



What binds us Together


A good many years ago, when I was researching various graduate programs that might enable me to explore my interests at the intersection of education and religious studies, I was urged to enroll in a survey course on world religions at Harvard University. I did so, and within two months I knew I had found my life's work. There were two things about this particular course's approach to the subject matter that drew me in.

The first was it enabled me to see the rising tide of interest in Asian religions, which so much characterized youth culture at that time, as part of the global history of religious life: it anchored current events in the long, broad and compelling sweep of human religiousness. It was, of course, this same rising tide that drew students to Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche when he first came to the United States in 1970 and which led to the founding of Naropa four years later.

The second key feature of this course was the way it invited us to think about religious life. Rather than looking for an "essence" of each of the dozen or so religious traditions that the course surveyed, it urged us to think of religious life as consisting of two components: a cumulative tradition that is historically dynamic and always unfolding, varying by time and place; and the integration of that tradition in the faith of individual human beings. The scholarly rationale for this approach was laid out by the professor, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, in his book *The Meaning and End of Religion*, which has become a modern classic. What makes this approach so exciting is the way it captures the existential power that individuals experience in religious life.

As Smith puts it: "Faith is not a factor in a person's life, alongside others. . . . It is not one element in the total pattern of that person's life; rather, it *is* the pattern that the other elements form."

This way of thinking about religious or spiritual or contemplative life is enormously useful when considering the ongoing vitality of an institution like Naropa University, as this issue of *Naropa Magazine* does. Although Naropa University is relatively young in the universe of American higher education, we do have a history and, like all histories, it has been dynamic. We should not look for any simple, linear core to what we have been, nor to what we are today. Rather we are an ever-growing cumulative tradition in which individuals have discerned a meaningful pattern in a variety of ways. What we have in this issue of *Naropa Magazine*, then, is a range of testimonies from people who have known Naropa at different points in its history, in each of whom the cumulative tradition has congealed in existentially meaningful ways. What binds them together is the same spirit that once bound together those who were building the fabled city of Camelot: "They are building still, seeing the city is built to music, therefore never built at all and therefore built forever."



Thomas B. Coburn, President