High School Graduation

June 9, 2024
Speech by John Burghardt, High School Faculty

On the eve of becoming a kind of alumnus myself, I've been thinking lately of the alums who come back to school from college, or from their full blown lives, who never fail to look different than I remember -- sometimes like older siblings, parents, now even grandparents of former selves -- and when they spot me in the hall, they very often ask two questions I find difficult to answer: When are you going to retire?

And how has GDS changed?

I'm not retired yet. I still have staff week to look forward to, and a send-off in the middle school cafeteria. But before I retire, I would like to say a bit about how GDS has changed. Or really, how it changes.

The change is so rhythmic, with so many rhythms playing on top of each other, it can be hard to spot, though *this* is different. [*]

There's a poem we share, class of 2024, -- some of you read it with me -- that finds something amazing in the layered rhythms of change. It's Walt Whitman's *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.* Whitman makes us see the ferry that's no longer there, the deck filling up -- faces, hats, shoulders angling through the crowd, parcels, valices. The gates close. From the deck he makes *us* see what *he's* seen.

I too many and many a time cross'd the river of old,
Watched the Twelfth-month sea-gulls, saw them high in the air
floating with motionless wings, oscillating their bodies,
Saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their bodies and
left the rest in strong shadow,

So. Once cross the river, the ferry's bumpers strike the far landing; gates open; there's a thunderous bustle on the planks, and when the gates close again from rail to rail the deck is hidden by completely different faces, caps, bonnets, walking sticks, parasols, kids shoving to the rails to look down into the water, the difference absolute -- as different as you are from the class of 2025 -- but the scene somehow the same. And here Whitman makes his case that time and distance avail not, that as long as any of us is living, with any time at all to loaf and invite our souls, watching whatever gulls remain, there is an abiding and unbroken line of sight that connects us all from that very moment to this. And here is the miracle of the poem.

Saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their bodies and left the rest in strong shadow,

Saw the slow-wheeling circles and the gradual edging toward the south,
Saw the reflection of the summer sky in the water,
Had my eyes dazzled by the shimmering track of beams,
Look'd at the fine centrifugal spokes of light round the shape of
my head in the sunlit water,

This happens when the sun is high enough to feel it on your shoulders but low enough to lay your shadow on the water, your head suddenly ablaze with a nimbus, like the visiting divinity in a religious painting, the saint, prophet, son of man, though as Whitman reminds us later in the poem, it's just you, and the person next to you, to your left and to your right.

Fly on, sea-birds! fly sideways, or wheel in large circles high in the air;
Receive the summer sky, you water, and faithfully hold it till all
downcast eyes have time to take it from you!
Diverge, fine spokes of light, from the shape of my head, or any
one's head, in the sunlit water!

What Whitman means here even *his* words can't entirely capture. We have to leap from these lines to a thought our minds can only fitfully hold. He's giving us an argument for our limitless share in all the soul there is. Whitman believes consciousness itself is divine, --transcendent, and immanent in each of us -- that it's all the miracle we need to anchor a lifetime of reverence and devotion. And you don't have to be in church or services or in the ashram or on the meditation pillow to feel its power. As the people in these front rows know very well, you can feel it in the classroom.

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For years now when I read this poem, when I think of the clank of the gates as the ferry is about to push off, I think of the click of my classroom door as I walk to the board, forget to take attendance, and see your faces.

The difference is that a ferry ride is a pretty straight shot. The conversation in a classroom however yields to the current. Sometimes going far enough sideways to show us the river's mouth and water to the horizon.

This year in Senior English, between Halloween and Thanksgiving, we were reading a great play by Nigeria's Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka. The play is based on actual events. In 1946 during British colonial rule, a District officer in Lagos sent his constables to the market to interrupt a ritual suicide. The man arrested was Elesin Oba, the king's Horseman, who had been attempting to do what his office required. According to Yoruban belief, when a king dies, the king's horseman must accompany him to the next world, along with the king's horse and dog. If he fails, the king lingers in this world, and his wandering, despondent spirit can do great harm to the Yoruban people. When Elesin was arrested and carried off to jail, the king's subjects were terrified and enraged. Elesin had two duties in life. To tend the king's stable, and far more important, to follow the king in the appointed ritual at the appointed time, the moment the two worlds were aligned. Even in jail, Elesin was not spared the intensity of the people's anger, and when his sorrow and shame seemed to approach a human limit, Elesin had to absorb the further sorrow and shame of learning that his only son had committed suicide in his place, with no guarantee that the sacrifice had healed the rift between this world and the next, or appeased the angry spirit of the king.

It was a tragedy.

It was in fact our third tragedy of the year. That fall we had also read *Oedipus the King* and *Hamlet*, doing our best to gather these vastly different texts under Aristotle's definition of tragedy.

“Tragedy,” says Aristotle, “is an imitation [mimēsis] of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude...stirring the audience to pity and terror in order to effect the *catharsis* of these emotions."

The question on my mind, however, had not come from Aristotle, but from Darwin Gu: "Who would write a play to do that, and why would anyone go to a play to have that done to them? Catharsis, it sounds very unpleasant."

So what's the point of tragedy? Darwin had heard the right answer. ""“Tragedy,” says Aristotle, “is an imitation [mimēsis] ...etc." But for Darwin, as for the best students always, the right answer isn't necessarily the answer.

So. The latch on the door had clicked. Having forgotten to take attendance, I was at the whiteboard having *also* forgotten to bring a marker so I could *write* on the board. But I did have a question.

Shame comes from within, and has something to do with having done wrong, and Elesin is surrounded by people who have a towering certainty about what he has done wrong, but none of them actually seemed to notice what he did. He hadn't hesitated to take his life. He was arrested waiting for the moment when the elders would tell him that the worlds were properly aligned. The only thing gouging his conscience was a momentary feeling of relief when the constables seized him and carried him away.

Iansa Powell raised her hand. She said she could understand that shame. Even relief that his life had been *spared* was a betrayal of his besieged culture -- because in the Yoruban cosmos, his life would have *continued*. He had gone over to a British world view that really had no place for him, except as a benighted primitive with no understanding why lives could be sacrificed for duty and country, by the tens of thousands, on the battlefield, but not for the worthy and waiting spirit of his only king.

But Elesin wasn't an apostate. He hadn't renounced his faith. It was just a feeling of relief, hardly even a thought. What had he done?

Laura Belle Kaufman at this point lifted her voice, "Why is this so hard?' Which was the real question. Laura Belle spoke for everyone, for the magical unsettledness that sometimes enters a classroom, that begins the cascade of contradictions, the current that sweeps everyone to new thinking. Teachers, we know what this is. And we've all been students. That moment a classroom comes alive with chatter, interruption, listening, and thinking. There is nothing like it in the world.

So the question. What had he done? Is it possible that Elesin doesn't even understand?

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Matt DelGuercio found a passage. He read it aloud.

"ELESIN. I need neither your pity nor the pity of the world. I need understanding. Even I need to understand."

So who on stage, who on earth, could give him that understanding? Not the British, who made it a point of cultural pride that they do not understand *these people.* Not the women of the marketplace, who know only that Elesin had been given a life of ease and privilege so that he could do the one thing he failed to do. Who?

Abel Elias, reminding us all of Iansa's remark, said, "It's the audience."

And there it was, the river's mouth and water to the horizon.

The audience. That temporary nation and culture formed in the presence of great literature. The culture and nation that understands -- if only for moments at a time -- how human beings with the wits and impulses we mostly share can find themselves overmatched by circumstance, and for reasons we can actually understand, choose their way to disaster.

The nation that briefly forms in the theatre, or the classroom, has no other loyalty. We're partisans of no other cultural or national cause. We belong to no city, not Lagos, London, not any city conquering or conquered, besieging or under siege, not even the city where tragedy began.

In Athens, Aeschylus, who had fought at the battle of Marathon, early in his career wrote a play that has made its way to us. It is called *The Persians* with long, heart-rending arias of lamentation by Persian citizens for their lost sons and their scalded national pride. In Athens, after Marathon, for the Persians, pity and terror. Terror though? What's to fear? Could democratic Athens ever be so cruel as the Persians? so swept away by hubris? And what pity could Athenians have for the Persians who never pitied them? Maybe none. Maybe tragedy only bids on our understanding. Because understanding is possible, because we mostly share the impulses and wits that can bring any of us into circumstances we cannot master. Because being overmatched by circumstance, because following the impulses and wits we mostly share to the occasional disaster, is, in Athens or Persepolis, one city or another, our common lot.

Understanding isn't forgiveness. We don't forgive Medea. We shouldn't forgive Hamlet -- for sending his old classmates to their death as a practical joke. Understanding isn't approval, or

even compassion -- which can make its way through a blur of tears. There *is* heart in it but no watery blur. Understanding is as clear and sturdy as our most rigorous thinking. We owe it to each other because of ways in which we are all entangled in circumstance, and in this brilliant, error-prone human form. We seek understanding because it may protect us. Most of all from ourselves. From all that can accumulate within our stultifying border walls.

But what happens when that temporary nation leaves the theatre, or puts down the book, or when you leave the classroom? Do you retain the customs of that country--reserving judgment, welcoming the unease of an opening mind? Can you pass those customs along to others? Can such a temporary scattering nation change the world? Well this is our hope, the hope in which I've lived and taught for half a century, the hope we send out into the world with you.

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