Cultivating Spiritual Academics for Leadership–A Presidential Perspective

Thomas B. Coburn*

*Naropa University

Copyright ©2005 by the authors. All rights reserved.
http://journals.naspa.org/jcc
Cultivating Spiritual Academics for Leadership–A Presidential Perspective

Thomas B. Coburn

Abstract

A reprint of a speech given at the 2005 Institute on College Student Values, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL February 3-5, 2005.
Cultivating Spiritual Academics for Leadership—A Presidential Perspective

By Thomas B. Coburn
A reprint of a speech given at the 2005 Institute on College Student Values, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL February 3-5, 2005

From my perspective as president of Naropa University, where “contemplative education” has been our goal for the past thirty years, there are three things to be said in linking spirituality and leadership educationally.

First, a word about history. Naropa was founded in 1974 by the Tibetan Buddhist meditation master and scholar, Chogyam Trungpa. Originally a summer institute emphasizing meditation, philosophy, religious studies, and the creative arts—with particular emphasis on the arts since they are the academic disciplines closest to meditation in how they expand conventional consciousness—Naropa moved quickly to offering credit-bearing courses, eventually added advanced undergraduate offerings to transfer students, and now offers full four-year Bachelor of Arts and Fine Arts degrees in nine majors and ten Master’s programs in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. The University has roughly 1200 students, about 40% of them undergraduates, with 60 ranked faculty and about 175 adjuncts. Accredited since 1986, Naropa’s best-known program is probably its writing program, established by Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman as the “Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics,” but it is rivaled in popularity and quality by our programs in transpersonal psychology and religious studies.

However, the historical roots of Naropa go much deeper. I have suggested that Naropa actually sits at the confluence of two long, broad historical rivers. One river has its headwaters 2500 years ago in classical India, in the experience of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha. Over the centuries, the ensuing tradition has flowed over varied terrain, interacting with and enriching each culture it came in contact with, drawing out a contemplative dimension from even as unpromising a tradition as the martial tradition of Japan. The other river has its headwaters in the eastern Mediterranean at about the same point in history, not in the experience of a single individual, but in the creative matrix that was classical Greece. The tradition that was born there, the liberal arts tradition, has also over the centuries flowed over varied cultures, enriching each of them. Since 1974, these two rivers have come together in Boulder, Colorado, a confluence that has never in human history happened before. Naropa University takes its name from the 11th century abbot of India’s renowned Nalanda University, the largest university anywhere in the ancient world, Buddhist in inspiration but with a broadly ecumenical vision. Naropa the abbot was chosen as the namesake for Naropa University because of his personal discovery and subsequent insistence that disciplined knowledge of the external world be balanced by disciplined knowledge of the inner world—that intellectual accomplishment be balanced by emotional maturity, that self-knowledge precede and accompany all other learning.
From another historical angle, what we are about at Naropa is recapturing the holistic vision of education that once prevailed in the West, before the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution tacked away from that vision in their fascination with cognitive activity, in their fascination with the understanding and mastery of the external, material world, and in their understanding of words as something written rather than something spoken. When we describe our mission as “contemplative education,” we do not with that phrase declare our intent to produce only reclusive quietists, for history shows that contemplatives have lived their lives along a spectrum. At one end are those whose inner life has led them to withdraw from the world—the Christian Desert Fathers, Milarepa and the famous Himalayan yogis of India, Thomas Merton—but at the other end are those whose interiority cultivates awareness of the interconnectedness of the world and whose compassion moves them into the world in order to transform it, deepening their spirituality in the process. One thinks of Hildegard of Bing, Thich Naht Hanh, Gandhi, or Martin Luther King. Moreover, of course, in order to change the world, one must understand how it works. Therefore, our assignment at Naropa has an intellectual, conventional liberal arts component to it: understanding the world. Its other component is to help students in the disciplined exploration of their inner lives, in becoming contemplatives themselves. Our goal is to display for students the range of implications for what it means to be contemplative, from being a solitary artist, scholar, or counselor, to being an activist community organizer or lawyer, so that each can decide for him- or herself how to bring the contemplative life to fruition, recognizing, of course, that these choices will change over the course of time, as individuals grow and circumstances change.

My second point is, in part, autobiographical and speaks to the nature of liberal education today. Throughout my years as academic dean at a conventional liberal arts college, a position I held just prior to becoming president of Naropa, I claimed that the single most pressing issue for educators in the 21st century is helping students learn to engage constructively with those who are not like themselves. (Since diversity work is necessarily reflexive, this actually means, how do we help ourselves learn to engage constructively with those who are not like ourselves.) No matter where I said this, on campus or off, in the academic world or beyond, virtually no one disagreed. Yet what kind of tools do we have, I found myself asking, in learning to engage others across the many boundaries and markers of difference? The conventional skills that we claim to cultivate in liberal education are those of reading, researching, writing, and speaking. We increasingly prize “discussion,” but as Carol Trosset has discovered, when you ask students what they mean by discussion, they say, “the opportunity to persuade others of the rightness of my position.” They do not say, “The opportunity to open myself up to others’ points of view, so that I might then change my own position.” Where in the conventional academy do we cultivate what I have come to believe is perhaps the most important liberal arts skill of all, the art of listening—listening to the other, in all of his, her or their otherness, listening without judging—and listening to one’s own innermost self—not to the head, for we know all too well what we think—but to the heart, to our deepest intuitions and values? Naropa, I came to see, at first from afar and now up close, understands all this. It understands the reciprocal nature of our existence, what Thich Naht Hanh calls “interbeing.” In doing so, it rounds out a contemporary understanding of liberal education, inner and outer, self and other. Similarly, it provide a deeper rationale for the mainstream educational activity of service or community learning,
by providing it with a philosophical, even ontological rationale: we are all, at bottom, interconnected, interdependent, and the wellbeing of each is intertwined with that of others, so compassion is the natural outcome of a genuinely holistic education.

Finally, then, a word about leadership, which is linked in this conference to spiritual and moral development. The single point I would make is to note the convergence between three recent observations, originating in very different contexts. The first comes from that great advocate and commentator on the liberal arts, Martha Nussbaum. In a recent article titled “Compassion and Terror,” Nussbaum builds on classical and Enlightenment thought to develop a theory of critical compassion. She closes with a recommendation and an observation. The former is that “an education in common human weakness and vulnerability should be a very profound part of the education of all children. Children should learn to be tragic spectators and to understand with subtlety and responsiveness the predicaments to which human life is prone. Through stories and dramas, they should learn to decode the suffering of others, and this decoding should deliberately lead them into lives both near and far, including the lives of distant humans and the lives of animals.” Her observation is that “the chances of success in this enterprise will be greater if the society in question does not overvalue external goods of the sort that cause envy and competition.”

The second observation comes from a very different source, from one of the pioneers in developing a fresh, contemporary understanding of leadership in the business world. Jim Collins, author of Good to Great, a study of the dynamics of success in this arena, writes, “We were surprised, shocked really, to discover the type of leadership required for turning a good organization into a great one. Compared to high-profile leaders with big personalities who make headlines and become celebrities, the good-to-great leaders appear to have come from Mars. Self-effacing, quiet, reserved, even shy—these leaders are a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will. They are more like Lincoln and Socrates than Patton or Caesar.”

The third observation comes from the Dalai Lama. In an op-ed piece titled “The Monk in the Lab” that appeared in the New York Times not long ago, the Dalai Lama reported results emerging from neuroscience laboratories at the University of Wisconsin and the University of California at San Francisco. They show that “mindfulness meditation [practice] strengthens the neurological circuits that calm a part of the brain that acts as a trigger for fear and anger. This raises the possibility that we have a way to create a kind of buffer between the brain’s violent impulses and our actions,” virtually creating a new kind of human being, one who can manage his or her emotions toward constructive engagement with others. Brain-scans show that mindfulness training for people in high stress jobs, people who are not themselves Buddhists, increases brain activity in precisely those parts of the brain that form positive emotions. The Dalai Lama writes: “The world today needs citizens and leaders who can work toward ensuring stability and engage in dialogue with the ‘enemy’—no matter what kind of aggression or assault they may have endured [or whether they are dealing with global or intimately interpersonal issues] . . . . The calamity of 9/11 demonstrated that modern technology and human intelligence guided by hatred can lead to immense destruction . . . . To respond wisely and effectively, we need to be guided by more
healthy states of mind, not just to avoid feeding the flames of hatred, but also to respond skillfully. We would do well to remember that the war against hatred and terror can be waged on this, the internal front, too.”

That, I believe, is what we are doing at Naropa University: helping students wage the war against hatred on the internal front, creating a new kind of human being, who is turning out to be the kind of leader Jim Collins has discovered is so effective in leading complex organizations, while also helping students learn in conventional liberal arts fashion about the external world. The cornerstone of this work is contemplative practice, which varies by course and by department. A former president of Naropa has observed, “The unspoken bias of [our] approach is that the best way to train the mind and to observe oneself at a deep level is via the laboratory of sitting meditation, viewed not as a religious exercise but as a practical educational tool.” The simplest definition of what this means is found, perhaps, in the epigraph of the Naropa faculty’s document on “The Role of Contemplative Practice in Education at Naropa University.” It is a quotation, not from a Buddhist or Asian source, but from the great American philosopher/educator, William James: “The faculty of bringing back a wandering attention over and over again is the very root of judgment, character, and will. An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence.”

Focused attention deepens spirituality, and it characterizes great leaders. They are integrally related in our work at Naropa University.

Works Cited


