

## Naropa University Fall Ceremony

December 13, 2008

“Peak Oil, Peak Water, Peak Education” by President Thomas B. Coburn

It is always a great privilege for me to address graduating students, and that is certainly the case this afternoon. It will come as no surprise that the first thing I want to say is “congratulations.” However, I want to say congratulations not just for one reason, but for two. The obvious reason is that we are here acknowledging and celebrating the accomplishments of these students who are now concluding their courses of study at Naropa University. This is great work, hard work that you all have accomplished, and I am proud of you, on behalf of Naropa’s faculty, Naropa’s staff, your fellow students, your friends and families. All of those people share, in varying ways, in what you have accomplished, but the bottom line is that it is work you have accomplished. Because this work has not just been cognitive and intellectual, but has entailed inner work that has asked you to come to know yourselves deeply and honestly, in ways you scarcely imagined when you began your studies with us, it has offered you challenges that most college and university graduates have never had to face during their degree programs. You have surmounted those challenges, completed your degrees and are now about to take the intellectual knowledge, the wisdom and compassion that you have cultivated with us out into the world that so sorely needs you. This is all grounds for justifiable pride, and so I invite us all to join in a rousing round of congratulations for this fall’s graduates.

I will have more to say in a moment about the threshold you are now crossing, as you leave Naropa and head off into the next chapter of your lives. But first I want to reflect on the second reason I want to offer you congratulations this afternoon. It has to do with the larger context, indeed the global context, in which your graduation takes place. I want to congratulate you for having had the wit and the courage to choose, out of all the possibilities, Naropa University as the institution from which you have earned your degree. Regardless of the particular program from which you are graduating, you have chosen to earn a degree in what we call “contemplative education.” That you have chosen *contemplative education* is the second reason I want to offer my congratulations this afternoon. Here is a story that indicates why that is such a noteworthy accomplishment.

Some months back I was invited to take part in a panel to introduce the unique resources of Boulder to some accomplished alumni of a major Eastern university. The gentleman who organized this panel, a Boulder resident who is 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 nonrenewable resource. We are beyond the peak of the earth’s 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 parallel situation, which is particularly apparent here along the Front Range, of 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 time to speak, therefore, about “peak education” as well. Those assumptions, now outmoded, include an emphasis on intellectual achievement, while ignoring emotion and intuition; 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. It is not going too far, I think, to see the seeds of the current financial collapse on Wall Street, and now around the globe, as the consequence of an inadequate educational system that has now outlived its sustainability and viability. As with oil and with water, so, too, with education, old assumptions and old ways of thinking have reached and surpassed their peaks. It is time for new ways of thinking and behaving on all these fronts. 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 will, indeed 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. As each of you, today's graduates, knows at first hand, the inner resource that is cultivated by contemplative education is quite unlike other resources because it is unlimited. It has no boundaries. It is, in fact, infinite. Here is the way the Upanisads, those haunting mystical Sanskritic intuitions from classical India describe this extraordinary inner resource. Purnam adah purnam idam/ purnat purnam udácyate/purnasya purnam adáya/purnam eva sísyate. “It 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 and whatever comes forth from it.” In a resource-challenged environment, does it not make sense to draw on this resource more consistently? You graduates know the answer to this question, because you have been doing it. You know at first hand the wisdom of what Blaise Pascal observed centuries ago: “All of an individual's troubles stem from his or her inability to sit alone, quietly, in a room for any length of time.” You have done a lot of just this kind of sitting—and other contemplative practices—in the course of your work at Naropa, and I am confident that, like countless contemplatives before you, around the globe and throughout the course of history, you have found that your individual troubles have abated, if not entirely dissolved, 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 kind of education that is still served up in most institutions. The fact that you have chosen this kind of education, contemplative education, which anticipates the needs of the new world into which we are emerging, is my second reason for congratulations this afternoon. 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.

Let me return now to the specific transition that is upon you, today's graduates, today.

One of the great pleasures I have had since arriving at Naropa is discovering that I was probably a contemplative educator long before I came to Naropa, but I had lacked the vocabulary to describe what I was doing. I don't just mean I lacked the specific Naropa language of "containers," of "bowing in and bowing out," of finding situations "workable," of taking "warrior exams," and avoiding "spiritual by-passing." I mean that my teaching, like that of others in mainstream educational institutions, lacked Naropa's overt attention to our inner lives and to the ways in which that life can be cultivated in order for us to engage more compassionately with others. As I look back on my life before Naropa, I now see that I was developing a Naropa-like appreciation of the contemplative life, but without the vocabulary. As you now head back into that world as alumni/ae, into a world that does not know the Naropa vocabulary, you will be faced with the task of translating our Naropa language into ordinary language, into something that those unfamiliar with our vocabulary and culture can understand. You will all, in some measure, become translators of the Naropa experience into a world that isn't familiar with our language. And so my gift to you as you embark on that translation work is a little scroll that I will give each of you as you cross the stage. Here is the story of that scroll.

In the spring of 2002, I was completing six years as vice president and dean at a traditional liberal arts college. Those years were good ones for the college and for me, and towards the end of that time, I got a number of queries, often from trustees, asking: Did I have a theory of management? Did I have a philosophy of deaning? I would smile and say no, I didn't approach my work in that spirit, as a manager or bureaucrat. But I then went on to say that over time I had learned a lot from my experience. Pressed further by them, I found that much of my experience congealed into short little aphorisms, little lessons gleaned from experience. At my last meeting with that institution's board of trustees, I shared with them seven of these little aphorisms. Six months later I found myself involved in the presidential search at Naropa, and I found myself questioned by faculty and staff in a similar way: what kind of administrator was I? Did I have a theory for my style of management? Some of these little aphorisms came tumbling out in my responses to these questions, and eventually, with help from my wife, Leigh, who was in the audience, I remembered all of them. On the second day of interviews, when one faculty member asked a question of me, another called out, "Tell him about the aphorisms, Coburn!" So I did. During those interview days, Leigh and I also learned about how spontaneous poems are composed at turning points in university life and captured in calligraphy by Laurie Doctor. Some months later, after I had accepted Naropa's invitation to become president, Leigh corresponded with Laurie Doctor and, for my birthday, she gifted me with a calligraphy of the seven aphorisms. What you will receive this afternoon is a copy of that calligraphy. (There is a key to the calligraphy: turn it sideways, and you'll see it is actually one of the aphorisms.) Here are the seven aphorisms. Just as they helped me bridge the journey from elsewhere into the Naropa world, so may they help you as you now cross that threshold in the opposite direction.

Anything will get better if you pay attention to it.

Don't duck the tough ones. Corollary one: go straight up the middle. Corollary two: carefully.

Pay attention to details. It will give the appearance of understanding the issues, and you'll probably learn something.

There are no enemies.

Don't pick the fruit before it's ripe.

People would rather be listened to than talked to.

Take the job with deathly seriousness, but not yourself.

Congratulations to all of you. We all wish you well in whatever lies ahead. Please do let us know of your successes in this great translation project. And Godspeed.