



## NAROPA UNIVERSITY

### **Faculty Address**

Andrew Schelling

December 12, 2009

Today we have gathered to celebrate a threshold or gateway for all of you who are graduating this December. 5356' above sea level, we meet on a parcel of land that sits within view of the Continental Divide, at another remarkable threshold or margin, where three realms meet: sky, plains, and mountains. A tool cache dated at about 10,000 years ago was recently unearthed from a garden inside the Boulder city limits, so we know that humans have lived around here since the end of the last ice age. I find it worth musing on the likelihood that those far-off Paleo-humans, separated from us by 300 generations, had their own training grounds for wisdom, their own centers of learning, and something we might distantly recognize as a graduation ceremony.

This floodplain river valley which houses Naropa's three campuses, has also long been a home to cottonwood, willow, many different berries, plums, chokecherries, and on our Arapaho campus stand the three largest sycamores in Colorado, as well as the ghost of the largest chestnut. We humans share this impressive threshold with mule deer, coyote, black bear, eagles, falcons, & a host of other creatures, including the mountain lion.

I want to mention several other margins or thresholds we are sitting on. One happens in time: today we sit a few warm breaths away from the Winter Solstice, a margin between darkness and light, coldness and warmth, the earth's elliptical swing away from the sun, and its return. My earlier mention of bear and coyote reminds me that we also reside at a shifting interface of urban and wilderness regions.

One way to look at margins or thresholds or gateways is to imagine they have something absolute about them. To enter one is to leave another irrecoverably behind. Another way to perceive them, is to observe that thresholds are really nodal points in ongoing cycles. Snow in the mountains, water in our reservoirs, ice on our creek surfaces, vividly show how reliant we are on hydrologic or water cycles. Mountains remind us of geologic cycles—all that red sandstone of our foothills once the bed of a long-ago ocean. The plants and animals show us life cycles, quicker or slower than our own. We have cycles of money, cycles of friendship, love affairs, food, gifts, and cycles of learning. Our economies have cycles of boom and bust, and as you prepare to go forward at a bust point in world economy, remember that this may be a high point along our cycle of learning.

And, as you prepare to walk away from Naropa—or to cycle away—each of you is ceremonially manifesting a moment in one of the finest cycles devised by Western civilization. We call this cycle “higher education”—a complicated human affair that sits on top of all the natural & social cycles.

Some people regard “higher education” as an oxymoron, something like “military intelligence,” and they have a point. Their view is to be respected, because we all know that real life lessons happen to everyone, whether you go to school or not.

I’m going to read a poem from old India that I have held up as cautionary for a long time. It is by an anonymous poet who may have lived 1000 years ago. This poet does the sorts of things I do, namely he writes poems, studies old languages, and meets with younger people in the classroom. By the sound of his poem though, this scholar who I have translated from his native Sanskrit into our modern American diction, was not terribly happy, and I believe it is because he lost track of something innately human.

I’ve never fastened  
a bracelet  
white like the autumn  
moon’s light  
to my wrist.  
Nor have I tasted  
the pliant lip of a  
young wife, trembling  
with uncertainty.  
I obtained no  
renown in the places  
the gods inhabit,  
by knowledge  
or by swordsmanship,  
but spent my bitter days  
in a college  
classroom, among the  
noisy, impudent  
students.

The challenge, of course, in college and out of college, amid noisy impudent street life bustle or simply in the mental clamor of your own active minds, is to obtain some renown in the places the gods inhabit. As that old Indian poet observed, to win it by the practice of love, through the application of knowledge, or by a precise display of swordsmanship.

One hope I have, is that at Naropa you have not had to suffer in a classroom as that poet of old India did, who seems the sort that gets called pejoratively an “academic,” for his inability to embrace clamorous life. Old India—and the legendary Buddhist civilization that spread forth from it—did indeed have its own version of academics. They were called *pandita*, or pundits—and held up for ridicule, as they often are today—by the

people who practiced love, knowledge (real knowledge), or swordsmanship out in the vitality of the streets. And who thereby achieved renown “in the places the gods inhabit.”

I am a poet, not a religious specialist. That means I don't have much theology to throw towards the gods, or the goddesses. But if someone presses me to say just who these characters are, my best answer would run something like this. They are the figures who seem to inhabit notable points within the great cycles of nature. They are members of the lineages of earth, water, sky—of mountain, plains, & river. They are not verifiable by science, but many of us have seen them too many times for word of their existence to disappear from us. The gods are what we humans with our active imaginations, good singing voices, and long childhoods, see & celebrate in the rivers and waterfalls, among the flowering plants, maybe in the skies or high in the snow-peaks.

Well, as they used to say up in Haida Gwaii—the Princess Charlotte Islands of modern history—“the world is as sharp as a knife.” *Tlgaay higha tlabju' waaga*. More accurately, the world is sharp as a woodcutter's blade standing straight up. This upright axe blade is of course our modern sword. The world. It is what will make all of you swordsmen—or people of the sword—as well as people of love, people of knowledge. You don't need to go through your front door, or out the gates of Naropa, to find that sword. It sits by your side all the time. Along with love & knowledge, it is there from birth, you do nothing to acquire it, and my hope is that at Naropa you have learnt that nobody can take it away from you.

If you have come to know these qualities as innately yours, then you will understand something said by that bewhiskered old North America Buddha curmudgeon, Henry David Thoreau—

Beware of enterprises that require new clothes.

New clothes? Old poems? Let's have old clothes & new poems for graduation!

I am now going to join Mark Miller's tenor saxophone with poems by four of you who are graduating today: Tiff Parish, Joyce Joseph, Shy Mukerjee, and Adam Perry. Only Adam is not here, as he waits in Santa Fe for the birth of his first child—