



High School Graduation

June 13, 2021

Speech by Katie Gibson, High School Principal

Welcome graduates of the class of 2021, families, faculty, staff, and friends. Thank you so much for being here with us today, both live and in-person and via our live stream.

I will deliberately keep my comments short today to focus on our student speakers, Ella and Jeremy, who will be speaking for the Class of 2021. I want to leave time for you to savor what we are all so excited to witness - watching our seniors walk across the stage in person to receive their diplomas.

This year has been challenging to say the least. As I mentioned in my end-of-year letter home, my memories of the year look, in my mind's eye, like an MC Escher print - straightforward in some ways and in others abstract and filled with tricks and illusions. The very concept of time has become amorphous. The only emotion that I can speak to with certainty in this moment is my profound gratitude for this community and for the myriad ways you have supported and guided one another, the students and families, the faculty, and me, as we sometimes stumbled and other times soared through this year.

For many of us, this year turned our worlds upside down. From the global pandemic to the conclusion of an unusual 2019-20 academic year which continued into the 2020-21 academic year, altering the time-honored traditions of our students, to the violence perpetrated against Black Americans, including the televised murder of George Floyd that served as the catalyst to mobilize against the violence spurred by anti-black racism in this nation, to a highly charged presidential election, and a televised storming of our Capitol. In isolation, any one of these events is a lot. For all of them to have happened in a mere 18 months is hard to fathom. We've all experienced the compounded impact of these events. Yet, it's June, and we are here --- at

graduation. We made it to the end of the school year simultaneously exhausted and called to action.

I will vulnerably admit that there were several moments this year where I struggled to feel hope. There were times when I wasn't sure I could keep it all together. And so, I don't know that I can stand here today and offer the typical graduation speech filled with words of wisdom and guidance. I, like many of you, am still unpacking these last 18 months. But what I am beginning to see and feel again is hope.

So, today, for a few moments, I want to reflect on hope. I want to call upon and name how two other challenging moments in human history - two other pandemics -- ultimately inspired cultural change, art, revolution, and a better future.

1. "The Black Death broke out in Europe in 1347. Subsequently, it killed between one-third and one-half of the total European population of 80 million people. But it killed more than people. By the time the pandemic had burned out by the early 1350s, a distinctly modern world had emerged – one defined by free labor, technological innovation, and a growing middle class. The loss of so much life shook up an ossified society. The new middle class's increasing wealth stimulated patronage of the arts, science, literature, and philosophy. The result was an explosion of cultural and intellectual creativity – what we now call the Renaissance."¹
2. "The Spanish Flu greatly affected the world economy, wiping out large numbers of healthy 18- to 40-year-olds. In many countries which had seen their male population decimated by the war, the pandemic left even fewer young men to run the farms and factories. The resulting labor shortage enabled workers to demand better living and working conditions, public health care, and better wages. These became significant demands of workers in Europe and the United States and in many other countries around the world. The workers' protests led to fundamental changes in the way governments in many parts of the world carried out their social policies. The origin of developmental and welfare states

¹ Andrew Latham, Professor of Political Science. "How 3 Prior Pandemics Triggered Massive Societal Shifts." The Conversation, (2020, October 1).
<https://theconversation.com/how-3-prior-pandemics-triggered-massive-societal-shifts-146467>

lies in the combination of the pandemic and the Great War. The drop in the male labor force empowered female workers and changed the labor force's gender composition. Women now joined the labor force, which strengthened women's agency and bolstered their position in society.”²

We are just now beginning to understand how some of the effects of COVID19, things like telemedicine, remote work, and social distancing, will influence the future. How will this collective experience of the pandemic influence art, culture, education, society?

I read an article by Adam Grant in the New York Times entitled "There's a Name for the Blah You're Feeling: It's Called Languishing," and it's about the lack of connection, motivation, and a general sense of apathy and numbness that so many of us were talking about and feeling.

According to Grant: “It wasn't burnout — we still had energy. It wasn't depression — we didn't feel hopeless per se. We just felt somewhat joyless and aimless. It turns out there's a name for that: languishing. Languishing is a sense of stagnation and emptiness. It feels as if you're muddling through your days, looking at your life through a foggy windshield. And it might be the dominant emotion of 2021.”³

And that feeling - languishing - is what I keep coming back to and why I reference the spurts of growth, innovation, creativity, and societal change that have come out of past pandemics. Yes, many of us have felt this feeling over the last 18 months. But when I look into this crowd of seniors - who have been loved and educated and seen and held by their families and by their teachers and by one another - I start to feel myself come out of that state of languishing. I begin to be present to hope again. Because I feel confident that you will learn from this experience - that you will make human connections a priority again - that you will innovate and create and build - that you will

² Touraj, Atabaki, Senior Researcher. “Spanish Flu: How the world changed in the aftermath of the 1918-1919 Pandemic.” International Institute of Social History. (2020, June 12). <https://iisg.amsterdam/nl/blog/spanish-flu-how-world-changed-aftermath-1918-1919-pandemic-touraj-atabaki>.

³ Adam Grant. “There’s a Name for the Blah You’re Feeling: It’s Called Languishing.” The New York Times, (2021, April 19). <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/19/well/mind/covid-mental-health-languishing.html>

make profound art and great music - that you will redefine what is possible as we emerge from a year that felt impossible at times. And it doesn't all have to be big. Start small.

Instead of texting your friends funny TikToks - pick up the phone and call or meet up for lunch or take a walk together to catch up.

Instead of studying alone next year over screens - find people to sit with, talk to, learn with - be in the presence of other humans and bask in how joyful that is.

Do things that make you happy, and that fill you - bake, sing, run, write, dance. Learn a new hobby or pick up an old one that you'd forgotten you love.

I am going to give myself permission to do all these same things I am suggesting to you. Because finding our center and creating our own joy after the year we've had is something we all need. The first time I was able to hug a friend after we'd both been vaccinated was such a powerful moment I almost cried. Sometimes, we don't know what we want until it's been taken from us. For me personally, I felt that way about human connections. I didn't realize how deeply I needed that till it was taken from me.

What is it for you? What do you want more than anything as we come out of this year? Whatever it is - go get it. You deserve it.

I love you all and wish you all a beautiful summer. I can't wait for you to come back to visit and share all of the amazing things that you manifest next in your lives.

And before I close today, I have to make one other request of you - and that is to thank someone who helped you through this year. Your teachers worked their butts off this year. Thank them. Your friends checked on you - even when they maybe had nothing left in the tank themselves. Thank them. And your families - wow! - they carried their families on their backs and loved you despite their own exhaustion. So, please, please please - thank them.

Have a beautiful and well-deserved summer and then get out there and begin to help our world heal from these last 18 months. There's no one I trust more to do that than you, class of 2021. Thank you.