



High School Graduation

June 12, 2022

Speech by Ketanji Jackson, Parent of Class of 2022

Good afternoon. Russell, Katie, Lisa, and my fellow trustees; the outstanding faculty and staff of Georgetown Day School; GDS parents; and graduates from the Class of 2022—it is a privilege to join you today.

My daughter, Leila, is a proud member of the graduating class, and I am here today speaking in my capacity as a parent. After recent events involving me and my family that some of you may have heard about, I actually wavered a bit about whether I should go ahead and honor my commitment to give this speech. And like any parent, I worried about embarrassing or upstaging my kid on her Big Day. But I ultimately focused on the upside: here was a chance for me to give advice to my teenager and she would *have* to look up from her cellphone! Better still, no child could interrupt me to tell me how lame I sounded! I was not throwing away my shot.

So, I told Russell—don't worry—I'm still in. And I am really honored to be here, addressing all of you, as members of this special school community.

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Now, before I get to the advice part, I did want to start by briefly thanking GDS's extraordinary faculty and staff for all of the work that you have done over these past two years to support and nurture our kids during the COVID-19 global health crisis. It is not lost on any of us parents that the Class of 2022 was only able to return to some semblance of normalcy during their senior year because of your incredible efforts, so, we've already done it a little, but I would like to ask the graduating students and parents to join me now in naming and acknowledging the herculean undertaking that the GDS administration, faculty and staff undertook to make this past year of in

person classes and programming possible, and to get us to this point—to an in-person graduation—by giving them a big round of applause.

I would also like to take a moment to name and acknowledge the unique foundation and essence of Georgetown Day School—GDS is a private school with an unusual mission that has made it a very special place for so many families. GDS opened its doors in 1945, at a time in which the public schools in Washington DC were segregated by race. White students and black students could not attend school together by law. And this school was founded out of a commitment by families, white families and Black families, to come together and stand up for equality. And for the last 76 years, GDS has been a force for equality and justice for all; those tenets are part of its mission, and they are woven into the fabric of a school community in which all kids are accepted and cared for and valued, and have countless opportunities to learn and to grow.

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Class of 2022, you are part of that legacy, and you have learned a lot and grown a lot over these past four years. Like all of us, you are living in unprecedented times. And as you graduate, you will now have the opportunity to put some of the skills that you have developed at GDS to good use as you turn and face the future.

As a general matter, I want you to know that your parents love you, and that we have every confidence that you will rise to meet this moment, in part because you've already done so! Look at how powerful and resilient you have *already* been: a once-in-a-generation pandemic that has consumed more than half of your high school experience could not knock you off course—you finished your coursework, and you are here today, graduating, nonetheless! We know that if you can do *that*, you can do *anything*.

Today I just want to briefly share with you two pieces of advice that I think can help you continue to navigate your course during these unprecedented times. These lessons are nothing new. They are merely reminders that I hope that you will rely upon time and again in the future.

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1. Choose Your Own Adventure

The first is my encouragement to you to *choose* your *own* adventure. Now, I have no doubt that that phrase is familiar to many of you, as it is also the title of a very popular children's book series. You know the one that I'm talking about: each volume is set in some exotic location, like the African savannah, or an ancient Mayan temple, or Mars. The book makes you (the reader) a character in the story, and after describing some mysterious or untenable situation, it gives you the chance to decide what to do or where to go.

In every book, on almost every page, the reader has to make a choice—for example

You are in a tent deep in the Amazon rainforest, and you hear a low growl in the middle of the night. . .

If you leap up, grab a flashlight and machete, and charge out of the tent, turn to page 15.

If you hold your breath, zip up the sleeping bag, and try to stay as still as possible, turn to page 20.

It occurred to me recently that this dynamic not only makes for good story-telling but is also a metaphorical preview for the kinds of skills that you as graduates will have to exercise in the months and years to come. You will have to CHOOSE and it must be your OWN adventure.

This means that, for one thing, you are going to have to CHOOSE; that is, use your own judgment to determine the path you want to follow, and I would urge you to be intentional about it. To be sure, there are people who go through life just looking around and doing what others are doing, without being thoughtful or discerning. But I would advise you to stop and think before flipping to a new stage, or chapter, or event, in your life.

And you will find that there can be times when there is considerable pressure to go on an adventure that is *not* of your own choosing: whether it's signing up for the most popular course or major in college even if it really doesn't interest you, or staying at some party because everyone else is there even if you'd rather be at home. When you get to such decision points, I want you to remember that *you* have the power to choose how you are going to act, respond, and behave. Remember what you learned at GDS— by giving you so much autonomy in high school, this school has allowed you to practice exercising your own judgment, and you now

have the ability to think through all of the consequences of your words and actions before you act.

This is, in fact, what the last assignment that you all worked on as a senior was really all about. Last month, you all participated in a venerable GDS tradition—the Senior Quest—in which you got to choose how you wanted to spend your time, and as we saw the other night, your creative choices varied widely—from making different kinds of hot sauce, to learning to play the guitar, to facing your fears, to painting a mural. The Senior Quest was great training for your next chapter, because after graduation, there won't be a set curriculum or pre-written checklist for the course of your life. And as you face new questions—like—“what am I going to do next?” and “what do I want out of life?”—you will have to choose the adventure.

And, not only must you *make* the choice, it's important to be sure that the adventure that you choose is your OWN. The unfortunate consequences of selecting a path that is not in line with what you really want was highlighted for me just this past week, during my 30th college reunion. Both of the panel presentations that were scheduled for the weekend featured my classmates who mostly talked about chasing a vision of themselves that their parents or their friends wanted for them, and how they had suppressed or ignored their true interests and passions to try to pour themselves into a mold that others had created.

As high school graduates, you now have the opportunity to make a choice about your future and how you want to spend your time. As you do, I encourage you to listen to your inner voice. Think about what inspires you—the subjects and the topics—the things that make you say, “this is great!” and “I want to do more of this.” Whether you are choosing an extracurricular activity, picking a major, deciding where to live, or making bigger life decisions, let those inner voices and values guide you as you shape your OWN story.

2. “Learn Something”

The second piece of advice that I hope to leave with you today is something that my mother, who was a science teacher and a high school principal, taught me from a very young age. With respect to pretty much everything, she would say that, whatever happens, you can always “*learn something.*”

Both of my parents (who are here today, by the way) are life-long learners. And they have consistently sought to pass these values on to me and my brother. As a practical matter, what that meant for me during my grade school years was that I never really had a well-earned period of rest and downtime during the summer after a busy school year. Instead, from about the age of 4 or 5, *my* summers were filled with science camp sessions, and poetry competitions, and impromptu writing projects. I grew up a stone's throw from the ocean in Miami, but it wasn't as if I could just go hang out at the beach with everyone else. If I was going to the beach, I had to have a net and bucket and flash cards with the scientific names of the various species of foliage that I was likely to encounter. Every situation presented a "teachable moment"—and boy did I learn.

I have recently come to appreciate the fact that my parents were then and still are intuitive believers in having what psychologists have come to call a "growth mindset"—that is, valuing one's ability to change and adapt and improve through the acquisition of new knowledge. As Professor Carol Dweck explains in her book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, people who have the opposite world view—a "fixed mindset"—tend to "believ[e] that [their personal] qualities are carved in stone." But the "growth mindset is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts, your strategies, and help from others." And experts have determined through research that a "growth mindset" is essential to being effective in a range of pursuits—from academics to athletics.

One potentially surprising adherent to the "growth mindset" philosophy is none other than the Boston Celtics basketball team, which, as some of you may know have done pretty well this season. The Celtics's former head coach, Brad Stevens, who is now president of the team's basketball operations, has touted the "growth mindset" philosophy to other coaches and players for years. As he describes the approach, [QUOTE] "you are focused every day on your growth; you're not deterred by challenges; you're not overwhelmed by accomplishments—you're just moving on to the next day." [END QUOTE]

That basic idea—that one can and should commit oneself day-by-day to improvement —can also be a means of coping with life's uncertainties. During the isolation that we all endured in 2020 and 2021, many people found that learning something was an important diversion of mind in the midst of the crisis. How many of you know someone who took up a new hobby during the lockdowns? I know people who taught themselves to cook, knit, meditate, journal, write poetry, garden, and more, for the mental and physical betterment of themselves and their pods.

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Reflecting on our collective commitment to personal growth in this way, even during a pandemic, reminds me of a memorable paragraph in T.H. White's novel, *The Once and Future King*, during which Merlin is counseling King Arthur:

[QUOTE] “The best thing for being sad,’ replied Merlyn, beginning to puff and blow, ‘is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honour trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then—to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the thing for you. Look what a lot of things there are to learn”[END QUOTE]

Class of 2022, I hope that you will remember that in whatever chapter or challenge of life you find yourself in in the future, you can always seek to “learn something”—and you might be pleasantly surprised at how much you grow as a result.

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I will close by stating explicitly what you already know, which is that you, the class of 2022, have been challenged in a way that few other generations of GDS graduates have been. You should be proud of the fact that, far from crushing your spirit, the challenges of these past few years have made you more resilient, creative, and potentially grateful, than perhaps you could have ever imagined. As you embark on this new chapter, I hope you will reflect upon your own agency—your power to choose a path that is consistent with your interests and your values. And whatever triumphs and tribulations you may face in the coming years, I hope that you will let that autonomy of choice, and your ability to learn, ultimately embolden and empower you.

Congratulations on all you've done and all that you will do in the days and years ahead. The adventure is yours to choose. A world of learning awaits you. And the future is yours to shape.

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