



High School Graduation

June 11, 2023

Speech by Nadia Mahdi, High School Faculty

GDS Seniors, Parents, Fellow Faculty and Staff, Friends:

It is an honor to be standing at this lectern today to speak to you all. I've had the pleasure of sharing a classroom with many of you, sitting in a circle together week after week with not much more in front of us than a notebook, a pen, and that most marvelous of innovations, a book.

"The book itself is a curious artifact," writes novelist Ursula K. Le Guin, "not showy in its technology but complex and extremely efficient: a really neat little device, compact, often very pleasant to look at and handle, that can last decades, even centuries. It doesn't have to be plugged in, activated, or performed by a machine; all it needs is light, a human eye, and a human mind.... it is not ephemeral. It lasts. It is reliable. If a book told you something when you were fifteen, it will tell it to you again when you're fifty, though you may understand it so differently that it seems you're reading a whole new book."

As a lifelong lover of fiction, I feel very lucky to have landed in a profession that organizes itself around the activity of reading books; reading, I firmly believe, is a kind of cultivated superpower that is within everyone's grasp; it has changed my life course multiple times and always for the better. Among the many benefits it bestows, reading can become a way to recognize yourself in the strangest places, to think outside the box you've been acclimated to inhabit, and to take comfort when the going gets rough which, if it hasn't already, undoubtedly will and often when you least expect it.

When I was a young person, a little younger than you are today maybe, but hungry to understand the world as you all are, I was lucky enough to come across the work of Le Guin and others who looked outside the boundaries of realism for that reflection. I wonder whether some of you have had a similar experience, an experience of reading what most people would agree is what everyday experience is like and feeling that the memo must have gotten lost in

the delivery because you never got it; that realness, the experience of everyday bus ride to school, sitting in class, or talking to your family at the dinner table bore a much stronger resemblance to the paintings of Frida Kahlo and Salvatore Dali or the inside of a Nick Cage soundsuit than any experience you see represented on TV or on the news. So when I discovered plays like Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in my high-school philosophy and literature class, it was like coming home to a place that I had always known about but had never hoped to see reflected on the page. *Waiting for Godot*, for those of you who haven't yet had the pleasure, is a play about two people waiting for someone who is going to appear at any moment to help them make sense of what is happening and enlighten them as to what to do next-- only he never shows up. Instead, a series of seemingly disconnected events transpire, leaving the reader feeling confused, dumbfounded, in awe of the strangeness of the world, and wondering when the core message or unified meaning would emerge.

As a person of about the age that you are now, I felt a deep soul connection with Beckett's characters. These characters, this world that Beckett manifests on the page and, if we're lucky enough to see it produced, on the stage, captures the experience of people caught in between places and times. Why it was that this felt so much more vivid, so much more real than any "realistic" story world was a mystery to me at 16. But there it was. Later, studying theater as a graduate student, I would read plays by Federico Garcia Lorca, Maria Irene Fornés and Suzan-Lori Parks, and I would recognize that same depth of perception, each writer re-imagining their world through a different kaleidoscopic lens. These extraordinary dramatists helped me see my own odd, fractured, surreal experience refracted back to me, a rift that those of you who have lived between cultures, between gender norms, between religions, continents, or languages may readily understand. Reading was a way to recognize myself in the unfamiliar and strange; a process that, in books such as *The Odyssey* and *The Song of Solomon*, in the poetry of Emily Dickinson and the prose of Lê Thi Diem Thuy, each of you, seniors, has already embarked on.

Whether you gravitate towards a play, short story, a novel or a poem, reading a good book can also inspire you to be curious about what you don't know yet. As the graduating class of 2023, you have made your way through extraordinary times—the early COVID years certainly, but also the president that accompanied them; the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* one year before its 50th anniversary that we would otherwise have been celebrating this year; the smell of fire drifting hundreds of miles down through the DMV, carrying another potent sign of the times with it this last week. What you know may already feel like a heavy lift, class of 2023. But being curious what you don't know can help you discover ways forward that we haven't even been able to imagine. The process of reading a rich, challenging literary text can help.

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Start with a question that you don't immediately know the answer to. What could possibly be so important about one small ice-cream shop called Johnni Waffles in Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor*? Or the absence of organized religion in Shakespeare's Scottish Play? How could a simple series of photographs in Richard Power's *The Overstory* hold a thematic kernel that reveals a whole new layer of significance to the novel as a whole? And how can the presence of flower imagery in *The Bluest Eye* be as important as any plot or character study?

So often we imagine the reading process to be one of reinforcing a single, unified truth that any reader at any moment in time and space should be able to understand. Why not simply press a button and amass the hundreds and thousands of observations that have already been generated from years of concerted human effort? But what if we were to imagine that a writer has hidden a special discovery inside their work that has been waiting just for your eyes-- for your own particular kind of curiosity to unearth it? That, as a colleague at Brown once said, the literary event is not a mirror held up to nature but is instead a site of multiple conflicts, each waiting for the right reader in the right circumstances to discover. The graduating seniors who wrote their senior papers on the topics I've just mentioned began by asking a question of their book that they didn't know the answer to. And through the deep reading of the books they chose with their own particular set of eyes in this particular moment of time, their own individual brand of curiosity lead to an argument that only they could have written. Reading rich, difficult, expansive stories can inspire us towards that same kind of rich, expansive complexity in our own thinking, and that in turn will find its way into the work we do, whatever that work may ultimately be.

The practice of reading a good book can also bring you comfort when the going gets rough. And while today is a day of celebration, a moment to feel deep satisfaction in what you've accomplished, and to be inspired towards a hopeful, bright future, I would be lying to you if I said that there won't be hard times ahead. Perhaps you and your family have made your way through some pretty hard times already over the past 4 years before sending you onto this stage this afternoon.

A dearly loved story can be a real source of comfort when major life challenges come your way. I'd like to give you an example. Throughout this last school year, I have been traveling back and forth to Boston to visit my ailing mother. During the early-morning weekend flights, the long rides on the subway, and the slow returns afterwards, I have often felt completely at a loss to express what I was feeling; putting the suffering or anger or all-around heart break into words routinely failed me. As I sat with my mother over this last Memorial Day Weekend, feeling that unbearable cacophony of emotion, my mind suddenly veered into poetry recitation mode. In that moment, the lines of a poem that I had assigned my 11th-grade class to memorize and recite came to me:

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June 11, 2023*

those many student voices, each putting sound to words from one great poem. And, more miraculously still, they weren't words of suffering or anger or all-around heart break at all:

*A child said What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands;
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.
I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.
Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may
see and remark, and say Whose?
Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.
Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same.
And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.
Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them,
It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken soon out of their mothers' laps,
And here you are the mothers' laps.
This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,
Darker than the colorless beards of old men,
Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.
O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues,
And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths for nothing.*

Little did I know, when I assigned those lines from *Leaves of Grass* to my students that they would return to me at such a critical moment in my life. Walt Whitman may claim to embody the collective voice of America. But his poetry teaches us that writing is not a place to amass an anonymous million-fold alga rhythm in order to capture a collective truth. Writing is a practice of noticing what we alone can notice when we sit down and put words onto paper. The way the words come out, in their own idiosyncratic style, is often the only way we can understand what we are thinking. And from those simple, often humble observations, grow our own understanding, the maturation of our thinking process of whatever it is that we're writing about, whatever the discipline, for whoever the audience.

I return in closing to the words of Ursula K. Le Guin:

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“A writer is a person who cares what words mean, what they say, how they say it. Writers know words are their way towards truth and freedom, and so they use them with care, with thought, with fear, with delight.”

What I wish for each of you, seniors, is that you continue to make room for the words of great storytellers of all kinds in your life, that your reading of books presents you with the opportunity to recognize yourself where you least expect it, to stay curious when faced with the unknown and, in the hard times that will undoubtedly come, to take comfort in words that have been crafted with care: words of great writers that move us and words of your own, however humble, put to paper as you write your own way into the future.

Congratulations to you all.