



High School Graduation

June 12, 2022

Speech by Julia Fisher, High School Faculty

Congratulations, class of 2022—on reaching this landmark day in your lives, yes, but also on choosing as the faculty speaker the high school teacher least suited to giving you advice about leaving GDS, since, after a valiant attempt, I utterly failed at that task. And yet—I'm honored.

I need to tell you a story about the wildest thing that's happened to me recently. A few weeks ago, after school, I headed down to Nats Park. I was there for a try-out to become a Racing President.

In case we have out-of-town visitors here: The Racing Presidents are mascot renderings of the four Mount Rushmore presidents—George, Tom, Abe, and Teddy. They are about ten feet tall; the costumes weigh over 50 pounds. Every game, in the fourth inning, they race along the warning track, from center field to first base.

I'll be honest: At no point in the process—from when I filled out an application to when I learned about my try-out and spent a week training, with the help of William Miezán and a 50-pound weighted vest, Maria Watson and her choreography skills, and the Hopper costume (which I thought would be good practice, even though it weighs only eight pounds)—at no point did I expect to actually become a Racing President. From the first moment, I just thought it was funny to say I'd applied.

At the ballpark, the twenty auditionees, all of whom were much bigger and stronger than me, hung out on the warning track, cheering each other on as we suited up and raced in heats.

Imagine a movie where you're in the cockpit of a very small airplane. And that airplane is crashing. That's what it feels like to be a Racing President. Only you can't really see, and there are a couple dozen people cheering "Go George!" while you're just struggling to stay upright and walk. And then run. And then dance.

I came in last in my heat, by a lot. Several applicants had "prior mascot experience." When the interviewers asked what skills I had, I told them I knew a lot about books. Needless to say, I did not get the job. I didn't care—the evening was a delight, every minute of it.

Almost as amazing was the reaction at GDS. Everyone peppered me with questions. This sounds corny, but I felt the full support and enthusiasm of the GDS community.

The funny thing, though, is that it seemed that people really thought I was going to get the job. They expressed sympathy when I said I'd been rejected. This was baffling to me. It was kind of like if people had been surprised that Donald Trump didn't win the electoral votes of the District of Columbia.

I offer you two lessons from this story:

1. GDS students believe anything is possible. They think their unathletic English teacher can become a Racing President. That optimism—that genuine faith in the people around you—is beautiful.
2. GDS students these days, sometimes, can be driven by a desire for measurable outcomes and success. Your expression of support for me came in the form of a wish that I might get a job I was applying for. Reasonable. But also totally unreasonable: No person in her right mind would ever think I could get that job. And, honestly, I wasn't really in it for the job. I was in it for the story. To be fair, there are lots of things GDS students do for the story, not for the resume line.

Those things—hours after school lounging on the field or in the library with friends, long hunts for a comma error in a *New Yorker* article, visitors showing up in English classes they aren't actually in, jokes that resurface annually about a backpack strap stuck in a locker—are what make GDS the place it is. We need more of them.

As we walk through life, we all have choices to make about how we're going to let the world shape us. I could have thought of that day as a failed job interview (not a very good story). I'd rather choose delight.

I hope you, seniors, will choose delight as you walk across this stage today. I want to linger for a bit on that verb: to walk. It's a colloquialism: We say one walks at a graduation, when we want to say they're graduating. I think it's a pretty apt figure.

Those of you who have taken one of my classes have probably, at some point, had me suggest that you go for a walk. I find that walking is the best way to think. On a walk, ideas often come to us unbidden.

You are about to take your last walk as a GDS student. It will be a very short one, and you won't have to write an essay upon your return.

So let's think about the walk. I find walking—as an idea—utterly fascinating. Virginia Woolf has a stunning essay called “Street Haunting” in which she walks through the streets of London, ostensibly on a mission to purchase a pencil, and finds herself seeing not just London as it is but London as it might be—she sees that the eyes are a vehicle not just for perception but for imagination, and that imagined Londons are, in some sense, just as real as the one she can touch.

I hope you, with Woolf, will think, on your walk, about what might be. Think about all the possible paths you can take after your walk, yes—but I also hope you will think about the possibilities in the present and—here's the weird part—even in the past. Maybe you spent the last four years running track, but there's a part of you that's always loved

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sportswriting, or painting, or math—and though you didn’t indulge those interests with the seriousness of some of your classmates, they are still a part of you, still real. Maybe you never auditioned for a play, because you didn’t think you’d make the cut, but a secret part of you still thinks of yourself as an actor, and you relished performing scenes in an English class. That part of you is real, too, even if it was never realized. Maybe you drifted to a new social circle in high school—but you always wondered what you’d be like if you’d stuck with your middle school friends, and from time to time you talk to them and recognize a self you could have been. I like to think that, at GDS, your last four or fourteen years might have been sprinkled with little moments when you saw glimpses of another version of yourself—a version who, if the facts of the world had been just a little bit less binding, you would have slipped into just as easily as you’ve slipped into the person you are today. Our dreams are what make us who we are, perhaps more than our experiences.

But the text about walking I most want to tell you about today is by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. It’s one of his crankier poems, and I think it’s very appropriate for today’s occasion.

In the summer of 1797, Coleridge was hanging out with some friends in the Lake District of England, which is a very beautiful region that is great for going on walks. His friends decided to go for a walk, but poor Coleridge was injured. His wife had accidentally poured some boiling milk on his foot. (Really.) He had to stay home, so he wrote a poem. It’s called “This Lime-tree Bower my Prison.” It is deliciously whiney. Coleridge is beside himself. He worries that he may “never more meet again” his friends. (Remember, they’ve just gone out for a short jaunt in the meadows.) He whines that *he’s* the one who told them about the dell they’re going to see, but now he can’t go with them. His friends are going to see magnificent sights! He compares those sights to Heaven! And he won’t be there! Eventually, Coleridge calms down from his tantrum, and he is transported: “A delight / Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad / As I myself were there!” He even comes to appreciate the lime-tree where he’s hanging out waiting, because he feels like nature, through his contemplation, has afforded him the joys he cannot witness with his friends.

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I think this is a great pandemic poem. No, Coleridge didn't live through a pandemic. But God, how many times in the last two years was there something you wanted to do and couldn't? How many times did you mope about being forced to stay at home, maybe even while your friends who had looser covid restrictions all hung out without you? How many of you referred to, or at least thought of, your house as a prison?

I know I did a lot of that. I was mopier and whinier even than Coleridge. And I felt justified. And you, too, are justified if you feel like part of your high school experience was stolen from you, like you were stuck in the lime-tree when you could have been out rejoicing in the dell.

But here we are. I'm not going to tell you to find a silver lining in the time we've lost. I think that's a little bit heartless. But I am going to tell you that Coleridge gets over his whining. I mean, he's not wrong to whine—his wife poured boiling milk on his foot! That sucks! The guy did nothing wrong—absolutely nothing. I know we like to write off “first-world problems,” but I really do feel for him, and I think we've all had moments when missing that one outing, that one party, one trip, even one day of school really feels like we're missing the only thing that matters.

But Coleridge ends his poem in delight! Not just acceptance or resolve but active, exclamation point-laden delight. And from what I've seen from your senior year, you, too, Class of 2022, have found your way to some kind of delight. For you, I think, it's been not the recollection of nature but the reconnection with friends that has delivered you to delight. From the senior trip to a prank that scattered celebration and weirdness to every corner of the school, you led this year with delight.

I think that, after all, is Coleridge's secret. Bad things happen. Really bad things—not just milk-foot injuries. Pandemics, and shootings, and mental health crises, and invasions of sovereign nations. We can, and sometimes we should, be angry about them. But anger and resentment don't get us much of anywhere. They are cathartic. Everyone likes to feel righteous. But what takes courage and intelligence and a big

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heart is not anger. Anyone can be angry. What takes the whole force of your soul is to choose delight. To choose, when your run-in is outside and not much of a surprise, to just...keep running! To choose, when *Footloose*'s run is postponed and then shortened, to dance. To choose, when your school becomes the target of right-wing derision, to gather together in the Forum to watch a Senate confirmation hearing and then to erupt in cheers of pride and delight.

I think the reason we can choose is that Virginia Woolf is right—that the world consists not just of what is here and now, but of all that we imagine at other times, in other places, or even in this very time and place.

You, seniors, soon fellow alumni, are here, but you are also all you imagine yourself to be. And I hope many of those imaginings feature delight, and that you will, more often than not, choose the delightful ones to be real, even—especially—when that is the tougher choice.

I think there's something that we all, as GDS graduates, understand. I don't know precisely what it is, but I think it's something to do with delight, something to do with choice, and above all something to do with the people among whom you create delight, among whom you make your most consequential choices. Those are the people sitting beside you now.

After your walk today, you will keep walking. You'll walk to the reception, where your teachers and friends and families will congratulate you. You'll walk on, with your families, to dinner. In not too long, you'll walk into your college dorm and meet strangers who will, in time, become some of your closest friends. What you will not do again is walk together, with these 130 people.

The people you have known for years—for some of you, more or less your whole sentient life—will almost certainly never all be together again. So that's a lime-tree moment for you all: You'll be on your own, leading your life, while everyone else is out in the dell having other adventures, without you. You could whine about it. Or you could

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delight, as Coleridge does, in thinking about what you know about the walks you're not taking—about the paths your classmates will be walking through.

You are, not just now but forever, a class—a collective entity. Nothing really distinguishes one class from another; they have personalities, yes, but insofar as they do they're more or less random. No one created you to be the smart class or the funny class. You're the class you are because of each of the individual members of your class—each of you a different possibility. So when you go spend your life advocating for voting rights while your classmate studies 17th century Italian art and your other classmate designs video games, I hope you'll see some possible version of yourself in each of your classmates. I hope you'll recall that they, like you, have been crafted by these years you've spent together, and they are bearing out another version of what it means to be a member of the GDS Class of 2022.

Okay. Enjoy your walk.