

Where Does the “Calling” to Convocation Come From?

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The story is told of a Jewish rabbi whose disciples were debating the question of when precisely ‘daylight’ commenced. The one ventured the proposal: ‘It is when one can see the difference between a sheep and a goat at a distance.’

Another suggested, ‘It is when you can see the difference between a fig tree and an olive tree at a distance.’ And so it went on. When they eventually asked the Rabbi for his view, he said, ‘When one human being looks into the face of another and says, ‘This is my sister, or this is my brother,’ then the night is over and the day has begun.’¹

Convocation is one of those wonderful occasions that link an institution of higher education to its roots. In Naropa’s case, the link goes back to the very founding of the institution in 1974, when Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche presided over such a ceremony, and it has continued ever since. This is entirely natural, for the practice of beginning the academic year ceremonially, with a ritual reminder of our shared purpose, is woven into the long tradition of liberal education. There is scarcely an educational institution anywhere that begins the school year casually, treating the first day or week of classes as simply one more day or one more week in the endless flow of time. Something special is happening with this new beginning. As we embark on the year, in expectation of the transformation that lies ahead for each of us—for the purpose of education is transformation—we pause to recognize and celebrate the particular significance of this beginning. It is a momentous occasion for us, individually and collectively.

It is the collective dimension of this occasion that gives rise to its name, “convocation,” a “calling-together” of the community’s members, a recognition of our common purpose. Almost every convocation talk I have heard reflects on the meaning of the word “convocation,” referring to its Latin roots, which suggest a summons, a common call, to which we as a community are responding. But I want to go a step further by asking the question: where does that call, that impetus to join together, an impetus to which each of us has responded by being here this evening, where does that calling come from? To what voice is it that we are responding when we assemble here? I want to suggest that, on the one hand, there is not a huge number of answers, for instance, as many possibilities as there are individuals in this room. Nor, on the other hand, do I think there is a single answer to this question. Rather, I suggest there are two answers to the question: who or what calls us to be here this evening? To what call are we responding?

The first answer is clear and straightforward. Each of us is here because we have chosen to be an agent, responding to something deep within us, a voice that says, perhaps after long years of searching, I need to be here at Naropa, as faculty member, or student, or staff member, or trustee, or friend. And then that voice says, more specifically, I need to be here in the Performing Arts Center on Thursday evening, August 28, for fall Convocation. Realistically, I suspect, if your inner voice is like mine, it doesn’t always come from deep within, but often from the shallows, with a degree of tentativeness and equivocation. We may be here, not because it’s some deep, self-actualizing and wonderfully fulfilling expression of our agency, but because it was better than any other options for this Thursday evening. It won out over the alternatives, perhaps by a narrow margin. But here you are, an agent of some sort, here of your own volition. You have chosen to be here. Given what I know about the contemplative nature of education at

Naropa, the kinds of people it attracts and produces, I suspect more of the agency of the people in this room is overt and does come from deep within, rather than from the shallows. You are in touch with your inner lives far more than most, and becoming more so on a daily basis. You are here, in significant part, because you have chosen to be so, intentional agents, some more deeply than others.

But there is also something else going on here, often intertwined with that first, internal call that wells up from within, but logically distinct, something that beckons us from outside ourselves. I had long known intuitively of this alternative kind of call, without having words for it. But last December, during the search process that brought me to Naropa, in the course of the public seminar, words came to me and I was able to give voice to what had previously been only intuitive. Some of you were present on that occasion and may recall that I undertook to relate the linear, two-dimensional Coburn that appears on paper in his curriculum vitae, the author of books and articles and doer of things, to half a dozen points in the three-dimensional life that Coburn was leading, points in my personal and professional life, where I encountered a dead-end, frustration, or outright failure. At those points, my life, such as I had known it, my plans, seemed virtually over. The experience of running head-on into a stone wall that lay 90 degrees across my path was the first, dreadful phase of an unsought encounter. You will all have known similar occasions. But I also reported in that seminar that these implosions turned out over time not to be the final word. Sitting in front of the imposing wall across the road, scrutinizing first myself, then the wall, then back again, I gradually came to see that the wall was not, in fact, set directly at right angles to my path, but at 30 degrees, or 45, or maybe 75—and that I was actually being invited to re-chart my course in a new, more viable, more promising direction.

Notice my language here: I was being invited to re-chart my course. Where did that invitation come from? Its origin, I suspect, coincides with the origin of that second call to convocation that brought us here tonight, the external source. We are drawn onward, drawn out of ourselves, by something larger than our private, inner selves, something that we sense is different from ourselves, but comparably compelling and interesting. (You know that wonderful Bette Midler insight about the self-preoccupied person who was carrying on to a friend about his or her private likes and dislikes, laying out the details with great animation, extraordinarily self-absorbed. Suddenly he/she realized what was happening, and said to the friend: “Oh, well, enough about me. Let’s talk about you. What do you think about me?”) We are rescued from our private self-absorption by something that comes to us, something that comes over us, where we are not the agent, but where we are beckoned onward by something extrinsic to ourselves. We thought we were in charge, but discover that quite the reverse is the case. I am reminded of that wonderful line at the end of Robert Pirsig’s Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance where Pirsig, who thought he had long ago recovered from mental illness and was now trying to help his son, Chris, avoid a similar destiny, realizes that his own recovery is not yet complete and that, in fact, their roles are reversed: “I haven’t been carrying him [Chris] at all,” Pirsig writes. “He’s been carrying me!”² And so it goes, at times, where we are drawn on, drawn in, to something larger than ourselves that beckons to us, in circumstances where we cannot honestly claim to be agents, where an unfamiliarity, even a mystery, lies ahead.

Most often, I suspect, those circumstances are characterized by our engagement with something different, something novel, by qualities or possibilities we have not met before, something unfamiliar, unknown in our experience, where we find ourselves—to use the language

I employed at orientation last week—extended beyond our comfort zone, broken open, a little or a lot, where we are ready to learn and to grow in new ways.

I will not here repeat my orientation argument about how critical it is for students, and for faculty and staff as they model the life of an ever-opening mind and heart, to take up residence in the “discomfort zones” that lie beyond their individual or social boundaries. Those boundaries are constructed around one's sense of the familiar, and any educational institution worth its salt asks its inhabitants consistently to challenge themselves, and each other, across the boundaries of the familiar. It is here that the second, the external source of the call to convocation, originates. I believe it is intimately tied up with the challenges and opportunities posed by diversity.

To put the matter bluntly: to my mind there is no more pressing educational question for the 21st century than to help our students learn to engage constructively with those who are not like themselves, whatever the axis of diversity might be. But that sentence must be rephrased: there is no more pressing educational question for the 21st century than to help ourselves learn to engage constructively with those who are not like us, whatever the axis of diversity might be. We are all in this, all in need of education, together. It was just this question that took me to India last fall when, after being deeply involved in diversity issues in American higher education, I wanted to inquire into what some Indian institutions might be doing on this front. I found the issues every bit as acute as they are in America, often with different inflections, for instance around caste, class, and religion, as well as race and gender, but also with heartening initiatives on virtually every campus. Over the course of the fall, as the Naropa search unfolded, I came to see a convergence between the trajectory of that search and the trajectory of my sabbatical, a convergence reflected in the title of a talk I gave to colleagues at St. Lawrence last spring as I took my leave of them: “From Diversity Education to Contemplative Education: How a

Sabbatical in India Led to a University Presidency in Colorado.” My central point was that, in my judgment, most efforts to do constructive diversity work fall short, because they fail to take account of the deep subjectivity, the inner life, that each of us brings to engagement with those who are not like ourselves. Naropa, in my judgment then, and increasingly now that I am here at work, is uniquely poised to contribute to local, national, and global efforts to develop a more inclusive, a more just and equitable world. Naropa has this potential because of its unique understanding of contemplative education, of how meditation both powerfully transforms individuals and enriches their ability to engage the world and its problems with humility, imagination, intelligence, patience, self-deprecation, humor, and compassion. To help deliver that promise is one reason I was so delighted to accept the opportunity to serve as your president.

But, if I see unique promise in Naropa's contemplative educational vision, I also see a corresponding challenge. Farid Esack, a African Muslim scholar, speaking primarily to a Christian audience, puts the issue directly in a wonderful little essay, “To Whom Shall We Give Access to our Water Holes?” Esack maintains that half the contemporary challenge is learning to live with ourselves, individually and in our several groupings. But he goes on to argue that this process “must accompany, and not precede, the process of living alongside the other. When learning to live with the self precedes learning to live with the other, then self-discovery runs too great a risk of degenerating into a narrow narcissism.”³ The epigraph with which I began these remarks puts the matter more metaphorically: we can all envision, and some of us can taste in our contemplative practice, what it is like “when the night is over and the day has begun.” But, for some people all of the time, and for many of us much of the time, that daybreak is not yet. Just as, until the day when universal sisterhood and brotherhood would be recognized in the face of the other, the Rabbi's disciples had to deal daily with the differences between sheep and goats,

between fig trees and olive trees, so do we have to deal daily with the realities of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and other markers of difference. To avert our faces from these differences is a premature flight into our private selves and away from what is the dominant reality for many, namely, prejudice, bigotry, and discrimination, both overt and intentional, and covert and unintentional.

Intentional engagement with the facts of difference is not just a challenge, nor some mournful duty, fraught with a sense of either guilt or retribution. It is also a spectacular opportunity to be moved out of one's isolation and one's perhaps unwitting self-absorption. It is a cause for great joy, for reaping the fresh insight and growth that comes from living beyond one's comfort zone, in proximity and intimate engagement with those who are not like oneself, either individually or in our various human groupings. It is just here, in the risky, pregnant encounter with those unlike ourselves that the second, external voice that calls us to convocation originates. It beckons us to become more than what we in our isolated selves and isolated groups thought we were. And as we do the hard work of constructive mutual engagement with others unlike ourselves, outside our respective comfort zones, we find—or at least I have found—intimations of what it might mean for the night to be over and the day to begin.

About eighty years ago, Rudolf Otto wrote what has become a classic in the study of religion, translated into English as The Idea of the Holy, better translated as The Experience of the Holy, or simply The Holy.⁴ Otto is interested in providing a generic description of what he believes is the fundamental religious experience, what we in English would now call a numinous experience. Otto characterizes this as encountering “awesome and fascinating mystery,” simultaneously alluring and intimidating. Elsewhere he describes it as the encounter with the “Wholly Other” (in capital letters). Otto was writing as a philosopher and implicit theologian,

and I do not think we need to accept his analysis wholesale. But in one way I think he got it right: when we engage others who are not like ourselves, multiple “others” with a small “o,” we hear a call that is both alluring and intimidating, a call that beckons us into our discomfort zones, that invites us simultaneously into increased self-awareness and into increased understanding and affirmation of the other. It is in the crucible of “otherness,” in whatever offers a challenge to our own comfortable individual and group identities, that the external call to convocation originates, coming to each of us in slightly different ways, depending on how we have shaped our individual and group identities. It is the invitation to grow beyond who we have been, into something larger and more inclusive. That invitation comes to each of us individually and to Naropa as an institution.

Students, of course, know this, though they may not talk this way. As is often the case, their instincts are ahead of the academy's theorizing, and of my philosophizing. One of the most important recent books on the student educational experience is Richard Light's Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds. Its content is empirical, not speculative, growing out of a long-term educational assessment project that interviewed hundreds of students at dozens of colleges over the course of a decade. Light had not expected diversity to loom so large in student eyes, but it turned out to be so important that his two culminating chapters are devoted to it. Students do not just say to faculty and staff—“Maximize and learn from the diversity that is available to you”—although that is a recurrent refrain. Rather, they also show a keen awareness of the differences between secondary school and college on the critical issue of how we engage with those who are different from ourselves. In high school, students report, difference—chiefly ethnic and racial, but also religious, gendered, and sexual orientation—is considered a problem, something to be “managed,” with conflicts to be avoided. By contrast,

students see that in colleges, difference provides an opportunity. It is something to be learned from and therefore embraced. Students recognize that they will learn “not just from professors but also from their experiences with one another.” But they caution that “how well ethnic and racial [and other] diversity actually enhances learning depends largely on how well a college builds on, capitalizes on, and proactively strengthens this basic assumption.”⁵ Awkwardness with difference, or ignoring it, or simply assembling a group of heterogeneous individuals without intentionally engaging the differences between them, either destroys or fails to capitalize on the learning potential at hand. The intentional engagement of differences, in and out of the curriculum, is as important as gathering together diverse individuals. Intentional engagement with difference educates, as virtually nothing else does. And nowhere is this truer, students report, than in engaging the religious diversity that is in our midst.⁶

Naropa University, I believe, is ideally positioned to engage this most important—and in many ways most difficult—instance of diversity, of encountering otherness, the fact of religious diversity. I hold this conviction because the University's mission statement says that our aspiration is “to exemplify the principles grounded in Naropa University's Buddhist educational heritage,” and it also says in the same breath that our aspiration is “to encourage the integration of world wisdom traditions with modern culture,” and “to be non-sectarian and open to all.” To hold both aspirations equally is a tall order, a daunting instance of thinking in terms of both/and, rather than either/or. But I am optimistic that we can manage this task since the Buddhist tradition and the world's wisdom traditions more broadly agree that truth is ultimately non-dual, transcending or supplanting all apparent opposites, all contradictions and antinomies, even those of religious life.

And now I close with two quotations. Since we are not yet at the point where the day has dawned and we can see brotherhood and sisterhood in everyone's face all the time, I choose quotations from two different religious traditions, one a sheep, if you will, the other a goat. One comes from a tradition usually called atheistic, the other from a tradition called theistic. They differ on the question of where the call comes from—the call to convocation, of course, but also the call to growth, to become something more, something newer and larger and fresher than we have been in the past. The first quotation comes from the Buddhist tradition, where emphasis has been placed on the inner voice. The second comes from the Islamic tradition, where emphasis has been on the outer voice that collaborates with the inner.

From the Buddhist tradition, the last instructions and last words of the Buddha, from the Digha Nikaya: “So, Ananda, you must be your own lamps, be your own refuges. Take refuge in nothing outside yourselves. Hold firm to the truth as a lamp and a refuge, and do not look for refuge to anything besides yourselves All composite things must pass away. Strive onward vigilantly.”⁷

And from the Islamic tradition, one of the hadith qudsi: “God says: ‘I fulfill My servant’s expectation of Me, and I am with him when he remembers Me. If he remembers Me in his heart, I remember him in my heart; and if he remembers Me in public, I remember him before a public [far] better than that. And if he draws near to Me by a handsbreadth, I draw nearer to him by an armslength; and if he draws nearer to Me by an armslength, I draw nearer to him by a fathom; and if he comes to Me walking, I come to him running.’”⁸

Wherever the call comes from to you, from within or without, to this convocation and to the year ahead, may it bring you growth in ways that exceed your imagination, engaging with others who are both like and unlike you, doing the hard work on diversity that is required of us in

the short run, and giving you intimations of what it might mean for the night to be over and to see sisters and brothers in every face.

¹ Quoted in Farid Esack, "To Whom Shall We Give Access to Our Water Holes?" *Crosscurrents* (Winter 2002), 502.

² Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Bantam Books (Toronto, New York, London, 1974), 404.

³ Esack, 509.

⁴ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, John W. Harvey (tr.), Oxford University Press (New York, 1958).

⁵ Light, 132-133.

⁶ Light, 161-162.

⁷ Wm. Theodore De Bary (ed.), *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China, and Japan*, The Modern Library (New York, 1969), 29.

⁸ Adapted from Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, Beacon Press (Boston, 1972), 89 and cited in Frederick Mathewson Denny, *An Introduction to Islam*, 2nd edition, Macmillan Publishing Company (New York, 1994), 168.