

Touching the Earth - Naropa Graduation Speech 2008

Thank you for this tremendous honor.

I'll begin with a little Zen story relevant to today's momentous occasion.

-4 monks at a monastery are sitting in meditation.

-Overhead the wind is blowing through prayer flags.

-The youngest monk comes out of his silence and exclaims "flags flapping".

-A 2nd monk, who has been there a few years, reflects out loud, "wind flapping."

-The 3rd monk, who has been there for over 20 years announces, "minds flapping."

-The 4th, a wizened old being, having been there most of his life, "mouths flapping."

So forgive me if I flap my mouth today...

- I'd like to reflect on the power of touching the earth
with both confidence and humility, with our humor and humanity.

-Humor, humility and human have the same root word – humus...earth.

-Humor, humility and the human journey are all about letting go
and realizing we are all in this compost pile together.

-Rumi, an 13th century poet and mystic in the Sufi tradition of Islam says:

I would love to kiss you.

The price of kissing is your life.

Now my loving is running toward my life shouting,

*What a bargain, let's buy it.**

-Rumi, in this flash of genius invites us to collapse opposites.

-Here "my life" is like my ego, desperately trying to hang on to what it knows –
while "my love" connects to what is alive and of the earth.

-The many mothers and fathers in our audience know this well.

-Parents discover, the first time they plant a confirming kiss
on the cheek of their new born child,
their "life" as they knew it is compost.

-They've entered Zorba the Greek's full catastrophe living –
not "doing my life" but learning to "do love".

-This year several of my students in the Counseling track
expressed the wisdom of "composting" in papers reflecting on their internship
as therapists in the greater community.

One states ...

“...one of my biggest lessons was the reminder that I am simply a part of my clients’ journeys; I am not their answer, savior or rescuer.”

from another student...

“Looking back, I can honestly say that I applied the teachings learned at Naropa and sat with my fear, my feelings of discomfort, of not knowing and ultimately and naturally began to relax and enjoy the relationships with the people sitting across from me.”

and distilling the words of another...

“...I am able now to give myself permission ‘not to have done it all perfectly’ and to welcome the learning that transpired from my own imperfections.
-I am noticing the voice inside my head now speaks to my learning and growth in lieu of the voice that haunted me with criticism most of my life.
-In addition to learning the skills of therapy, Naropa has taught me how to be in the world in a way that brings me peace and connection.”

Her words echo a gesture of the Buddha.

-After sitting for seven days under a Bodhi tree, some 2500 years ago, he touched the earth and reconciled the demons of self doubt, perhaps his version of the inner critic.
-He was wrestling with his capacity to take what he had learned and communicate it effectively in the world.
-He was at a threshold, much like our graduates find themselves today.

-In his meditation, the Buddha discovered a path to relieve suffering in the world.
-As the story goes, after his realization, he was challenged by “Maras”, nightmarish demons questioning the authenticity of his experience.
-In response to the Mara’s attack the Buddha touched the earth asking for witness to his enlightenment.

-In the mythology of SE Asia, when the Buddha touched the ground, the earth goddess rose up and wrung an ocean of water from her hair.
-The earth shook and the demons vanished.

-When we humbly touch the earth as our witness, we touch into the truth of our own being and discover confidence.
-We ground in the groundlessness of an ever shifting reality.
-We wring ourselves of illusion and allow the demons of our imagination to dissolve in the ground of awareness.

-Another student expressed an aspect of this grounded awareness in a final paper summing up her work with the veterans of Vietnam, Kuwait and Iraq:

“I have seen changes in my clients from a year ago and that is a really wonderful experience.

-Of course, I have changed right along with them and I am amazed at how much I have grown.

-I hereby claim my right of passage as a therapist and I know that I have chosen the right path for myself, because my heart feels full.”

-One of my favorite quotes of H.H. the Dalai Lama is “emptiness is fullness”.

-The Buddhist scholars among our graduates have wrestled with the concept of emptiness, and to my best knowledge, so has every student that has passed through the halls of Naropa University.

-It is a hallmark of contemplative education – being more interested in emptying out than filling up.

-What is there to lose? Only fear and prejudice.

-Filling yourself with facts and technique is easy compared to emptying out.

-The task of realizing emptiness is the highest challenge – yet lays the ground for the deepest knowing.

-Now is the time to appreciate whatever glimpse of emptiness you may have achieved.

-It is at the heart of true learning; only through emptying out, can we receive the fullness of life.

-The ecstatic poet, Mary Oliver, touches into fullness in a poem called *TheRoses*, from a collection of writing that won her the Pulitzer Prize in 1984.

In *TheRoses* she says....

One day in summer
when everything
has already been more than enough
the wild beds start
exploding along the berm
of the sea; day after day
you sit near them; day after day
the honey keeps on coming
in the red cups and the bees
like amber drops roll
in the petals: there is no end,
believe me! to the inventions of summer,
to the happiness your body
is willing to bear.**

-You, graduates, are the wild bed of roses exploding by the berm of the sea.

-You are the amber drop of a bee. You are the red petals.

-Graduation is a time of fullness. You have worked hard turning your compost heap. Now is a time of blooming.

-Every graduate in our audience today has wrestled with “maras” and each one of you is now planted in the fertile loam of a discipline.

-How can you trust this?

-Because you have touched your experience, you haven’t only read about it in a book, you have danced and sung and wrote and wept your tears into the earth.

-The flower that is blooming in you is the compassionate heart.

-Out of a sense of compassion, rooted in the direct experience of his body, the Buddha stepped across a threshold and began his work of teaching.

-He was known to do it with humor, humility and humanity.

-Now is the time for you to step across a threshold. Go in confidence – for the wisdom and compassion you have uncovered is as real as the earth beneath your feet.

-May you touch it for the rest of the days of your life.

Many blessings on your journey.

*John Moyne & Coleman Barks, translators. 1984. *Open Secret: Versions of Rumi*. Putney, Vermont: Threshold Books.

**Mary Oliver, *American Primitive*. 1983. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.