

The Purpose of Education

President Coburn, Trustees, VPAA and Dean of Faculty, Dr. Sigman, Faculty colleagues, Staff, the Class of 2008 and your loved ones—

Members of the class of 2008, we are glad you chose to be a part of the Naropa community. The hours you spent in classrooms, libraries and community settings exploring familiar as well as unfamiliar ideas are over, at least for the moment. You alone know the full measure of the dreams and hopes with which you entered Naropa. And you alone know the extent to which your dreams have been realized. I like to think that the time you spent here has been well worth the effort. Without a doubt, you have contributed much to the mission of our university. We feel certain that the world beyond will be the better for the many gifts that you will share in the days ahead. Now that you have successfully completed an important stage in your lives, it is time to salute you and to celebrate your many and varied achievements. We are very, very happy for you, your friends, your families and for Naropa at your success. This afternoon I want to speak about the purpose of education.

Among my many joys at Naropa University is meeting prospective students and their parents during their campus visits. I usually meet them in the mock classes that I am asked to conduct by the Office of Admissions. The students and their parents come to my classes having read short statements on a given topic by a range of thinkers, writers and social activists. As a rule the readings for each class session are less than a page long and are designed to provoke discussion. In all such classes that I have led since joining Naropa University eight years ago, the readiness of the prospective students, to reflect on shared readings, to listen to each other and to energetically exchange ideas is always impressive. As you can imagine, these classes are a wonderful introduction to new students; these classes also help me to gain a sense of students' commitment to contemplative education.

The curiosity that so many demonstrate in these classes is nearly always affirmed in subsequent formal classroom settings. So when friends and colleagues, who have known me from the years when I taught at the Iliff School of Theology, the University of Denver and the University of Colorado at Boulder, ask me about Naropa students, I tell them that what really sets our students apart from students at other institutions of higher education is the seriousness with which Naropa students seek to harmonize the inner and the outer, the personal and the political. Nurturing and nourishing the interior being even as our students seek to do well academically is what makes Naropa graduates so very special and what teaching at Naropa University such a privilege. That is not all; our students, and that includes you, also seek to make our world better, more caring, more compassionate.

As in previous semesters, so also the semester that has just ended, I ran a mock class for prospective students. The focus of my class this fall was education. For the shared readings, I had selected from the writings of the Chicana poet and writer Gloria

Anzaldua, the Southern writer and activist Lillian Smith, educator-activist Myles Horton, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

We had an hour-long spirited discussion in which everyone participated. As it turned out, we spent much time exploring Dr. King's perspective on education. I had selected a short paragraph from an essay he had written while still an undergraduate at Morehouse College. He wrote, "The function of education . . . is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. . . . The most dangerous criminal may be the [person] gifted with reason, but with no morals. . . . The late Eugene Talmage, in my opinion, possessed one of the better minds in Georgia, or even America.

Moreover, he wore the Phi Beta Kappa key. By all measuring rods, Mr. Talmadge could think critically and intensively; yet he contends that I am an inferior being. Are those the types of [persons] we call educated?" Not surprisingly, the class agreed with King, and it concluded that we can call that person educated who sees herself/himself in community with all irrespective of difference. And that the basis of such fellowship is our common humanity, certainly not our race. They insisted that King's is a call to the expansion of our circle of concern, the circle of love based on the unity of life. I feel I won't be wrong if I suggest that all of us gathered here this afternoon are one with Dr. King when he argues that reason and morals must jointly undergird education. Reason alone is not sufficient; in order to break down the walls of separation and hatred, we also need wisdom, compassion, and courage. The transformative moment through which we are currently passing in our nation's history is illustrative of what I mean.

No matter what our political affiliations, we can all agree that the political landscape of the United States of America has changed forever, but not just that. Less than a hundred years ago and not long before inviting Booker T. Washington to dinner at the White House, the misguided Theodore Roosevelt in his arrogance could say, "A perfectly stupid race can never rise to a very high plane; the Negro, for instance, has been kept down as much by lack of intellectual development as by anything else." Racism in its many manifestations has had a long history in our nation. And we know only too well that there are still some that hold racist views. But we know that we are a witness to a transformative moment with possibilities for healing and reconciliation across racial lines. Let us take a brief look at the distance we have actually traveled.

It wasn't that long ago that segregation was legal in our nation reducing all people of color—be they Native Americans, Asian Americans, African Americans, Latin Americans—to second class status. They were denied their basic human rights; they were persecuted and harassed in a variety of ways.

Their access to housing, education and employment was restricted by law. Black people were often the victims of mob justice, a practice in which the law enforcement authorities often collaborated and even led the way. Between 1882 and 1968 an estimated 4,742 African Americans were lynched. It wasn't until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that African Americans gained the right to fully participate in the political process. After 243 years of slavery and 100 years of Jim Crow, here we are just days away from

inaugurating the first person of African descent as our president. Even a year ago, few would have predicted that our nation would be ready for an African American to lead our nation into the future.

This transformed political landscape encourages us to know that a better future is possible. It powerfully demonstrates that deeply entrenched prejudices can give way to tolerance and even acceptance of difference.

Through patience and sustained effort we can create a caring, compassionate society. As we justly savor this historic moment, we will do well to remind ourselves that we did not get here by accident. Hundreds and thousands of women and men in earlier generations labored hard, made many sacrifices and even gave their lives for us to get this far. And if we, who claim to be educated, are to play our part in building a world free of oppression of all kinds, we'll need to start now. Ultimately, the causes we choose to serve or fail to serve will define the worth of our lives. For it is only when we confront prejudice and learn to live with differences that we can call ourselves truly educated.

Now racism is only one of the many challenges facing us. King's words deserve to be examined afresh for this time and the time ahead. Difference and otherness takes many forms. Gender discrimination, the exclusion of the native people from the decision-making processes, religious bigotry, the denial of full citizenship rights to gays and lesbians are among the urgent issues calling for change in our attitudes and structures of society.

Without question we must expand our definition of what constitutes "we." As the historian Gerda Lerner reminds us, "None of can be defined simply as being members of one group or another. We are Jewish, Christian or Muslim, women or men, immigrants or fifth generation, we may be differently abled or differently acculturated by being rich or poor, we may be lesbians or married heterosexual women, battered or independent, educated or deprived of education. . . . We know the perils of being defined by others and of being stigmatized. . . . All of us must survive in a world in which difference is the norm and no longer serves as an excuse for dominance or we will not survive at all. And in order to survive in this interconnected global village we must learn and learn very quickly to respect others who are different from us and, ultimately, to grant others the autonomy we demand for ourselves. In short, celebrate difference and banish hatred." Go well and stay strong.

Sudarshan Kapur
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