



NAROPA UNIVERSITY

**Master of Arts Student Speaker**

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*MFA Creative Writing*

May 8, 2010

President Lord, Naropa faculty, family, friends, and fellow graduates, I am honored to have this opportunity to speak to you on this very special day.

I'd like to thank the administration, faculty, and staff of Naropa University for making possible the educational experience that has led each of us to this day, this culmination of our work as Naropa students. I'd also like to thank the families that have supported us in this journey—whether parents, spouses, or children. Without your love, we would have been less able to deeply experience the full possibilities of an education here or elsewhere. In my own case, I would especially like to thank my seven-year-old son Aidan, who handled long separations from me when I came to two Summer Writing Programs with a grace and acceptance well beyond his years.

I first stepped foot on what is now the Naropa University campus back when it was still the Naropa Institute. It was fall 1991 or spring 1992, during my senior year of college at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. I'd discovered Naropa in a directory of graduate writing programs, sent off for more information, and was impressed by the materials I'd received. My mother and I visited Naropa together, and I immediately fell in love with both Boulder and the Naropa campus. It felt different from any other school I had attended or visited. In a way inexplicable to me at the time, it felt like home.

For a variety of personal reasons, I didn't end up going to graduate school right away. I never dreamed that it would end up being 15 years between finishing my bachelor's degree and beginning my graduate studies. I did know, however, where I wanted to do those studies: here at Naropa.

Over the years, I occasionally visited the Naropa website, wistfully looking at whatever courses were being offered that semester and envisioning myself on campus. However, by 2002 I was married, and because of my husband's career as a firefighter in Spokane, Washington, a move to Boulder was out of the question. I imagined that my graduate studies here would have to wait until he retired, but decided it would be worth the wait to attend the school that spoke to my spirit so powerfully all those years ago. I kept looking

at the website once in a while. I thought that at some point I might be able to come for one week of the Summer Writing Program as a noncredit student.

Finally, in 2005, I visited the website again and found that Naropa had begun offering a low-residency MFA in Creative Writing. I now had the option of taking online classes during the regular school year and coming to campus each year for the Summer Writing Program. It was the best of both worlds--much less delayed gratification, and I still got to attend the school I'd dreamed about for so long, and to spend time on campus with others who chose the same nontraditional educational path.

One of the things that drew me to Naropa rather than a more traditional MFA program was that at Naropa I would not only develop my skills as a writer, but also apply contemplative practices to the educational process, and consider what I would do with those skills once I'd honed them. Not just what kind of job I would aim for after graduation, but what kind of impact I would make with those new skills. That appealed to not only the writer in me, but also the activist and the lay minister. In fact, the only other graduate school I seriously considered was Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, and I have often commented that attending Naropa was like blending an MFA program with the best of the seminary experience. Where else would I be likely to take electives in topics such as Buddhism and Deep Ecology while earning a creative writing degree, and find them applicable to the writing I was doing in my core classes?

Even though I knew this school was where I belonged, I couldn't have imagined the journey I've experienced in my time as a Naropa student. For anyone who might wonder about the low-residency experience, I can say that while there are downsides to being in another state (mostly logistical ones), the sense of community is still strong. Some of my classmates from my first semester in the fall of 2007 are now among my closest friends. Other classmates have become colleagues that I am proud to partner with on both publishing and educational projects.

Both in my online classes and when I came to campus the last two summers, I realized what it was that had felt like home nearly two decades ago. It was the spirit here, the spirit of a community engaged in mindful practices, in an education that encompasses so much more than just classroom work, and in actively seeking personal growth as well as degree completion.

When I entered the MFA program, I thought of myself primarily as a poet. In my time at Naropa, I was encouraged to push beyond that limited definition of what I write, and in fact my creative thesis was almost entirely nonfiction, with only a small poetry section. I can say with certainty that I broadened my sense of myself as a writer, as well as my writing skills.

When I started the program, a lot of people asked me "what will you do with that degree?" In a response fairly uncharacteristic for me at the time, I answered that I didn't know. I knew that Naropa was where I belonged then, and I trusted that sometime between enrolling in my first classes and graduating, I would discover what I was meant to do next.

Well, here it is, graduation day. And you know what? I'm still not sure I know the answer to the question "What's next?" But I still trust that I'm on the right path, and I know that I am in good company as I leave Naropa for the wider world.

After talking with several of you, I suspect that this uncertainty about what comes next is fairly common. Like many of you, I'm still not sure what all the pieces of my post-graduation life look like. One part is that I'm pursuing credentialing in poetry therapy, a field I discovered shortly before beginning my studies here. It became increasingly attractive to me as I experienced the power of contemplative education, which seems to me to be related to poetry therapy and other forms of art therapy. In fact, much of what I experienced in classes here at Naropa could be considered therapeutic. We have been asked not only to explore our fields of study, but also to explore our own inner landscapes, to find where our authentic selves and our work intersect. That place is where we are called to work in the world.

Whatever degree you are receiving today, whatever skill sets you have gained in your time at Naropa, the question before all of us now is how we will take those skills out into the world and make it a better place.

The last paragraph of Naropa's Mission Statement says, "A Naropa education—reflecting the interplay of discipline and delight—prepares its graduates both to meet the world as it is and to change it for the better."

Those aren't just words. They are our future. Our world is imperfect, as are we, but I believe that we leave here today both more prepared to meet it as it is, and better equipped to change it for the better. May we be grateful for the gifts we have received here, and eager to share them with the wider world.

Thank you.