



NAROPA UNIVERSITY

Graduation Address

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December 12, 2009

Esteemed faculty, families, staff, honored guests, and most especially, graduating students.

In the summer of 1974, I had the great privilege of attending the first Naropa summer institute.

That summer was an amazing festival—there were Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Yogis, mystics of all stripes, physicists, psychologists, artists, poets, dancers. Like Woodstock a few years before, it hit some fault line in the zeitgeist.

Originally planning for maybe a couple hundred people, the founders were overwhelmed with interest from both prospective faculty and student. By the summer, nearly 2000 participants had signed up for two five week summer programs. That summer was an amazing display of wisdom culture – I took courses in phenomenology, 20th century physics, Buddhist thought and meditation practice, Tibetan thangka painting, yoga. I heard Ram Dass’ stories of his travels in India on Tuesdays and Thursday evenings, and on Mondays and Wednesdays the exceedingly provocative teachings of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche.

I remember the opening convocation, at Mackey Auditorium on the CU campus. That evening, Trungpa Rinpoche, the founder of Naropa University, told a story about who Naropa was, and why he had named the school after him.

Naropa was a great scholar at Nalanda University in India, and had become the abbot of Nalanda at a very young age thanks to his intellectual brilliance. One day when he was studying, a shadow fell across the book he was reading. He turned to see an old woman leaning on a walking stick. She pointedly asked him what he was doing. He said, well, I’m reading these books about wisdom. Hm, she said, “Do you understand the words or the sense?” Naropa replied, I understand the words...and the woman was overjoyed, dancing and waving her walking stick. Thinking he had made this old woman very happy, Naropa thought he could make it even better by saying “...and I understand the

sense, too!” At that point the woman began weeping, threw away her stick, and glared at him very angrily.

Naropa was confused. He asked “How is it that you were so happy at first, and then when I said I also understood the sense, you became so upset?” And she said, I had hope for you when you said you understood the words, but when you said you understood the sense, I knew you were lying. I really expected more from a great scholar like you!”

Trungpa Rinpoche went on to say that his dream for Naropa University was that it would last for hundreds of years, as a place where students could learn both the words and the sense of the world’s wisdom and apply this to the challenges of contemporary life.

Not long ago I facilitated a planning session for a group of engineering professors at a state university, a group that was examining how to improve the learning experience for their students. One of the professors talked about the financial crisis in higher education. He said that the courses where you have 500 students in a large lecture hall are the most profitable. Trouble is, if all that’s involved is a one-way transmission of information, we have this thing now called the internet that can do it much more efficiently. Their question was: “What’s the differentiating value of a residential higher education in the 21st century?”

Good question! As I saw them grapple with it, I felt good about Naropa and its opportunities for the future. Naropa was founded on the idea of integrating the words with the sense, the intellect with intuition, with the emotions, with the body. It’s a felt, physical journey, not a downloading of information. It’s not something you can get on the internet.

Thirty years out from the MA Psychology program I graduated from in 1978, I can tell you that, for me and my classmates, going to Naropa was among the foundational experiences of our lives, no matter where we went afterwards, in my case a Master’s in Business Administration, and a career in consulting. The emphasis on a deeper way of learning and knowing is now more important than ever, and I’m inspired thinking of the contributions you will all make in the future.

We live in interesting times. Our economic model of growth is running into the physical limits of the world—peak oil, ever expanding population, financial instruments hardly anyone understands bankrupting our society, species extinction, rising sea levels.

Sustainability is the term used to describe finding ways to live on this planet within the carrying capacity we’ve been given.

Regardless of whether you believe we’ve hit peak oil, or whether you believe that global temperatures might increase 10 degrees F in this century, we have collectively created a world that we don’t really want to live in anymore.

There was a cartoon in USA Today earlier this week. The scene is Copenhagen. There's a speaker in front of the group gesturing toward a slide that outlines desirable outcomes including:

- Energy independence
- Preserve rainforests
- Green jobs
- Livable cities
- Clean water and air
- Healthy children

There's an angry looking man in the back of the room, no doubt thinking about those hacked emails, shouting "What if it's a big hoax and we create a better world for nothing??"

This is not just a problem for our physical survival. It's a spiritual crisis. The prevailing world view sets us apart from nature, and ultimately from ourselves. And the more efficient we have become, fueled by abundant oil, the more effective we've become at isolating ourselves from one another. In effect, we have been creating a global monoculture that crowds out other species and other ways of life, and crowds out the deeper lessons of our own being.

There's a tribe in Ecuador, the Achuar, who practice active dreaming. In the mid 90's, a group of north Americans met the elders of this tribe. The elders had had a dream in which they saw how the destruction of their own rainforest environment and way of life had its roots far away, in the North. Here. These elders asked the visitors to convey a request to us—a request that was stunning in its simplicity and directness.

They said you people of the North are destroying not only our rain forest, but your own environment and yourselves because of the nature of your dreams—your values, desires and appetites. Their request was for us to change our dream—OUR DREAM—in order to save the earth.

We need to recognize that there is knowledge, spirit, and intelligence embedded in nature. And, that we are not some alien species set apart from that, but rather we are the eyes of the world, a critical part of the evolving spiral of life.

What each of us does matters.

Your dreams matter.

For the last 250 years, we have been living in what Peter Senge calls the "industrial age bubble", based on a "take, make, waste" worldview. Behind this way of life has been a set of attitudes and beliefs about nature, the universe, economics, wealth, and business. We tend to think of these beliefs as "common sense", or even as objective natural law. But in fact, these beliefs are received knowledge, the inheritance of centuries of cultural,

political, and philosophical tradition. Our way of business is based on learned behavior, not natural law.

With this worldview, we've created unprecedented wealth, knowledge and communication. And, we've created environmental toxicity, cheap throw away products, denatured industrially-produced food, and a culture of low self-esteem and spiritual poverty.

Since the 1960's, there has been an emerging rejection of this worldview, and a declaration of the value of healthy food and lifestyles, social justice, environmental sustainability, and spirituality.

As a business consultant and executive coach, I'm interested in how we can bring this emerging worldview down to earth, down to business. Over the last few years I've conducted research with a number of sustainable entrepreneurs, activists, and provocative thinkers, and have tried to apply the lessons from that in my consulting and coaching.

Here are some of the key principles I use in this work, a set of principles I've come to call "Sustainable Leadership". This model is focused on the business world, because I see the greatest need, and potential, for change there, but can be applied to leadership of any enterprise or organization.

There are four principles:

#1 - Business is a Complex, Living System

The models we use to visualize business, far from being abstract business school stuff, are actually critical. The metaphors we use to describe the world—like organization charts, process diagrams, and stock charts—inform our sense of what is real, our ability to imagine possibilities, and the choices we make. If we think the world is a machine, a fundamentally meaningless bunch of stuff put here for us to use, we see and act accordingly.

"Common sense" in the modern world emphasizes the separation of the self from nature, and a linear notion of cause and effect. This shows up in business planning models that view markets and organizations as machines, to be "managed" via command and control. But today, the business metaphor is beginning to change from that of a linear, mechanical system to a complex, biological one. Your business environment is more like a forest than a set of gears. As a result, today's emerging business planning models imagine enterprises as interdependent networks of resilient, individual players. Processes of planning and change are not straight lines from A to B, but cycles involving action, learning and adaptation.

#2 – Everybody Matters

If you see your business environment as a machine, you want to improve your ability to manipulate it. If you view your business environment as being more like a forest, you see

a variety of plants and animals that behave according to their own rules, rules that you need to understand and respect.

In the industrial age model, business exists solely to make a profit for shareholders. Sustainable leadership strategies, on the other hand, begin with the intention to respect the values and needs of all the stakeholders. The forest is only healthy if all the plants and animals in it are healthy. The value of a business model is maximized when all the stakeholders—investors, suppliers, employees, consumers, communities—benefit from being a part of it. And in a surprising number of cases, returns to investors turn out to be just as good or better.

#3 – Collaboration and Trust are Essential Management Tools

Industrial age systems get people to work together by command and control, carrots and sticks. Networked organizations require greater skill to enable people to collaborate. Why is this essential? In a complex world, no one person can see the whole picture. Wise leaders tap into the collective intelligence and motivation around them. This means building trust.

Effective collaboration requires trust in order to creatively innovate and solve problems, negotiate healthy win-win agreements, and manage performance based on those agreements rather than on power alone.

#4 – Authenticity is the Foundation of Leadership

Getting things done through collaboration requires personal authenticity, rather than force. To be authentic is to know and act from the heart, as well as the head. In the language of the heart, having the right questions is more valuable than having all the answers. Authenticity is a confident, wholehearted state of being that puts all these ideas into practice—purpose, complexity, interconnectedness, respect, and collaboration.

I believe all of us have drunk from a deep well of authentic practice and learning here at Naropa. The integration of intellectual study, arts, and practices like meditation and yoga develop personal resilience and creativity, integrate mind and body, and enable us to act confidently within that more complex view of reality.

These are the skills that are essential in order to build the world we want to live in, and to pass on. What is needed is the kind of wisdom culture that Naropa teaches, and I hope continues to teach for centuries to come.

I want to leave you with a quote from George Bernard Shaw:

“This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.

“I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community, and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can.

“I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle to me; it is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.”