



NAROPA UNIVERSITY
OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

Remarks by President Stuart Lord at Convocation

August 26, 2009

Greetings! We are very fortunate as a university because there is a time and a place for us to gather and symbolically mark a new beginning. Today we assemble in the annual ceremony of renewal and reunion that marks the beginning of another academic year and that formally welcomes those who join us for the first time.

I am pleased this afternoon to greet my colleagues from the faculty, administration, and staff, and to welcome new and returning graduate and undergraduate students, and other members of the community. This afternoon, as we start a new year, we have the opportunity to begin with a fresh perspective. If, together, we want to make a difference in the world, if in fact, we want to BE the difference in the world, we must, in the spirit of the Naropa education, use this opportunity to contemplate our goals and thus ground our perspective.

We gather here today as a community, as a group of individuals with personal goals yet a common value system. During the course of this academic year, we will each celebrate our own individual achievements, be they in course work, extracurricular activities or administrative challenges. Because of our commitment to diversity, we have accepted you as students and hired you as staff for your unique qualities, for your individuality, for the different perspectives you bring to campus.

However, what is most important is how you share your unique qualities and individuality, thus enriching the daily experiences and scholarly opportunities of your peers and colleagues. My question for you as we begin this year is this: Are you going to be a participant or a bystander as we enter the 2009-2010 academic year? For you, as a member of the Naropa community, choices lie before you. I want to challenge you to make positive and solid choices and to be an active participant in your world and community.

For many of you, this is your first foray into independence. You will be learning new skills from making creative recipes to balancing your own checkbook. You will be confronted with a plethora of decisions, some of which have been made for you in the past. I would like to focus on just three choices I would encourage you to make this year and see how they develop in your life.

First, I ask you to choose to be an active and engaged participant in the educational process and campus community. Sometimes students arrive at college filled with ambitions and plans for what they expect college life will be like. They arrive on campus and are told where they will live and with whom they will share a room. They step into a program that has been pre-printed in an academic plan and wait for the professors to impart knowledge to them. These students see themselves as consumers. Yet a quality education is interactive. What you put into your education is what you will take from your education. Every day that you have class, you are being asked to make an investment in your future.

Be present in your education. Involve yourself in the material you are learning. Ask questions. Try to see things from a new viewpoint, and if you already do, be brave enough to share a different way of thinking. Be inquisitive. Participate in discussions. Learn to hear and value a different viewpoint, even when you may strongly disagree. Debate. Wonder. Ask. Appreciate.

Make yourself a participant in the Naropa community. Do not consider yourself some outsider who has no voice. We are in this together. Take a look around at the people who share this room with you today. TOGETHER we are the Naropa community. I speak not just to students but to all members of our community. We can rise together if we are willing to work together, to support each other and to ask difficult questions.

Being engaged means being willing to invest our own opinions and thoughts for the greater good of our community. This, my friends, is a choice. If you disregard this choice, the community loses the distinctive viewpoint that you bring to us, and you miss the opportunity to learn how to express your concerns in a constructive and valuable way. Make the choice to be an engaged participant.

Next, I would like to challenge you to make the choice to be a values-driven individual—to choose to let your values drive your decisions. You will make choices about what you really want your life to be. You will choose habits that you will build into your life. Some choices will be a matter of personal preference, such as what to have for dinner, or what to wear on the first day of class. Other choices will start to define you as a student and as an adult.

You will be asked to make decisions about the value of studying as opposed to the value of your social life. You will be asked to make decisions about your career path. I know you may think that those of us who serve as members of the administration and faculty are out of touch with the issues you face, but we have been where you are, and we really want you to learn to make the best choices for your own benefit.

Do you know your values? Have you thought about the basic ethical foundation for your decision-making? I challenge you to consider your values, what matters to you, as you set forth into this academic year. You may choose to just go with the flow, and make decisions on the basis of some mental coin-flip. I want to challenge you to be better. I challenge you to learn and discover your values, largely through contemplation of your daily learning and interactions, and to let those values drive the decisions you make.

Lastly, I want to challenge you to choose to act in the best interests of your future. You have a wide array of possibilities before you. Yet the best way to arrive at your goals is to start taking steps toward them today. I might say, “I have decided to become a virtuoso pianist.” Could I do so? Perhaps. But that level of accomplishment doesn’t come from a mere decision and saying it is so. The truly exceptional pianists started practicing every day as young children. They practiced, they gave recitals, and they gave themselves to their art daily, missing out on opportunities outside of music because they were determined to be the best in their field.

So it is with whatever you wish to do with your life. Maybe you are just deciding about your career path, or maybe you know but it seems like a long way away. I urge you to make decisions daily that will help you to find and develop WHAT—and WHO—you wish to be. Practice the piano if that is what you desire to do. Spend more time in the art studio or on the meditation cushion if that is your calling. Gain every piece of information you can if you wish to learn the skills you hope will become second knowledge.

We want you to live and enjoy life, but we also encourage you to think carefully about the implications of the everyday choices on the person you hope to be. Some wise sage once said, “The person you wish to be, you are already becoming.” You are now making choices to become the person you will be. I challenge you then to: Choose to be engaged as a participant in the educational process. Choose to let your values drive your decisions. And choose to act in the best interests of your future.

What you seek to find here at Naropa, you will likely find. If you seek to have a good time and party for four years, you will likely find that. If you seek to build character and enrich yourself so you can be a difference in the world, you will find that (and my seal of approval) too!

I want to close with a true story. In the Washington, DC, Metro Station on a cold January morning in 2007, a man with a violin played six Bach pieces for about 45 minutes. During that time approximately two thousand people went through the station, most of them on their way to work. After three minutes a middle-aged man noticed there was a musician playing. He slowed his pace and stopped for a few seconds and then hurried to meet his schedule.

4 minutes later: The violinist received his first dollar: a woman threw the money in the hat and, without stopping, continued to walk.

6 minutes: A young man leaned against the wall to listen to him, then looked at his watch and started to walk again.

10 minutes: A three-year-old boy stopped but his mother tugged him along hurriedly. The child stopped to look at the violinist again, but the mother pushed hard and the child continued to walk, turning his head all the time. This action was repeated by several other children. Every parent, without exception, forced their children to move on quickly.

45 minutes: The musician played continuously. Only six people stopped and listened for a short while. About twenty gave money but continued to walk at their normal pace. The man collected a total of \$32.

1 hour: He finished playing and silence took over. No one noticed. No one applauded, nor was there any recognition.

No one knew this, but the violinist was Joshua Bell, one of the greatest musicians in the world. He played one of the most intricate pieces ever written, with a violin valued at \$3.5 million. Two days before, Joshua Bell sold out a theater in Boston where the price of seats averaged \$100.

This is a true story. Joshua Bell playing incognito in the metro station was organized by the Washington Post as part of a social experiment about perception, taste and people's priorities.

So, my fellow member of the Naropa community, I ask you, what do we miss in the every day? What priorities do we set and how do we live them? Are we moving so quickly through life that we are too busy to be present? Do we make assumptions about the people from whom we can learn simply because they are not what we expect?

I challenge you today to make this year a year of positive priorities and wise decisions. Just as Naropa will change and help form you, you have been selected to help change and help advance Naropa. Do not take this responsibility lightly, for our impact is large and growing and we expect that the impacts you make on our community will be positive and substantial. To succeed in this way, I implore you, keep your eyes and mind open, do not miss the music you might pass by in your daily routine, take the time daily to contemplate your actions and path and how your actions and path are of benefit to our community. I wish you all success in this year and look forward to celebrating our collective accomplishments. Thank you.