



High School Graduation

June 12, 2022

Speech by Russell Shaw, Head of School

Good afternoon everyone. Welcome! Welcome to the 51st commencement exercises of Georgetown Day School and to the graduation of the Class of 2022. We are so lucky to be here--to share together in a milestone for these young people.

Graduates: You are a remarkable class. You set a tone for GDS this year, and we as adults could not have asked for a better tone to be set. Your voice, leadership, talent, passion, integrity, and deep commitment to our mission have made us a better school. Thank you.

So, I never thought I would be a teacher. After I graduated from college, I came to Washington for the *first* time to begin a life in politics. After three years working on Capitol Hill, I did what all self-respecting legislative aides do — I enrolled in law school. Right before starting, I got cold feet and decided to defer admission. I spent a year as an outdoor educator, leading backcountry trips for Outward Bound and working at a place called the Genesee Valley Outdoor Learning Center in northern Maryland, where -- and I'm not kidding -- I lived in a horse barn with no electricity or running water and earned \$50/week. Glamorous, right? As prestigious as this work was, I decided I wanted to try teaching in a classroom.

I applied for teaching jobs all over the country, but what I heard again and again was that schools wanted someone with classroom teaching experience -- and I didn't have any. I knew I needed to change my strategy, so I registered with a big placement firm for independent schools and learned that they were having a job fair in San Francisco.

Fortune Favors the Brave, as Matt Damon told us all during this year's Super Bowl. (And look how that worked out). So I would be brave. I bought the cheapest ticket I could find and flew to

San Francisco, where I would sleep on a friend's couch for 2 nights while attending the job fair. I went to California with a dream. I would return to my horse barn, a teacher.

On the first morning of the fair, I was feeling good. I had dry cleaned the one suit I had left from my time on Capitol Hill. I had brought extra copies of my resume, printed on that nice paper that if you held it up to the light you could see the name of the stationary.

At the fair there was one huge room where each of the schools looking for teachers had its own table at which to interview candidates. We, the candidates, waited in a big room next door. In our room there was an inbox for each of us--literally our name written on an envelope--that was considered high tech in 1994. When a school wanted to meet with you, they would put a yellow index card in your envelope, telling you who they were and the time for your interview.

I arrived in the waiting room at 8:30 AM, a half hour early, and checked my envelope to find out my schedule for the day. It was empty. But I was early.

At 9 AM, the candidate room started to fill up and people were heading off to interviews. So I checked my envelope again. Empty. 10 AM. I saw something yellow—but I was looking in the wrong envelope. Mine was still empty. I went to the check-in table to make sure I had been properly registered. I had.

At noon, with still no interviews, I went and got lunch. I knew when I got back, my luck would change. Alas, it had not.

When I left the job fair at 5 PM that day without having been called for a single interview, I was feeling pretty dejected. But I had faith that day two was going to be better.

It turned out that it wasn't. Day two brought another 8 hours of waiting and not a single interview. I couldn't believe it. I'd taken a week off work and flown across the country for nothing. When I got on the plane the next morning to fly back to the East Coast, back to Genesee Valley and the horse barn, I was no closer to my first teaching job than I had been when I flew out of BWI airport three days earlier. I sat down in my window seat on the plane and tried to figure out what I could do. So I opened my bag and took out a pad of paper and a pen... and I wrote this speech. The one I'm giving now. I decided that this failure wasn't going to define me — that it was going to be a risk that I took that didn't pay off, but that eventually I would get a job, I would

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work in a school, and maybe one day I would even get to speak at a graduation. I tried to have faith that if I could see beyond that disastrous job fair, things would get better.

Graduates -- you will fail. You will try something hard and it won't work out. When you encounter those setbacks, your job is to say, "this is what's happening in this moment — this is *not* who I am." When you bomb an assignment in college, or have a big breakup, it's easy to feel defined by that moment, that setback. But in fact, you will be defined by the many moments that your life creates together, and by what you learn along the way.

It can be difficult to have that perspective when things are hard, but I encourage you to try to do so. One thing I hope you're taking away from GDS is resilience and the ability to take a long view.

And, what else will you be taking? Several weeks ago, I wrote to you and asked you these very questions. I received far too many responses to share today and I'm only able to share a brief sampling of what you will be taking with you from GDS. But I want you to know that I read and valued each response I received. Thank you.

So, Class of 2022, what will you be taking with you from GDS?

Avani Ahuja writes, "I will take away a newfound voice that developed through years of offering undeveloped thoughts and questions in discussion-based English and History classes. Although I considered myself a "science kid" when I started at GDS, I developed a love for the humanities that helped me understand that you can never be a successful scientist without extensive experience in empathy and understanding of biases fostered through the humanities."

Eli Faber writes, "I will take away the fact that *anything* is possible if you know how to ask and advocate for yourself. GDS is unique in that rarely will your ideas be shot down, and this is a place where faculty will work to make your dreams and goals come true."

Nora O'Connor writes, "I came to GDS fragile, malleable, and incredibly shy but so excited to learn and finally be challenged academically. I will take from GDS confidence in myself backed by all of the incredible teachers who have supported me. It literally brings me to tears (not exaggerating—cried while writing this) to think about how much all of these people have given

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me. Every little thing, like replying to the silly notes I write on my tests, reaching out to meet with me when they saw I was struggling, or writing kind and thoughtful report card comments showed me that they thought I was worth their time and energy. I get to keep within me all of that kindness, trust, and support and it is the best and most important gift I've ever been given."

Nadia Fairfax writes, "I will be taking pride. Pride in GDS for giving me the platform to speak up about issues that I'm passionate about. Pride because GDS realizes that they're not perfect, and because of this, they are not complacent. Instead of saying, "look what we've done" GDS says "what more can we do?" I have an immense amount of pride in my teachers. Teachers have encouraged me to break out of my shell and have supported me through that breakthrough. I take pride in the class of 2022, because our high school was interrupted by a pandemic, and yet, we still found the resilience to leave a lasting impact. I will be taking the knowledge that challenges aren't always roadblocks or obstacles, but rather necessary steps towards progress. And I will be taking with me the courage and strength to make space for people who did not have space before."

Luke Flyer writes, "GDS is my favorite place to be and at school, I am my favorite version of myself. GDS is not a judgment-free zone, but it is certainly a place where we embrace the weird in everything we do. I want to take from GDS this ability to be unapologetically weird. One of my biggest fears going to college is that I will lose this ability and fall into a rhythm of conformity. I don't mean that being normal is a bad thing, but I don't ever want to suppress any urges to have fun or be myself in an attempt to blend in. GDS taught me how to be loud and when to be quiet. If you ask, you can probably get your way at GDS. If you talk with your teachers, you will probably get much more out of the class. I have also learned how to shut up and listen. There are so many incredible teachers and students at this school who have so much to offer. Sometimes it's best to let them do the talking, sit back, and appreciate what they love to teach."

Isa Rene writes, "GDS has taught me to contribute, to collaborate and to care about issues beyond my initial understanding. And GDS has given me what I've needed to pursue my greatest interests."

Jonah Shesol writes, "At GDS, I've been taught to ask questions, no matter how delicate the subject might be. During my freshman year, when our class discussed institutional racism, I had many questions, but was afraid that they might offend someone. Then a classmate raised his hand and asked one of the same questions that I'd had (but was too afraid to ask). No one was

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offended, and the answer given was very helpful to my understanding. Now I know that asking questions of one another is essential; without doing so one might never fully understand someone else's point of view."

Maya Stutman-Shaw writes: "I will take with me a deep appreciation for my dad and his wisdom. I know that I didn't always clean my room. And sometimes I would leave wet towels on the floor. But I promise it will never happen again. You were right, Dad." OK, she didn't actually say any of that. But I'm sure it's what she was thinking.

Abby Kanter writes, "Before coming to GDS, I was told that I asked "too many questions," and that I was a distraction. At GDS, I've learned that it's ok to want to know more. I feel so lucky to have been able to spend my time at an institution that values student's curiosity and encourages them to be tenacious."

Nick Penniman writes,

- I'll take the idea that it's better to turn outwards than inwards—better to step into someone else's shoes than to stay standing in your own, to move away from what is safe and familiar and toward the things you don't understand. Better to think less about yourself and more about what's happening outside the window.
- I'll take the idea that doubt is not only helpful, but necessary. That determination and certainty are not the same thing, and we could use more of the former and less of the latter.
- I'll take the belief that progress, however slow or incremental, is possible. That you can be a realist and an optimist at the same time, and you shouldn't waste any of it wishing things were different when you could get up and change them yourself. Even when our problems can seem so insurmountable, when anger and despondency are so palpable, when forces of misinformation and authoritarianism are on the rise—we can improve things when we try.
- And I'll take the understanding of democracy as a necessity, a disposition, and a verb. As something that can't be taken for granted or given up on. The understanding that living in a democracy gives us the privilege to determine what our government looks like, but that if we don't, we're allowed no excuses. That democracy, now more than ever, is worth fighting for.

And finally, Eve Kolker writes, “Over the past four years, I've learned to love learning. I've learned to love learning in the classroom—learning languages, math, history, poetry, writing skills, and everything else. But what I've also really loved is learning about my peers. What I actually think sums up the love of learning at GDS is the Senior Quest of three of my friends. Each member of the group decided that they would teach the other two something new. One member of the group is a singer, and taught the other two how to sing and play piano (ending with them performing at Cabaret). Another member of the group is a really good bridge player, and taught the other two how to play bridge (ending with competition in a bridge tournament). The third member is a skilled rock climber, and taught the other two how to rock climb (ending with them bouldering in a park). GDS students love learning in the classroom, of course, but they also love to learn from each other. I'm going to take that with me for the rest of my life. I'm not going to physically take the 130 (or so) people in the class of 2022 with me wherever I go. What I will take is the community that we've created, the sense of belonging I've learned, and the love of strong friendships that they've fostered in me.”

Seniors, what a great list of things to bring with you! Some of you may also take a book that I gave you at graduation rehearsal called *How to Be Perfect*. The book, like GDS, is funny and serious at the same time. It is an introduction to moral philosophy--asking what does it mean to live a good life, and recognizes that asking the question and struggling with the answer is oftentimes more important than the answer itself. As you head on this journey, may you continue to question, struggle, care deeply, and live purposefully and joyfully--and know that we will be cheering you on every step of the way.

Class of 2022, 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 that you are in the world and that we've been able to be a part of your stories. 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 2022!

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 2022, I want to invite you to be present. Look at your friends and teachers and parents. This community--this extended family--is here for you. We believe in your tremendous

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capacity, we are proud of you. And to all of us basking in the reflected glow of these magnificent seniors -- 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 2022, 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.

Congratulations!