

Keynote Address: Andrei Codrescu  
NCNM Commencement Ceremony  
*June 28, 2014*  
*Portland, Oregon*

Dear faculty, dear brave parents, kin and friends of the future healers of America, and future healers:

You have all contributed to a grand campaign on behalf of nature. You, new graduates, are launching your professional lives in the thick of the major battle of our time, the fight to keep nature out of parentheses.

We live in a time when nature is being increasingly put between parentheses by technology. Bulldozers, agribusiness, and even eco-tourism have made us custodians of the natural world, whether we like it or not.

Mother Nature is in big trouble. Global warming, toxins, genetically engineered food and fossil fuels still call the shots in both the so-called developed and underdeveloped worlds.

This we know and think about and we have begun working to remedy, but part of the trouble is that we talk so much about it, we have in some way begun to accept the unacceptable, which is not good enough. We talk more than we act, and as Ezra Pound, the poet, said, "what is the use of talking when there is no end to talking?"

We know some of the solutions, but we mostly know how to talk about them: yes, we need to wean ourselves from dependency on fossil fuels, we need solar energy, we need to live green and use the power of plants to heal our bodies and our distressed mother earth.

Right on.

There is much being done by individuals, by local administration, by the federal government and by partnerships between educational institutions and business. But the greater burden falls on you, young healers, because natural medicine must be practiced in a healthy environment, even though it is the sick environment we live in that will provide you with clients. It's a paradox, but there is no way out.

Two nights ago at NCNM I heard about initiatives to bring about a healthier world. One program planned to plant one million trees in one year.

Eventually there *will* be as many trees as there are people. Right? There are twenty million people in New York, so in twenty years every New Yorker, let's say, will have her or his own tree. Cool.

In the 1950s only ONE tree grew in Brooklyn.

I believe that enterprising new idealists are multiplying, maybe not as fast as trees, and not as fast as words about our green future. Portland is an exceptional place to have learned, studied, and loved the generous abundance of a bountiful flora and the conscious effort to defend it. But it is situated in the world, alas. A world that shares with you pollution, depleted seas, and the murder of medicinal plants in the deforested

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Amazon, the razed-mountain-tops coal-mining in Appalachia, and the ongoing criminal patenting of genetically altered seeds.

We know this, but there is something more elusive and perhaps as vicious, coming to you courtesy of the miraculous new world of technology, namely, a major crisis of time.

The driverless car Google is going to sell us in the near future sounds wonderful, until you realize that you will be traveling inside a computer.

You are free inside this computer to do anything you like, but most of you will be hanging out in your social networks, which are the smaller glass prisons where many of us already work now for free... for Facebook & Company.

The roads your driverless car is on will be lit up by personal commercial messages asking you to stop here and buy this, whether you want to or not. The car knows you and has been talking about you with the road.

The tracking devices in your pockets (I hope you turned them off) know where you are at every moment and they are already making you buy things wherever you find yourself.

Inside your mobile prison where you spend time with your friends in *their* prisons, there is another object, in the form of a chip imbedded in your flesh.

This device is continuously monitoring your vital signs and emailing them to an AMA-approved doctor, or maybe even to an NCNM doctor, who is also a computer that will diagnose you, send you the necessary medication intravenously before you can say peep, or, if needed, slice you on the spot ... oh look, I have a new liver... even as your driverless car is going through the automated checkout line at the grocery store that selects and wraps what your medical chip thinks you need.

This health implant will figure out not just your nutritional needs and care, but also your health insurance, your copay, and the price of the groceries it's buying.

If you don't have the right insurance or enough money, the computer will calculate how much you're likely to earn in your lifetime given your college debt, your educational and health level, and charge you accordingly.

If you can't pay, it will just terminate you on the spot.

It comes equipped with a humane Kevorkian feature.

Meanwhile, you can rest assured that your intimate thoughts, your revolutionary impulses, your outlandish ideas, your sexual fantasies, and your seditious thoughts will continue to be recorded by the the Surveillance State that is already doing this as I speak, and you tweet or whatever it is you're doing over there where I can't see your hands.

You are graduating just in time for this perfect world.

Still, and amazingly, we are not quite there yet, so there is still a chance for you to perform techno ju-jitsu, to turn the power of technology against its seemingly inevitable dystopian logic.

The coming synergy of devices and its incorporation of humans within the pleasing pastel of its crypto-politics, sounds like the perfect nightmare to me -- but what is *really* missing from it?

What's missing from it is unscheduled, free *time*. The freedom to exist in a time of your own choosing. The time to experiment with your skills, to experience the surprises of wildness, to have the nerve to go against the grain of machine logic. To look at your patients as an opportunity to know humans, not as a business, but as ambassadors of a nature not yet corralled by our time-keepers.

The liberty to enjoy and play within the surprising, sexy, sometimes violent, wilderness of nature needs reverie, surprise, and unplanned, unprogrammed time. It needs time for telling and listening to stories that arise from nature itself not from the scripted scenarios broadcast by ceaseless electronic entertainment. The Timeless Outside where humanity has produced the stories of our nature and its meanderings through myth, magic, and history, is now under attack by our friendly time-sucking gadgets.

The time to imagine, tell and listen to the unscripted stories of your patients is the gift of time where human imagination flourishes. Within stories, the healing herbs and the medicine that you learned in your years of study, have staked out a vast folklore and wisdom, a gift of many ages that waits only for the spark of your youthful passion to come alive. But to access it, you need time, a time that machines in their seeming simplicity and friendliness are stealing imperceptibly from all of us.

Imagination and attentiveness to the inner fountain of myth, story, legend, in their lyrical or narrative forms, need the same time that technology takes from you without asking, programming it as it sees fit for its mercenary ends.

The techno-world of circuits and numbers is ruthless and seemingly inevitable: You are being asked to surrender your freedom to dream, not to look behind the curtain of consensual logic. You are denied the space for mistakes, mistranslations, mishearing, misunderstanding and mistaking, which are the muses of poetry and the teachers of anyone making up their world as they go along. All your wildness, your outside, your freedom, are waiting for you behind that curtain of consensual reality that is hidden from you by the mechanical clock.

One minute of your free time is already worth more than your productive time, and much more than your dream time.

Each one of you is the product of two billion years of evolution. Your unique goofiness is the work of ages.

Do not surrender it to the machine. You have youth and idealism on your side, and I have faith that the earth herself takes a lively interest in the well-being of humans -- Don't let Google put nature between parentheses. You yourself are the best search engine there is.

The sicknesses of the body are the sicknesses of the world. Chinese medicine knew that. Plants know that. Consciousness is not the exclusive privilege of humans. The natural world is awake, alive, restless, watching, and working through us.

The living organism that has given you your healing calling operates on behalf of a mystery beyond the mathematics of our machine culture.

"the poetry of earth is never dead." so said John Keats on the 30th of December 1816, nearly two centuries ago:

**THE POETRY of earth is never dead:**

**When all the birds are faint with the hot sun,  
And hide in cooling trees, a voice will run  
From hedge to hedge about the new-mown mead;**

**The poetry of earth is ceasing never:**

**On a lone winter evening, when the frost** *10*  
**Has wrought a silence, from the stove there shrills**  
**The Cricket's song, in warmth increasing ever,**  
**And seems to one in drowsiness half lost,**  
**The Grasshopper's among some grassy hills.**

***December 30, 1816.***

"the poetry of earth is never dead."

Beauty, surprise, poetry, wonder, and mystery are the grasshopper companions of human Imagination. The teachings of the old masters and the earth-cures you learned at NCNM are the Cricket's song. And your teacher-plants, our earth's atmosphere and our oceans must be protected.

More recently, the Gogol Bordello, a group of border-crossing Gypsies sang:

"Evolution isn't over!"

**Revolution is internal  
Help yourself at any time  
Evolution isn't over  
No no no no, no no no no  
We're *about* to use our mind  
I am walking in the balance  
I am ready, ready to uncover  
Evolution is preparing  
All of us a maximum surprise  
So rise, Rise the knowledge rise!**

What I am saying is no news to you, I'm sure. What *is* new is that you are needed now more than ever.

You are needed in the Ozarks where I live now, in the wilderness near the Buffalo River National Park where old herbal medicine is still practiced by very old people.

You are needed in the interior of the North American continent, as well in all those huge still-wild areas of the globe where the old ways of healing have not yet died out.

They old healers are waiting for your generation to pick up the old arts and renew them with new knowledge.

Many people are escaping the din and sickness of machines to grow organic produce, make efficient and clean use of resources, meditate, make music and art, write poetry and even live without television. Imagine!

They are keeping nature out of parentheses.

And we need healers. We need you. We are idealists but we are fighting idealists. It won't be easy but humans have to win, because the posthumans or techno-humans are already here, making us *their* tools instead of the other way around.

So this is my advice: find the wilderness inside America and the world, be the wise healers you were taught to be in this school and fight for your own free time. Find that unscheduled time and use it to sabotage the common place and to heal the disconsolate victims of a money-crazy world of beautiful machines.

You won't get rich practicing healing and defending the wild that surrenders its secrets to you through stories and imagination, not patents, provisos, qualifiers and dangling techno-carrots.

You will be paid in love-money. By humans. This is the real currency, it lasts longer, and it keeps the human in humanity.

The poetry of earth is never dead. Your multi-dimensional flesh is infinitely more rewarding than the virtual and superficial rewards of your screens.

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Good luck, stay on your toes, and say no in the name of love to all that marginalizes humans and disrespects nature.

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