



High School Graduation

June 7, 2026

Frank Foer, Parent of the Class of 2026

Class of 2026.

Those of us who have followed you closely have been dazzled by everything you've accomplished.

You've shown your mastery of new technology with the Dom Wall.
(Domdani, chef's kiss)

You've showcased your talmudic gifts for logic and rhetoric with your debates over Assassin.
(Winne, you were totally not out.)

You displayed executive function with the meticulous care you've taken of the senior corner — henceforth to be known, in your honor, as the senior landfill.

Many years from now, when a future group of seniors is laughing hard at its own inside jokes, I hope you get to return to that vantage and stare down at your memories of this place. The embarrassing moments will come rushing back first—the time you blurted out an answer so wrong it briefly silenced the room. But then the others: the free period on the field on a spring day, talking to friends, when you wished the beep for the next class would never come. The rush of staring at the art on the walls of the third floor, remembering how you were surrounded by insanely talented classmates.

I graduated GDS in, [mumble] 1992. Back then, the high school was an architectural disaster—the *Washington Post* architecture critic noted the exterior's similarities to a bathroom. It was the nineteen nineties, but you could still smell the fumes of the 1960s. Frank, the bolo-tie wearing calculus teacher, who actually had been head of the high school, would bum a cigarette off kids in a spot by the dumpster by the old Safeway known as the Smoking Lounge.

Russell, is that still best practice?

What I can tell you, with a little experience, is that when I set foot in GDS today, the overwhelming emotion, after the nostalgia subsides, is gratitude. My greatest gratitude is for my teachers, one of whom is here today. Sue Ikenberry taught me *and* my daughter—how's that as evidence of devotion to a job? When she taught Watergate as the greatest true-crime narrative in American history, when she sent us into Hofstadter and Morgan, when she pushed me to research the emancipation of slaves in Washington, DC—research that eventually helped create a new official day of remembrance in this city — she lit up my mind with a sense of how exciting politics, history, and the life of the mind could be. I would love for her to stand.

Today, you're graduating alongside your head of school, Russell Shaw. He is the Franklin Roosevelt of GDS, who ran this school for the equivalent of four presidential terms. He transformed an institution while tending to its soul. Future generations will walk the halls of the campus he unified. Every graduate will remember the leader who knew each of them by name, who taught the values of GDS by exhibiting them as he welcomed kids in the carpool line, as he steered this institution through every crisis the world could possibly throw at it.

Russell, on behalf of all of us who have trusted you with our most precious cargo—thank you.

Humility is a GDS value that Russell lived, and in that spirit, I will respect the limits of the commencement speech. The most useful thing I can do is tell you about the parent speaker at my own GDS graduation, because I have spent the rest of my life mulling his remarks.

The speaker was Lamar Alexander—a Governor of Tennessee, university president, Secretary of Education, senator, and, though this fact will be hard for many of you to comprehend, a Republican. Even then, the GDS community was hardly what you might call politically diverse. But there were pillars of the Republican establishment, a handful of rock-ribbed conservatives, who sent their kids to this school.

Alexander's speech was about stepping across the divides of American life. It was about his friendship with the author Alex Haley. In 1992, Alex Haley was a far more familiar name than Lamar Alexander. Haley co-wrote the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*. He then spent a decade on an even more ambitious project, tracing his own family's history back seven generations, from a small village in West Africa through enslavement and the Middle Passage to freedom. That book was *Roots*. It became a television miniseries—*kids, ask your parents*—watched by 130 million

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Americans. It was one of the first serious dramatizations of slavery that Hollywood had ever attempted. For Black audiences, it was an inspiration. For White America, it was a confrontation with the original sin it had tried so hard to bury.

Alexander first met Haley in 1980, when he was governor. Haley's grandparents had lived in a small mountain hamlet, in a home that Alexander helped turn into a museum. When Alexander was later struggling to finish a book, he called Haley, who suggested he tag along on a trip from Long Beach, California to Sydney, Australia on a cargo freight container ship. Haley liked to write on freighters, where he was the only passenger, the ultimate enforced solitude. Each night, they would stroll out onto the deck. Beneath the night sky, Haley taught Alexander how to write—not by sitting down at a desk, but by telling stories aloud before committing them to paper. He was practicing the oral tradition he had learned from his grandparents on their Tennessee porch.

In his speech to us, Alexander explained how Haley also taught him an ethical system, which he distilled to a phrase. That phrase was an earworm. It implanted itself in Alexander's mind, and when he made it the central message of his Georgetown Day School graduation speech, it implanted itself in mine.

Find the Good and Praise it.

Haley first saw that line on a bumper sticker in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles. And he kept repeating it.

Find the Good and Praise it.

Haley asked that the phrase be etched onto his gravestone on the site of his grandparent's home in Tennessee.

Find the Good and Praise it.

When I heard the phrase, I saw a vision of how I might live the rest of my life---generously, optimistically, with an openness to the world. A bumper sticker philosophy, yes, but my eighteen year old brain couldn't think of a better one.

Now....flash forward seven years.....I had graduated from college, a cub reporter for a magazine called *U.S. News and World Report*. *Back then, it was more than college rankings.* I

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was just starting to cover national politics. Lamar Alexander was running for the Republican nomination for president. I asked my editors if I could write a profile of Alexander, who I remembered so fondly. They approved and I flew off to Nashville to interview him.

When we sat down in a hotel conference room near the Grand Ole Opry, I reminded him of that speech and told him how much it meant to me. That, sadly, was the high moment of the interview. I asked him about his opposition to affirmative action. Even though I knew he didn't share my view on the issue, I thought that I would hear him acknowledge the arguments of his opponents. I wanted him to find the good and praise it. And when he didn't, I felt betrayed. I wondered if his graduation speech was a fraud. I sat down to write a profile, and I didn't hold back. I mocked the hokeyness of his campaign and skewered him for abandoning his moderation in pursuit of his ambitions. What I didn't do: *Find the Good and Praise It*.

I told myself that it was what he deserved—and what my professional code demanded. But I also began to wonder if the phrase itself was deficient. He was imploring us to be sunflowers always craning towards the sun, but there are malign forces in the world. Do we have to take a microscope to them and scour for trace elements of the laudable? Wouldn't it be better to confront those who would do us harm?

Those questions dogged me. But so did the phrase. It kept arguing back. I still wanted to believe that every human contains a praiseworthy spark of goodness.

I kept looking for a way through. I began to study a Jewish legend about an orchard known as the Pardes—a garden where it was possible to glean the deepest, most mystical secrets of the universe, perhaps even to see the divine presence. Rabbis warned about entering the Pardes. The knowledge found there could be so overpowering that it would shatter the unprepared human beings who encountered it. Still, four sages entered.

One died; another became a heretic. The sage Ben Zoma lost his mind.

Ben Zoma's fate was the most tragic of them all, because he was humble, as well as insatiably curious. His legacy was a phrase that became, for me, a friendly but necessary amendment to Haley's slogan. Ben Zoma said: "Who is wise? One who learns from everyone."

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Our teachers don't always look like our teachers. Sometimes they live on the other side of a divide. Sometimes they're voices we'd rather not hear.

The world you're entering will reward you for narrowing—for curating your friends, your feeds, your convictions, until everyone around you sounds exactly like you. But Ben Zoma and Haley were both pointing in the other direction. They were insisting that the good life is the curious one. It resists easy judgment. It is hungry for the next lesson.

If you can't tell, this is a message I'm trying to internalize myself, as I watch you graduate. The hardest part of today, for parents, is that we know we're unclutching the hands that we have held for so long. We're reaching that inversion point in life, where *you* begin to teach *us*, more than we can teach you. (And I'm not just talking about how to use the Apple TV remote.)

But we can let go—can't we?—because we're slightly in awe of you and what you've become. We've watched you take care of each other.

We've seen how seriously you can think through a problem. The world will need you, and your example, but, the truth is, so will we.

When you can, find the good and praise it. Learn from everyone.

And—please, please keep sending us your dispatches from the Curious Life. Be our best teachers.

Congratulations.

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