



# A Reflection on Transitions

As Leigh and I move into our last months at Naropa, there are opportunities to reflect at every turn. We have loved this work: the people, the mission, the opportunities to grow. We have been the beneficiaries of a quality of life at Naropa that I have come to call “an ever-present invitation to ever-greater openness.” What makes Naropa such a gift to the world is the way it weaves together the academic and the contemplative and makes the resulting synthesis available on a daily basis to all who study and work here. As our students go forth as graduates, this quality has prepared them, in the words of our revised mission statement, “to meet the world as it is and to change it for the better.” How fortunate is everyone who has the opportunity to taste this transformative quality!

As I consider how Naropa as an institution has grown over the past six years, I am most gratified by the increased intentionality of our work, crafting a shared vision for our future, even as we need to remain agile in the face of changing circumstances. The starting point for this transformation was the revision of Naropa’s mission statement, led by the board of trustees, which was subsequently developed in a broad-based strategic planning process that involved more than one hundred members of the faculty and staff, students, townspeople and a professional consultant. The resulting ten-year plan—“Deliver Distinction with Excellence”—was resoundingly endorsed by the board last fall, and we have been busily about its implementation ever since.

As important as the substance of this plan, I believe, is the transparency with which it was developed. This, too, reflects an increased institutional maturity, an honesty about who we are and a self-confidence that will serve us well as we embark on the next chapter in Naropa’s rich history. As I have come to know my successor, Dr. Stuart Lord, through the early stages of the presidential transition, I have come to share the trustees’ enthusiastic conviction that he will provide Naropa with inspired

leadership, even as he will be nurtured by the community in his own growth, as Leigh and I have been.

Transitions, of course, are bittersweet occasions, as we wean ourselves from the familiar and step forward into the unknown. As I reflect on transitions at Naropa, in the recent past and on the near horizon, both individual and collective, I am drawn back to the central point in my welcoming talk to new students each fall: research shows that all learning occurs optimally under conditions of moderate discomfort. Too much discomfort and we fear for our safety. Too much comfort and we are not stimulated. All learning and all growth depends on being suspended in this in-between space, on being in some form of transition, wending our way inquisitively and compassionately into whatever lies ahead.

There are, of course, deep contemplative implications here. Emphasis on the present moment, and recognition of mundane impermanence, are woven into the contemplative life everywhere. They bring in their wake both wistfulness and joy. I think this is what the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein had in mind when he wrote: “Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death. If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present.”

Thank you, Naropa University, for the privilege of spending this six-year sequence of present moments, each infinitely deep, in your company.

Thomas B. Coburn, President