Ethan climbs down from the car and Caleb takes one look and says, "That's the wrong Ethan!" And Caleb immediately bursts into tears. And Ethan bursts into tears.

So it turns out there were two Ethans in Caleb's class. And we'd scheduled a playdate with the wrong one. And Caleb's three, so he doesn't yet understand social graces. "I don't want that Ethan! Get the other Ethan!" The Ethan who is standing in our driveway, the wrong Ethan, has now grabbed onto his mom's leg. And Shira and I are looking at Ethan's mom, who is looking at us, and we're thinking, I don't think there was anything about how to handle this in any of the

parenting books we read.

The wrong Ethan has become shorthand in our household for when things go sideways. So when I would show up to the wrong campus for a meeting—which doesn't happen anymore, but did happen for my first 10 years at GDS—"that's the wrong Ethan!" A doordash delivery and it's not what I ordered: "That's the wrong Ethan!" I'm on hold with customer service for an hour, only to have them hang up on me. The wrong Ethan.

And graduates, here's the thing. Sometimes life brings us the wrong Ethan. You can count on it. It can be a senior year disrupted by a pandemic. It can be losing a paper that you were nearly finished with and thought you had saved but somehow didn't. It can be a friendship that seems to fall apart and you're not sure why.

Of course, what matters is what we do when the wrong Ethan shows up in our life. In Caleb's case, the two boys rallied, had a playdate, and then Ethan went home. It would be a better story if they became best friends and remain close to this day, but that's not what happened. It was a one-off playdate. And a good story.

And it turns out that the stories that we tell about our experiences are powerful in informing how we make sense of them. It's in the making sense, in the narrating of the story, that we have agency. In your English classes, you learned how to close read and you learned about narrative. Graduates, we get to narrate our own lives. My advice to you is to do this with intention. Where possible, make yourself an actor with agency. Recognize the challenges that you have faced, and then tell the story of how you have navigated them with humanity, with courage, with a sense of humor, with resilience, with purpose.

You'll each tell a story of this pandemic. You'll tell the story to your own children or grandchildren or colleagues—you'll be telling this story for the rest of your lives. What story will you tell? What role will you play in that story?

Events in our lives take place in three stages. First, there's the anticipation of the event. Second, there's the event itself. For example, this is your actual graduation. It's not how you imagined your graduation over the past weeks or years. It's the actual graduation. Right now. And third, there is our memory of an event. And it's in that memory that, believe it or not, we have choice.

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My charge for you today is to take ownership for the stories you tell yourself. These stories matter because they inform how we step into new situations, new challenges, new opportunities. Narrative is a powerful tool. Use it so that it doesn't use you.

Speaking of stories, on Monday at graduation rehearsal, I gave you each a book, *Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro. The book is set in a not-too-distant, slightly dystopian future. It's a world of tribal loyalties and the rise of populist, nationalist politicians. And it's a world that has been disrupted by a terrible pandemic in which a substantial proportion of the population pretend that the pandemic isn't happening. Sounds hard to imagine, doesn't it?

The Klara of the title is what's known as an Artificial Friend, a very sophisticated form of artificial intelligence that develops a close relationship with a sick girl. The book raises themes of loneliness and connection, of love and being a friend. I think you'll like it. Klara is the narrator of the story, and it's striking to have a machine serve as narrator. It begs the question, what does it mean to be human? Ishiguro seems to be making the point that our ability to narrate our experiences is one of the most human things about us.

And so, story tellers, what stories did you tell me about your time at GDS? I asked you each what you'll take with you from GDS. Here are a few of your responses.

Bryce Savoy writes:

I will take the ability and responsibility to shape my environment for the better.

Alyssa West writes:

GDS has taught me to engage with my community as a strong, well-rounded individual and shown me that I don't need to compromise academics in order to participate in multiple clubs and sports. I don't need to sacrifice different parts of my identity in order to be successful.

Avah Rustomjee writes:

I will take with me amazing friendships and experiences that have shaped who I am.

Mack Dixon writes:

I will take the feeling of a large family that will always support me.

Anoushka Chander writes:

Through English and history classes, I have learned how to engage with texts and apply them to the outside world. GDS has given me the tools and opportunities to make change in the real world, and has empowered me to join with other students in raising our voices. GDS has affirmed for us that our voices matter. The friends and community I have gained here will be with me for life.

Ashton Brubaker writes:

I am going to take with me from GDS the marvelous sincere relationships I have developed with faculty and staff. The unique space created for students to engage in conversations with teachers was such a gift to me. Knowing that my voice would be heard was transformative.

Josh Gaba writes:

I will take from GDS a love for learning and the mentality to set my sights high. I leave with the motivation to never stop pursuing my aspirations. I no longer hold reservations about being myself nor about continuing to explore my identity.

Lexi Orenstein writes:

What I will take with me from GDS is my ability to see a problem, act, and create change. Students at GDS are taught to self-advocate, and while this may seem like such a simple skill, it's a challenging one to master. Learning to self-advocate has allowed me to make the most of my academic experience. I have learned not to be afraid of admitting that I don't understand the material we are learning and feel comfortable approaching my teacher and asking for help. I have learned to speak up when something seems wrong, and I have learned to find ways to solve problems. I have learned to engage in healthy debate by speaking up about what I believe.

Marleigh Ausbrooks writes:

I will take my affinity for close knit communities and spaces. My earliest memories at GDS are of my math group that would work together in the hallway. The intimacy of the group made it much easier for me to feel comfortable, and spend time not only being myself but discovering who I am. In that environment, I discovered that I really enjoy math! When I move on into what our parents call “the real world” I will be sure to create caring, connected spaces for myself and others.

And Jessica Ganley writes:

The wave of sound that washes over me as I open the front doors. The bright colored backpacks, coats, lunch boxes, and computer cases scattered across the Forum like paint splatters. The bright sunlight coloring the Forum’s steps. The welcoming image of teachers in t-shirts and jeans. The euphoric energy and the comforting chaos.

The joy of eating hot dogs with my friends on the curb on our first ever First Friday. The hilarity of hearing Russell sing The GDS Christmas Blues for the first time. The amusement of seeing what dollar-store item was going to be raffled off that day. The excitement of looking at all the colorful home-made posters dedicated to social justice at the Club Fair.

Having freedom to hold open discussions in History. Building 3D models of cell membranes from found objects in Science. Stitching together geometric theorems and properties in Math. Hearing Latin, Chinese, and French drifting through the walls in Spanish. Discovering new meaning of texts through close-reading in English.

In the Acting Room during lunch, the ten of us singing in a semicircle around the upright piano that is always slightly out of tune. In the library on Wednesday nights, the shuffling of feet and the boisterous conversations as students pour through the doors to choir rehearsal. In the third floor hallway in February, the students’ whimsical and powerful artwork hanging proudly on the walls.

Seniors, what’s striking to me in these reflections is that you choose to narrate your GDS story as one where you developed skill, empathy, insight, friendships, community and more. I love the

way that you tell your GDS stories.

And I can promise you that even with all of this strength and capacity, the wrong Ethan will still show up on your doorstep from time to time. When he does, know that you have everything you need to respond, to connect, and to narrate your story. And know that your GDS community will be standing with you.

Class of 2021, as you head off to college and beyond, I know that I speak for all of the adults at GDS when I say that we're deeply grateful to have been part of your story. We love you. We believe in you. And we are very, very proud of you.

GDS community, I present to you the Georgetown Day School Class of 2021!

I'd like to take this last opportunity to say, on behalf of the faculty, staff, and administration of Georgetown Day School, a final congratulations to both the graduates and the family and friends who have helped us arrive at this moment.

And now, Class of 2021, I want to invite you to be present. Look at your friends and teachers and parents. Know that hundreds of people from around the country are with us virtually. This community—this extended family—is here for you. We believe in your tremendous capacity, we are proud of you. And to this extended family—our responsibility for these graduates does not end today. These talented young people will need our ongoing support and guidance as they discover the world, make their way in the world, and change the world. Our work isn't done.

My closing tradition is to share a poem by Mary Oliver called "The Summer Day."

The Summer Day

Who made the world?

Who made the swan, and the black bear?

Who made the grasshopper?

This grasshopper, I mean-

*the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?*

Class of 2021, may you encounter joy, growth, and blessing in your one wild and precious life.
You have our confidence, our support, our love, and our profound hope for the road ahead.

And now, graduates, you can move your tassels from the right side of your cap to the left. NOW
you've graduated.

Toss your caps.