

Excerpt from Lady of the Hall remarks, Ashley Zhu

May 27, 2018

Excerpt from remarks, "Celebrating, going forth!"

...I have spent eight years in plaid. And to be honest, I struggled with this speech, because I do not know how to fit eight years of wonder and gratitude into five minutes. So I did what my best friend would do, and I looked to nature for help. Plants teach us the simplest and possibly the most profound message, that no matter our space or shape, we have the ability to grow, and to go forth...

Today, we celebrate light.

If passing the torch is a passing of light, then today is a celebration of that brightness, from not only the seniors to the juniors, but the light that passes between all of us. Our brightest light, Dr. Balmer, told us we were always enough. You are your own light that in turn inspires more of the same. No matter what college you're looking at, no matter what grade you got on your exam, know that you have been provided with enough senses to look, and touch, and love, and with this, you have the capacity for brilliance.

To the seniors. With a last name like Zhu, I have had the extraordinary privilege of always being the very last in line. Through endless cycles of calling role, random fire drills, and assembly seats, you will always know precisely where to find me, heading up the back! What people don't realize, is that my position from the end of the line is a privilege. I have had the honor of watching the entire grade grow up in front of me, going through the cycles, from 5th grade until senior year. And now, we have new lawns, new galaxies in our futures. But "we're smart and capable, so we'll pull it off" *wink*.

In elementary school, I never spoke. I didn't know how, and I was so shy. I didn't feel like I had anything worthwhile to contribute to a conversation, and so I kept quiet. In fifth grade, so many people told me to "come out of my shell" that I said that a turtle was my spirit animal.

Harpeth Hall has given me the greatest gift of all, which is a voice. I can stand up here and sing a song of myself, and I will forever be thankful for that. Eight years ago, I was just a girl looking for a place that would hold her. In the process, I have found not only a place beloved, but a family of astonishing, strong, women. We empower, we encourage, and we brighten ourselves.

The final quote I'll share from Whitman's *Song of Myself* is as follows, "I do not know what is untried and afterward, but I know it is sure and alive and sufficient." We are learning, in graceful fits and starts, how to sing. Every year is another expansion, another root grown into the ground here, while our branches reach out into the sky.

And so we grow, and so we go forth. These songs of ourselves will continue into our futures, but for now, while we are in the present, know that you have not only "pulled it off", but become better, *stronger*, and certainly more beautiful.

Thank you.