



High School Graduation

June 7, 2026

Bobby Asher, High School Faculty

Hello everyone. I know at this point, I'm supposed to say "good afternoon," but that's not something I typically say. And I wanna keep it real here today. So I decided I would open with "Bruh." That seems to be how every student at GDS begins a conversation, regardless of their name, age, social status, race, gender identity, or any identity for that matter. Apparently, "bruh" has many meanings. For those here who aren't as familiar with the "bronoun," I researched it in the way we traditional academics do—I consulted Urban Dictionary, and here's what it said:

"Bruh": The reaction to every single situation possible. The most versatile word in existence. Can be used to show happiness, sadness, distress, anger, fear, sleepiness, approval, disapproval, confusion... and many more!

For example:

Elsie: My mom has COVID

Finley: bruuhh

Mikhail: Yo, my mom just won a million dollars!

Gavin: bRuHhh!

In fact, my guess is that right now at least one of the seniors is turning to a classmate and muttering under their breath, with side-eye disdain, "bruh," as in I can't believe Bobby is doing this. "Ok, boomer!"

On a more serious note, I want to begin by thanking you, the Class of 2026, for granting me the profound privilege and weighty responsibility of speaking today.

I do feel a certain amount of pressure (sharing the stage with nationally acclaimed writers like Russell Shaw and Franklin Foer—at least it's only Frank and not one of his more famous brothers).

Thankfully, a funny thing happened to me on my way to graduation. When I walked into my neighborhood Starbucks, as they always do, the entire staff called out, if slightly asynchronously, “Good morning, Robert!” For those of you who don't know, “Robert” is my real name (more importantly, it's the one on my credit card). Seeming to sense my nerves, Julia, whom I've known for over a decade, handed me my iced grande, sugar-free, blonde vanilla latte. On the cup, someone had written, apparently knowing it was I who would pick it up, words that completely changed my outlook. The handwritten message, in succinct and sympathetic Sharpie: “You're enough.”

I am? I think to myself. Or am I? I know that over the years, a number of folks, my parents especially, often said I was too much. And there were certainly more than a few educators who told me I was not enough. But apparently, at least today, I am “enough,” and, while the bar seems a little low, I'll do my best.

For years, GDS seniors graduated at GW. And it was lovely. But somehow, it feels different being here on campus, like we have some sort of advantage. There is something special about being here on a day when many of us on stage will be leaving soon, striking out on our own. Maybe I shouldn't say “striking out.” Maybe I shouldn't say “on our own.” In fact, strike that. Sorry. Let's just say, “beginning a new chapter.”

I'm guessing at this point that some of you are thinking about home-field advantage in athletics and how much it impacts sports (and these days, sports betting). I don't bet on athletic competitions (or anything, for that matter), but even I know that in football, when it comes to the point spread, the home team typically gets an additional three points (what amounts to a free field goal). In soccer, playing at home has an even more powerful impact on the betting probabilities. And doesn't soccer explain the world? [Inside joke. *How Soccer Explains the World* is one of several books written by Theo's dad. You'll hear more—and better—from him soon.]

Why is the impact of playing at home so significant that it changes the betting odds for every single professional sport? Is it about familiarity with the court or the course, the field or the floor? Is it about travel? Maybe sleeping in your own bed and eating home-cooked meals? They're

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probably dozens of reasons, but there's research that says it's something else – that home-field advantage is more about knowing you have fans, people there with you, on your side, offering emotional support, that enhances your success rate.

But aren't there fans at every game? Interestingly, most of us here (but for the crying babies and toddlers, who, in my opinion, should've stayed home anyway—I'm kidding!) experienced COVID. And one thing we learned during COVID was that home-field advantage absolutely disappeared. Even though home teams enjoyed many of the perks outlined earlier, without fans in the stands, their advantage was completely erased.

To me, it says something about knowing you have people in your corner and how that, in turn, impacts your confidence and ultimately your performance. And of course, right now, some of you, particularly us science nerds, are thinking about the placebo effect. And you're right to do so. It's not random that teams and individuals perform better at home. It's their belief in themselves, when they feel supported by those around them, that creates their advantage. And now, as some of you were just beginning to settle in for a short siesta, comes the interactive portion of my speech. Seniors, take a moment. Look around. Look at the faces of the people sitting next to and near you — the people who understand you, who know what you've been through, who've been there for you when things got hard. Our impulse to turn toward another person—to connect—is a uniquely human advantage, our superpower, if you will. What I want to do now is to simulate some research done by one of my favorite neuroscientists, a guy named Nicholas Epley from the University of Chicago. Ready?

Imagine that you're taking the metro to school. As you walk into the station, Epley offers you a \$20 gift card to do one of three things during your commute:

- 1) Do whatever you typically do
- 2) Sit quietly in solitude or
- 3) Engage in a conversation with the stranger sitting next to you.

Which would you choose?

Not surprisingly, the vast majority of those surveyed found option three the least appealing. Initiating a conversation with someone you don't know feels daunting. Understandable, but a bit ironic given that decades of rigorous, peer-reviewed research has consistently revealed that the

single greatest predictor of whether your life will be happy, healthy, long, and meaningful is the quality of your connections with other human beings.

So what do you think happened in Chicago? You guessed it: Epley found that people were happier when they engaged with others - even if they considered themselves introverts. The research has been replicated in study after study: subjects who talk with strangers report significantly happier rides than those who keep to themselves.

There's even more recent research conducted by esteemed seniors Noah Kolker and Oliver Wolin. While many of you know them as a formidable pickleball tandem, who, much as I hate to admit, ousted me and my good friend Anthony Belber in last year's quarterfinals, Noah and Oliver, as part of their Quest, conducted some participatory action research themselves, talking with strangers on the Mall and at a Nats game and hosting a dinner for a handful of GDS students they didn't know particularly well. Their results were strikingly similar.

So what's the deal here? Why do we, the most social beings on the planet, whose species' survival depends on human-to-human connection, consistently fail to prioritize our predisposition to connect. Of course, technology has changed the landscape, arguably more so in the last 15-20 years than in the past 4,000. Loneliness has become a public health crisis, particularly among adolescents. The devices that promised to connect us have left many of us feeling more alone than ever, enticing us to make choices that threaten our health and happiness.

But there's something else at play here. It is that we are lousy predictors of how others will respond to an invitation to engage. More simply, we are afraid. Afraid of being awkward, afraid of embarrassing ourselves, afraid, in a cruel twist, of isolating ourselves by being perceived as weird.

Social interactions can be anxiety-provoking. Just ask Winnie Penniman, whom I learned (during my advisees' quest), by her own admission, has a propensity to go in for the hug when a simple handshake or high-five is called for. That is embarrassing. In fact, what Epley's research (as well as Kolker and Wolin's) shows is that the thing that gets in the way of social connection is also hardwired. Because belonging is so central to our survival, we tend to avoid anything that threatens it. We are wired to connect, but we are also wired to survive.

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So what to do? The answer is really rather simple: “When in doubt, reach out.” Research shows that the majority of people actually want to connect. They are far more interested, empathetic, and excited to engage than your anxious brain predicts.

So seniors, remember that wherever you go, you all enjoy home-field advantage. Your supporters have filled this gym today. In addition to your immediate families and friends here, you have extended family, friends, and supporters of all kinds all over. People you don’t even know are excited to connect with and to support you.

In a world where, more than ever, people live and work alone, where texting has replaced talking, and online is more frequent than in person, your ability to connect is your superpower. It is also a choice – one that you will make every day. Make it a habit. As E.M. Forester wrote in *Howard’s End* over a century ago: “*Live in fragments no longer. Only connect...*”

Class of 2026, as you forge new connections and nourish existing ones, though it might make you feel awkward or insecure, remember, you’re enough. We love you, and we are rooting for you always.