

"Of Peaks and Birds"

**Excerpts from Naropa University Graduation Remarks**

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Thomas B. Coburn, President

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Beyond these words of welcome, I want to offer one brief reflection on the truly immense significance of what you graduates have accomplished at this particular time in human history. From my perspective as an educator and historian, you are not just today completing your academic degree programs. You are also participating in an evolution of human consciousness that is now well under way, is accelerating, and that will be with all of us for the rest of our days.

The starting-point for my line of thinking occurred last fall, when I was invited to take part in a panel to introduce the unique resources of Boulder to some distinguished visitors. The fellow who organized this panel, a Boulder resident familiar with Naropa, pulled together an environmental scientist from the Rocky Mountain Institute, an environmental lawyer, and Anne Parker, chair of Naropa's environmental studies department, whom I introduced. The scientist did a powerful and deeply disturbing PowerPoint presentation on the natural environment, revolving around the concept of "peak oil," that is, around the fact that there is now an ever-diminishing supply of this non-renewable resource. We are past the peak of the earth's ever-diminishing oil supply. We humans, he said, have been virtual drug addicts to this chemical for the past 150 years, and our supplier—the natural world—is now cutting off our drug supply. When the environmental lawyer spoke, he addressed a similar situation, particularly apparent here along the Front Range, in what he called "peak water." Here, too, our past ways of behavior are no longer sustainable, presenting huge challenges for us and for future generations. This precious resource, too, is finite, and we are today challenged to revise the ways we use water, the very building-block of life. As I then turned to introduce Anne, I realized that the same logic applies to the world of education. For decades, indeed for centuries, the Western educational system has also been operating on assumptions that are no longer sustainable, and it is critical that we therefore start talking about having reached "peak education" with a corresponding need to develop new, post-peak educational models, models that are sustainable and beneficial for life on this planet. The assumptions that have prevailed for so long and are now outmoded include an emphasis on intellectual achievement, while ignoring emotion and intuition; an emphasis on rational thought rather than our dream life, on the left brain rather than the right; an emphasis on objectifying and manipulating both the natural world and other humans for our own individual or group advantage; an emphasis on education as a private gain rather than a public good; an emphasis on material gain at the expense of deeper happiness. I believe that the seeds of the financial collapse on Wall Street, and the now world-wide financial crisis, were planted, in significant part, by an inadequate educational system that has outlived its sustainability and viability. As with oil and with water, so, too, with education—these old assumptions are dinosaurs. They

have reached and surpassed their viability and sustainability. It is time for new ways of thinking and behaving on all these fronts. This is particularly challenging for those of us who were educated in mainstream, often elite institutions where the assumptions of “peak education” have been particularly entrenched. We are now past the peak in education, as we are in oil and water consumption, and in desperate need of new ways of learning and new ways of being. The task here is immense. As our friend and mentor, Reb Zalman Schachter Shalomi, put it recently after Passover, the work that lies in front of us makes the parting of the Red Sea waters look like child’s play. As Einstein put it so beautifully, “we cannot solve our problems with the same thinking [the same level of consciousness] we used when we created them.”

It is here, I believe, that contemplative education comes into its own and provides a foretaste of what the new world must look like. The fact of the matter is that the inner life of each of us is a resource, a resource that has been underutilized, has been virtually ignored, in the education that has been administered—or should I say inflicted?—on students in American colleges and universities for the past many decades, even for centuries. But, as each of you, today’s graduates, knows at first hand, the inner resources that are cultivated by contemplative education are quite unlike other resources because they are unlimited, and they are renewable. They have no boundaries. They are, in fact, infinite. As the Upanisads, those haunting mystical intuitions from classical India put it: this inner resource “. . . is infinitely complete in every way. Whatever comes forth from it is complete in just the same way. It is never diminished, no matter how much or whatever comes forth from it.” In a resource-challenged environment, does it not make sense to draw on this inner resource more consistently?!

You, today’s graduates, know the answer to this question, because you have been doing it. Like countless contemplatives before you, around the globe and throughout the course of history, you have found that, in the contemplative life, your individual troubles have abated, if not evaporated, your hearts have opened—and you now find yourselves ready to serve others in ways that can scarcely be imagined by the old consciousness, that old and outmoded, dinosaur kind of education that is still served up in most institutions. You are, quite obviously, to be congratulated today for the completion of your Naropa degree. But, beyond that, you are to be congratulated for having chosen this kind of education, which anticipates the needs of the new world into which we are emerging. You are today becoming alumni/ae of a new way of learning that is distinctively appropriate to life in this new post-“peak education” era.

For all of the challenges that lie before us in further developing this new and emerging way of living and learning that is more sustainable for all creatures on earth and for the earth itself, I am optimistic that, led by people like you, today’s graduates, we are up to the task that lies ahead. I take heart from people like you—and I take heart from what happened to dinosaurs in the course of evolutionary history. While the full story of the dinosaurs has yet to be written, the majority of paleontologists working today agree that dinosaurs, particularly small theropods, are the grandparents of present-day parrots, partridges and pigeons. In other words, some kinds of dinosaurs,

faced with the threat of extinction, over time developed wings and became birds. If this can happen to dinosaurs, surely this can happen to educational systems—and, as you, today's graduates know, it is happening at Naropa. As you now take flight, we have high hopes, not just for you as individuals, but for the new kind of human being that you model—one that is better able to draw on inner resources, as well as outer ones, and so is better able to create and to live in sustainable peace with all beings and with the world we share. For your accomplishments, and for the hope you bring to the human condition, I can only say, thank you, congratulations, and Godspeed!