



Diversity Education in a **Contemplative Context**

Many years before I came to Naropa, I was suggesting to fellow educators that the single most important task for educators in the 21st century was to help our students learn to engage constructively with those who are unlike themselves. Because we as faculty and staff are implicated in this work, there is a reflexivity to it, and we cannot claim to have all the answers. We, too, are learners. The core assignment, therefore, is also to help ourselves engage constructively across all conventional markers of difference. No one ever disagreed with me about the central importance of this work.

This charge is important for many reasons, not the least of which is that it lies at the intersection of intellectual growth, emotional maturity and ethics. The importance and complexity of this work is thus often matched by its difficulty. The title of Deborah Tannen's insightful book, *The Argument Culture*, suggests why this is the case: we are more interested in talking and arguing our way toward who's #1, in what makes people and things different, rather than in commonalities, in what holds us together and in collaboration. Correspondingly, when a researcher recently sought to understand what students mean when they say they want more discussion in the classroom, she found they meant: "The opportunity to persuade others of the rightness of my position," rather than "The opportunity to listen to others, so that I might change my point of view." Here, as elsewhere, Naropa University has an enormous contribution to make to the expanded practice of education in the 21st century with our understanding of contemplative education.

Virtually every college in the country aspires to cultivate in its students the abilities to read, to write and to speak. Very few aspire to cultivate the flip side of speaking, which is listening. At Naropa, deep listening is an integral part of contemplative

education. It means, on the one hand, an ability to listen to oneself, not just to the head—which already gets more than its share of attention—but to the heart, learning to listen carefully to one's intuitions as well as one's "intellections." It means, on the other hand, a disciplined willingness to listen to the other(s), across all boundaries of difference—race, class, gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation and so on—without trying to straighten her/him/them out. Just attentive, caring listening. In a world where the facts of diversity and difference are so often fractious and contentious, the deep, disciplined listening that is part of contemplative education offers a glimmer of what it might mean actually to *engage and celebrate the differences* that so often divide us, rather than seeing them as sources of conflict. This deep, reciprocal listening combines with intellectual understanding of social, economic and political issues to prepare our students to carry on the work that has claimed the commitment of so many of our alumni/ae, inserting themselves into the "hurt points" of the world as agents of reconciliation.

The demographic face of America, and of higher education, is changing. As other institutions continue to take seriously the huge challenges of diversity education, I believe that the wise among them will see the enormously important and promising convergence between diversity education and contemplative education that we are pursuing in our work at Naropa University.

Thomas B. Coburn, President