It’s common knowledge in higher education that the composition of an institution’s student body is as important to student learning as the credentials of the faculty or the shape of the curriculum. That’s why diversity matters: we learn more when engaging regularly with those who are not like ourselves. It’s also why mainstream colleges go to such extremes to recruit intellectually talented students: they will learn a lot from one another.

Naropa recognizes the logic here, but since our mission of contemplative education distinguishes us from the mainstream, so, too, does our effort to recruit students. We are interested in finding those students who aspire, in the words of educator Parker Palmer, “to live undivided no more.” This means undivided and grounded in one’s own personal life. It also means recognizing and consciously affirming the ways in which our individual lives are reciprocally implicated in the lives of others and in the physical environment in which we live, so that we may be agents of change in a most needy world.

The theme of this issue of naropa! is compassion in action: how inner work produces outward results and how those results, in turn, fuel further inward growth. It is filled with examples of the work Naropans do in their various roles. Let me invite you in with some words from a current student, someone who has clearly seen the integrative, activist nature of our mission:

“The devotion to contribute to community via my love for unabashed creativity is the focus of my life. . . . I once had a dream that my grandfather came back into his body to tell me to play a song. He pointed to the piano where instead of piano music were papers that documented the swindling of land from the Native American people. He asked me to play it. What I take this to mean is that the function of creativity is a sort of alchemy—that our spirits want us to take suffering, make it known, and in so doing make it beautiful. My dedication in life is to use my voice, which inevitably invites others to try out their voices—to speak up. I want to be a part of the catharsis of storytelling that helps us heal this planet. As part of the loving-kindness meditation goes, ‘May we be healed. May we be the source of healing for each other.’

Can you imagine having this young woman as a fellow student—how much you would learn from each other in your shared aspiration to leave the world a better place than you found it? I can, and so can her fellow students, which is why Naropa is the first choice of 95% of our students, both undergraduate and graduate.

To describe this fundamental but often overlooked way in which our private lives are connected to those of others, peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh has coined the wonderful word “interbeing.” I love this word because it so succinctly captures the movement from wisdom to compassionate action that lies at the heart of Naropa’s mission, the linkage of peace within and peace without. Please read on for some wonderful examples of the musical alchemy of which our student dreams.

Thomas B. Coburn
President