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Nurturing a Culture of Possibilities

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Abstract

Over the last three years, Naropa's Masters in Environmental Leadership (ELP) program has collaborated with the citizen initiative, Awakening the Dreamer, Changing the Dream Symposium (ATD), a global citizen effort to create a thriving world. In this paper, we describe a model of shared learning and community building, which arises from embedding the one-day, ATD Symposium into the ongoing curriculum of a university semester and offering it to all students, faculty and staff at Naropa.

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Over the last three years, Naropa's Masters in Environmental Leadership (ELP) program has collaborated with the citizen initiative, Awakening the Dreamer, Changing the Dream Symposium (ATD), a global citizen effort to create a thriving world. In this paper, we describe a model of shared learning and community building, which arises from embedding the one-day, ATD Symposium into the ongoing curriculum of a university semester and offering it to all students, faculty and staff at Naropa.

Naropa Environmental Leadership Curriculum

The Naropa Environmental Leadership course of study offers an integrated, living systems perspective to environmental work which promotes engagement that is not 're-forming' what is or has been, thus repeating history, but transforming in a way that involves personal as well as societal transformation. Its purpose is " to

prepare the next generation of innovative thinkers to lead organizational and community transformation toward an environmentally just and sustainable society. “¹ As one of the tools for carrying out this purpose, at Naropa, we add into our semester a public program, an initiative of the non-profit organization, The Pachamama Alliance (TPA)

The Pachamama Alliance

The Pachamama Alliance, with offices in California and Ecuador, was founded in the early '90's by a young American couple, Lynne and Bill Twist, successful entrepreneurs in business and social non-profit work. Following a trip deep into the Ecuadorian Amazon rainforest -- where they experienced both the destruction of the rainforest and the alive wisdom traditions of the Achuar tribal peoples – they came home inspired to develop a program whereby people living in the trance of the modern world could wake up to what we are doing to the planet. In one of the Symposium videos, Lynne Twist tells the story of their first meeting with the Achuar:

¹ Environmental Leadership Program. MA Program of Naropa University.

From the very beginning our indigenous partners told us that it was really really great that we were working with them in the Amazon, shoulder to shoulder, but that was only half the battle. They told us that if we really wanted to protect their lands permanently, we would need to go to work in our part of the world, and as they put it, we would need to ‘change the dream of the north—the dream of the modern world.’²

The response to this call from indigenous peoples has resulted in the Awakening the Dreamer Symposium (ATD).

Awakening the Dreamer, Changing the Dream Symposium

Now in its ninth iteration, the Awakening the Dreamer Symposium is a dynamic, multimedia experience whose goal it is to “bring forth an environmentally sustainable, socially just and spiritually fulfilling presence on this planet.”³ Blending aspects of spiritual, ecological, technological and scientific knowing the Symposium works to wake people up to commitment and action. The program follows a path of four questions: Where Are We?, How Did We Get Here?, What’s Possible?, and Where Do We Go From Here? The Symposium does

² *Awakening the Dreamer Symposium V-2 Manual* (TPA, 2010), 10.

³ *Awakening the Dreamer Symposium V-2 Manual* (TPA, 2010), 6.

not blame anyone or debate issues, nor does it prescribe actions. And while it provides scientific information, this is not the primary focus. Rather the experience of the Symposium is one that guides participants to look through eyes of the heart and mind in order to identify root causes for themselves, At its core the message is profoundly positive and motivating in its call to action based on a worldview of community.

Working with Personal Transformation

Both ELP and ATD programs begin from a point of view that personal engagement in the world must come from compassion and awareness of the radical interdependence of all of life, human and the more than human, and recognition of the social justice issues that are intertwined in this understanding. Based on the consensus of widely recognized social and physical scientists, the Symposium lays out a kind of 'medical report on mother earth' – how we are treating the natural world and each other. The purpose is to have participants face as a group, and let in, the urgency and scope of the current global social, environmental, and spiritual crises, and to

understand them as totally interconnected facets of one crisis, not as three separate issues. ⁴ Both programs also recognize the deep personal inner work that is necessary for each individual to do, as well as the crucial support of community for collective action.

In exploring the best approaches to opening up to the depth and immediacy of ecological degradation, both programs see the need to counter the 'gloom and doom' mentality, which is so much the current experience of learning about the declines of the planet. Many students go into environmental studies or environmental and social justice activism because they are well aware of the world crises, and they feel a strong call to help. This generation knows the situation is serious and that the next few years are critical, and they feel longing – often very intense longing – to make a difference. They have a deep concern for the condition of the earth and its inhabitants. Students come to the Environmental Leadership Program and the Awakening the Dreamer Symposium

⁴*Awakening the Dreamer Symposium V-2 Manual* (TPA, 2010), 12.

with a variety of strong emotions and attitudes including inspiration and passion, but they also can slip easily into discouragement, anger, judgment, despair, overwhelm, hopelessness and burn out.

The Symposium, as presented in collaboration with Naropa's ELP, offers an opportunity to use this emotional energy in creative ways. Students who attend the Symposium, are guided to watch the videos with new eye glasses and asked to listen with open heart ears as if they are seeing this material for the very first time. This is because the Symposium is designed not necessarily to give new information but to provide a different way of relating to the information and a different way of responding to it.

Benefits of the Interdisciplinary Approach

At Naropa, the Symposium is offered not only to Environmental Studies students, but to all BA and MA programs as well as all staff, faculty and alumni, and the broader Boulder-Denver public. It is co-sponsored by Naropa's School of Natural and Social Sciences and The Career and Community Engagement Office. The community

engagement piece is crucial to the vision and goals of both organizations. Faculty, students and staff from all disciplines are invited. In attendance, we have had students from Naropa's Art Therapy Department, Religious Studies, Inter-disciplinary Studies, Writing and Poetics, the Performing Arts, Somatic Psychology, Contemplative Education, Ecopsychology, and Psychotherapy programs, as well as several "undeclared" students. Both BA and MA attend. Some faculty require participation, some give extra credit, and some simply encourage students to attend. Alongside students and alumnae, the program also attracts staff, such as those from the Counseling Center, Career Services and Community Engagement, and the Contemplative Practice Office.

On the side of benefits to the ATD community of activists, Naropa provides an unusually openhearted and well-educated audience where many are starting from the realization they are on a path of waking up. Furthermore, collaboration with the University brings together a more diverse public and helps open up the conversation about a thriving future, and in this way, it meets the intention of The

Pachamama Alliance to reach one million individuals by 2014 with the message of waking up from the trance, and coming into community to stand powerfully as agents of change.⁵

⁵ *Awakening the Dreamer Symposium V-2 Manual* (TPA, 2010), 76.

A Model for Town-Gown Collaboration

We feel we are working with an innovative academic model. The ATD community and Naropa plan the Symposium during the previous semester, and over those months of dialogue, we share publicity responsibilities and work closely together on the design details for the program. We consider the appropriate timing, date and duration (usually 5 hours on a Saturday), breaks, appropriate personal processes and decide what forms of hospitality (for instance, flowers and room set up) would best fit the changing energy and dynamics of the participants and the material being presented. For example, we know that it is crucial to embody the principles we are presenting, such as collaboration, personal introspection, compassion for others and combining our spiritual path with our action in everyday life. During the day of the Symposium, we have a substantial meal – a tea break usually done in silence -- with nurturing, local and organic foods, using compostable products, creating a Zero Waste event.

Throughout the semester, in our commitments to each other, the planning team models personal sustainability, giving support to the need for nurturing ourselves as we go through personal processes that can -- and do -- bring up strong emotions along with new understandings. Both with each other and with the students, we have learned to make sure that between relating to the pain of the world and getting into the possibilities for future action that we support each other to take time to acknowledge and experience deeply the difficult emotions that could arise. Also in putting the event together, we work to create sacred space. This is critical to the principles of the ATD community as well as the ENV Leadership Program, because it lets us feel into our connection with those who have come before us and those who will come after. Usually in a very simple ceremony, we invoke the elemental world as well as naming the American Indian tribal peoples who first inhabited the natural landscape here in this part of the Rocky Mountains. As a practical matter, our 'town-gown' team takes turns on the level of everyday details as well, attending to budgeting issues and proper closing and cleaning up of the Nalanda campus space. Because

AV is such an important component of the ATD Symposium, we are very fortunate to have a facility here that can accommodate the best of both our programs.

We have found for the students in the Environmental Leadership Program that it works best to offer the Symposium early in the second semester of the first year of the academic program, usually around the third week. This is because the Symposium provides a profound personal journey in the short space of one day, and then -- the best of both worlds -- the students continue the remaining two-year program with their cohort. In this way after the Symposium has ended, sudden realizations and new intentions are still able to land on solid ground, for students have continuing opportunities to share their challenges and everyday successes throughout the rest of the school year. The students are developing shared experience, like a family, moving toward living more sustainably on earth.

The importance of this synergy between the short symposium event and the extended 'town campus' environment cannot be

overstated: it feeds the journey and allows for uncovering new motivation and support along the path. The students refer back to quotes, videos and experiences of the Symposium as they enter into their second year and choose an organization to partner with for their Applied Leadership Project (which is discussed in more depth at the end of this paper).

The Path of Transformation

Our mutual interest in developing human potential is the basic reason these two programs work so well to bring the public together within an academic environment. The shared mission of transformation creates a culture of possibility. Transformation on the side of the University talks about going on an inner and outer journey to bring forward a better world: “A Naropa education...reflect(s) the interplay of discipline and delight, and prepares its graduates both to meet the world as it is and to change it for the better....

Drawing on the vital insights of the world's wisdom traditions, the University...embraces the richness of human diversity with the aim of fostering a more just and equitable society and an expanded

awareness of our common humanity."⁶ This is part of the mission statement at Naropa.

Transformation from the perspective of the Symposium is a form of evolution. It is human beings waking up to the urgency of our current situation by leaning into the call from indigenous culture, and from Nature itself-

As we look to the future, there is a metaphor from Nature that can serve us... When a caterpillar reaches a certain point in its evolution, it becomes over-consumptive, a voracious eater that consumes hundreds of times its own weight. At that same time, inside the molecular structure of the caterpillar, something called the "imaginal cells" become active. They wake up, look for each other, and begin to cluster inside the caterpillar's body. When enough of them connect, even though they are not in the majority, they become the genetic directors of the future of the caterpillar. At that point the other cells begin to dissolve and become what's called the nutritive soup—out of which the imaginal cells create the absolutely unpredictable miracle of the butterfly.⁷

⁶ Mission Statement of Naropa University.

⁷ *Awakening the Dreamer Symposium V-2.5 Manual* (TPA, 2011), 57.

Given the purpose of the Symposium – to bring forth an environmentally sustainable, spiritually fulfilling and socially just human presence on the planet -- what this is saying is possible is that WE are the imaginal cells on the planet now.

Thus, in joining efforts between Naropa and the Awakening the Dreamer community, we are seeing not only that we share this same kind of commitment to transforming ourselves and the world, but also that we can easily find ways to expand and enhance the possibilities for everyone to view themselves as part of the evolution of a humane, just and sane global community.

Paradigm Shift Away From a Culture of Separation

Both the Naropa ELP and the Symposium call for a fundamental change in how we relate to the natural world, to other people, to organizations, and to society. But even more they both call for a paradigm shift. This begins with a deep change in how we relate to

our self. This new paradigm brings forth a view that is supported by scientific discoveries and parallels many spiritual traditions. In the Symposium we watch videos like the short film, *The Universe Story*, by cultural historian, Thomas Berry and mathematician, Brian Swimme,⁸ In this section of the Symposium, students move deep into personal and group processes in response to the Big Bang theory, direct experiences of how profoundly related we are. Author and creation spirituality teacher, Matthew Fox, comments: “if you run the story of the universe backward 14 billion years, you realize we all descend from an original pin prick smaller than a zygote. It’s really one being here. We’re all relatives.”⁹ This scientific – cosmological observation is something indigenous peoples have always known; thus it is a natural progression at this point in the Symposium to move into wisdom teachings from American Indian tribal peoples and other First Nation elders. Through watching amazingly beautiful videos,

⁸ Thomas Berry and Briane Swimme, “The Universe Story” by Neal Rogin in *Awakening the Dreamer Symposium V-2 Manual* (TPA, 2010), 45.

⁹ Matthew Fox, *Awakening the Dreamer Symposium V-2 Manual* (TPA, 2010), 45.

these sections introduce students to other worldviews as a way to distinguish the societal pool of separation we are swimming in.

Likewise with the MA program, we investigate how we are NOT separate entities, “encapsulated selves” – in these words of Fritjof Capra, he says further: “all concepts setting boundaries to what we term the self are arbitrary.” In the living systems view, where we introduce Joanna Macy’s work, students learn “we consist of and are sustained by interweaving currents of matter as well as energy...a flow through...connecting us with our environment and other beings.”¹⁰

A related program goal central to the ELP is to strengthen the inner self and sustain strong human-nature relationships that foster a student’s experience of the radical interdependence of all of life in order to develop the personal capacity for reflective and participatory leadership. Transformative environmental engagement cannot be separated from personal sustainability.

¹⁰ Fritjof Capra, *The Web of Life*. (New York: Doubleday, 1996).

Students come to an understanding that “one cannot implement a sustainable society unless they learn how to cultivate a sustainable psyche. An overdeveloped, polluted, disturbed ecosystem is not different from an exploited burned-out psyche.”¹¹

¹¹Mitchell Thomashow, *Ecological Identity – Becoming a Reflective Environmentalist*. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995).

Issues Based Learning

We have also seen shared goals and learning outcomes with the emphasis on current issues. Both programs guide participants to understand key theoretical perspectives in cultural, economic, diversity, policy and scientific dimensions of environmental issues. At Naropa some of our intended outcomes are to be able to analyze and explain global and national environmental justice and diversity issues; and also to be able to apply new science perspectives and to explain their cultural applications.

The Symposium is constantly being updated, Using these current videos, students hear directly from recognized experts in the fields of social science, physics, biology, cosmology and economics, and students use these talks from professionals as a way to develop their own insights and then discuss their evolving opinions.

The videos of the Symposium move theory into application. The second half of the Symposium focuses on 'what's possible' and

'what's emerging now.' This part inspires creative solutions by looking at new technologies and finding out what communities in the U.S. and other countries are already doing. What we have found is that our audiences are usually much better educated about the problems in the world today, than they are about the successes. This is due in part to the fact that this good news flies mostly under the radar of conventional media. Students are often surprised and they are energized by seeing that over 2 million non-profit organizations, referred to as "humanity's immune response," are emerging as a new expression of civil society.¹² Hawkins' "Wiser Earth" website becomes a central resource, and because this current generation is so adept with new technologies and already doing social networking, we see them moving quickly to reach into the possibilities of linking up local community efforts.

¹² Paul Hawkins, *Awakening the Dreamer Symposium V-2 Manual* (TPA, 2010), 53.

Awareness Based Learning

At Naropa students are expected to demonstrate effective leadership skills using transformative, cutting edge models. This requires deep self-reflection and awareness. There are specific objectives in this area: to demonstrate deep listening skills; utilize mindfulness/awareness skills; work with strong emotions; recognize empathetic presence in others; appreciate varying sacred world views; and deepen their nature/human connection.

These learning outcomes are enhanced in the Symposium through awareness exercises such as a personal investigation of 'what the world needs now' contrasted with 'what makes me come alive.' These and other contemplations and interactive processes guide participants to identify ideas for action. Daily practice is obviously a form of action, and we have seen people come out of these classes and the Symposium more ready to commit to practices that help them stay awake in a state of what is called "blessed unrest" (from

the book of the same name).¹³ Blessed unrest is a way of bringing together longing and activism -- it guides us onto the path of being of service. It says that what is needed now is an optimistic, creative, informed people who have a commitment and a stake in what comes next for everyone. Finally, students are required in the MA program to demonstrate an integration of the theoretical perspectives and leadership skills by engaging with an organization or community group and collaborating with them to effect an agreed upon initiative.

This Naropa requirement, called the Applied Leadership Project, asks students first to volunteer with an organization that speaks to their particular passion and interest in the environmental field, and secondly to collaborate with key individuals. Together they come up with an initiative that would benefit the organization and further its mission. So the students have the opportunity to be creative, and

¹³ Paul Hawken, "Blessed Unrest:: How the Largest Movement in the World Came Into Being and Why No One Saw It Coming," in *Awakening the Dreamer Symposium V-2 Manual* (TPA, 2010), 45.

yet work with the existing goals and management structures of the organization. Students have expressed that the Symposium has given them a larger view of the global efforts that are occurring now and a greater understanding of being part of what Paul Hawken calls “an unnamed movement”.¹⁴ One student said on her feedback form: “We are not alone - there are 2 million organizations doing things as we speak - unbelievable!” Another said: “I recognized that questioning our assumptions is essential and the root of everything, not just the Symposium but everything we do.” And another student reported: “It was like waking up again. I knew intellectually a lot of what was presented, but I FELT it DEEPLY at the Symposium.” Students gain new perspectives and a chance to embody certainty, confidence and trust: the certainty that they are not alone, the confidence that they can make a difference, and the trust that the Universe does indeed “bend toward justice” as spoken in the Symposium by Martin Luther King.¹⁵ Through practical

¹⁴ Paul Hawken, *Awakening the Dreamer Symposium V-2 Manual* (TPA, 2010), 45.

¹⁵ Martin Luther King, *Awakening the Dreamer Symposium V-2 Manual* (TPA, 2010), 50.

networking, transformative conversations occur among participants. What is exciting about these discussions is that they occur with students and among people from different generations, different educational experience (from BA students, to PH.Ds) and different walks of life (parents, professionals, everyday citizens, unemployed, retired). One student remarked, "The Symposium is showing all that is happening in the world through the lens of relationship." Participants can be inspiring -- and inspired -- no matter what he or she is doing in their lives.

Ripple Effects Beyond ELP

So it is not just the Environmental Leadership students who are affected. Several Naropa students have gone on to become involved with the Awakening the Dreamer community and received training to facilitate the Symposium themselves. Two Naropa graduates are taking the Symposium back to their own countries of Canada and Costa Rica. Some Naropa students have become part of Generation Waking Up and have worked to create a three-hour adaptation of the Symposium, called a "Wake Up," a program

especially designed for and by 16-29 year olds. At first GenUp was funded by The Pachamama Alliance, but starting in 2011 the youth are doing their own fundraising as they are taking the Wake Up experience to their peers on college campuses all over the world.¹⁶

We see that it is becoming more common now for faculty to use portions of the Symposium in their individual courses. Because of the module type design of the Symposium itself, and the Wake Up, it is possible to excerpt particular dynamic segments, speeches, videos of people engaged in projects like: urban farming, teens creating and performing songs and dances expressing their commitment to be fully who they are, new business models arising out of new technologies, communities rallying together to stop the loss of natural beauty and open space in their neighborhoods. Given the wide range of community successes highlighted in the Symposium videos, there is no field in our opinion that could not find something in the Symposium that would not be relevant.

¹⁶ "Generation Waking Up: Igniting a Movement," (TPA, 2011).

Conclusion

The Symposium was initially presented to Environmental Studies faculty in 2009 and then offered to the broader Naropa community the next year. The Environmental Leadership Program recognized that the Symposium was, in the words of one of our students, “ a microcosm of our whole two year program.” Thus, the Symposium, for the past three years has been a required part of ELP curriculum. The goal is to take academic learning beyond the classroom and recognize that the community is a significant aspect of the classroom. It is not only “community service” as in service to the community, but the community can serve as teacher to academia.

There is an increased number of Universities bringing diverse wisdom tradition, spiritual perspectives, and contemplative approaches to community service that embrace environmental and social justice. We have found a natural synergy, a strong and effective way of doing this by including the Awakening the Dreamer Symposium as part of Naropa’s Environmental Leadership program. It is a direct way of creating the experience of a local culture of possibilities. We

feel what the Naropa and the ATD communities have been joining together to do could provide a model for other institutions of higher learning.

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