



# **The Scalpel and the Silver Bear: The First Navajo Woman Surgeon Combines Western Medicine and Traditional Healing**

*Lori Arviso Alvord , Elizabeth Cohen Van Pelt*

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The first Navajo woman surgeon combines western medicine and traditional healing.

A spellbinding journey between two worlds, this remarkable book describes surgeon Lori Arviso Alvord's struggles to bring modern medicine to the Navajo reservation in Gallup, New Mexico—and to bring the values of her people to a medical care system in danger of losing its heart.

Dr. Alvord left a dusty reservation in New Mexico for Stanford University Medical School, becoming the first Navajo woman surgeon. Rising above the odds presented by her own culture and the male-dominated world of surgeons, she returned to the reservation to find a new challenge. In dramatic encounters, Dr. Alvord witnessed the power of belief to influence health, for good or for ill. She came to merge the latest breakthroughs of medical science with the ancient tribal paths to recovery and wellness, following the Navajo philosophy of a balanced and harmonious life, called Walking in Beauty. And now, in bringing these principles to the world of medicine, **The Scalpel and the Silver Bear** joins those few rare works, such as **Healing and the Mind**, whose ideas have changed medical practices-and our understanding of the world.

## **The Scalpel and the Silver Bear: The First Navajo Woman Surgeon Combines Western Medicine and Traditional Healing Details**

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# **From Reader Review The Scalpel and the Silver Bear: The First Navajo Woman Surgeon Combines Western Medicine and Traditional Healing for online ebook**

## **Sheryl says**

While it's no surprise that Native Americans continue to struggle, the focus on women specifically was eye-opening. While Alvord may (not quite sure on that) have been given an opening into higher education due to her demographic, she certainly deserved it. Her approach to medicine is contrary to our current culture, and very refreshing. Great choice for book club discussions.

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## **Kristin says**

I really enjoyed this non-fiction account of the life journey of the first female Navajo surgeon. It is short and simply written. This book reminds us all of some of the problems in medicine, and how all the technology in the world is useless without harmony and balance in the patient's life. Lori Arviso Alvord does such a nice job of explaining how she brought these two worlds together for the benefit of her patients. It's a lesson everyone in the healthcare industry would do well to study.

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## **Jennifer says**

This book was an assigned reading in my medical anthropology class, a subject in which I have a great deal of personal interest. Combine that with having lived in the American Southwest, particularly in New Mexico, and I found this book an interesting read. The author does an excellent job at weaving stories of the traditional medical practices of her Navajo culture in with her profession as a biomedical physician and demonstrates how important cultural context is in the framework of disease, illness, sickness and healing. She voices some important lessons for biomedicine in incorporating culture into practices; however, she falls short at fully convincing a skeptical reader to see her stories as anything more than anecdotal references to her own experiences. Granted, her intent in writing the book was not to provide an academically-based argument, but rather an opportunity to show the reader a glimpse into how a pluralistic approach to medicine can be beneficial to both traditional and "modern" medicinal practices, particularly when the cultural beliefs of the patient are considered as important to overall well-being as his biological health. For that reason alone, I found the book a very worthwhile read and what I believe should be mandatory for any student of medical anthropology, medicine or public health.

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## **Kathy says**

I appreciated this book and admire Lori Alvord for the work that she continues to do. I believe that her wisdom .....the Native American ways....apply to all of us. We need to treat our body, mind, and spirit to be well.

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### **Catherine Newell says**

You know, I don't know why I bother teaching a class on religion and medicine. I should just assign my students this book and *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* and call it a day.

Except I know they would never read either book because I DO assign them (as part of their final assignment) and none of them read either one.

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### **Cindy Michael says**

Interesting and a fairly fast read. I admit to skimming through some of the pages about Navajo culture and spiritual beliefs...but since I feel there was quite a bit of repetition I don't think I missed too much.

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### **Sabrina says**

Loved this concept: "Navajo people have a concept called [Walking in Beauty], but it isn't the beauty that most people think of. Beauty to Navajos means living in balance and harmony with yourself and the world. It means caring for yourself--mind, body, and spirit--and having the right relationships with your family, community, the animal world, the environment--earth, air, and water--our planet and universe. If a person respects and honors all these relationships, then they will be Walking in Beauty."

Highly recommend this book for medical professionals; great insights into giving compassionate, culturally competent care.

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### **Julie says**

This was a really good book! I started reading it because it was on a reading list published by my Career Tech Student Organization for a competition.

This is a very fast reading book about a young Navajo woman named Lori who becomes a surgeon. This was a pretty big deal because typically the medical field does not recognize the cultures, customs, and ceremonies of the Navajo. Add to that, Lori is female. She overcomes many obstacles, becoming accepted at Dartmouth, and then becoming a respected surgeon in her field.

Lori's goal was to mix modern medicine with Navajo medicine to reach the members of her tribe and surrounding areas. She manages to do this by becoming a patient herself (not by choice!) and aligning herself with other Navajo medical professionals. It's not until she feels she needs a medicine man that this need becomes ever more clear to her.

I found this book to be very inspiring. I hope I can take something from this book to add to my own nursing practice. I also feel that I have learned more of my heritage in terms of Native American practices. I am not

Navajo but of Cherokee descent.

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### **Isabel McIlhenny says**

I have read quite a few memoirs in the past few weeks, and all of them, including this one, have given me insight into the lives of different people in America. It has been interesting to see how where you grew up, and the community you grew up in can have an effect on your life. I was extremely intrigued by Alvord's thought that certain aspects of native culture could be beneficial if implemented in modern medicine. I like the idea that belief and comfort can have an actual effect on how people recover from disease or injury. To me, it speaks to the power of community, and how important that is for people. Alvord's story is inspiring and insightful which is why I would give this book 4 stars.

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### **Stephanie says**

It is always fun to read a book in which you find the names of people you have known in the past. In this book appear Alan Waxman MD an OB-GYN with whom I worked at the Alaska Native Medical Center in 1979, and Brooke Medicine Eagle with whom I did a vision quest in Montana. They each only get a sentence, but it was a pleasant surprise. The Beauty Way is the pathway Navajos seek to walk in life. This is a life in harmony with family, community, and nature. If a person disrupts this harmony then he/she becomes ill. The traditional Navajo healer sings to the patient to try to restore this harmony. We would do well to try to learn to walk on the path of beauty.

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### **Astartiée says**

J'étais assez sceptique face à ce document mis en main par ma sœur future doctoresse avec un « lis-le, il est trop bien ». Je ne jugerai pas l'écrit et le niveau de langue assez particulier de l'ouvrage ici, et qui m'ont donné beaucoup de difficultés au départ.

Une fois le premier chapitre terminé avec labeur, j'ai dévoré la chose.

L'auteure raconte ici son parcours, tiraillée entre la culture occidentale et sa médecine d'un côté et de l'autre son appartenance à la tribu des Navajos et la médecine traditionnelle qui en découle. Son expérience de vie démontre de la difficulté de trouver sa place entre les deux univers, tant du point de vue personnel que professionnel.

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### **Catherine says**

I liked the focus on a more holistic approach to health care, but the book was fragmented and lacked depth.

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### **Gail says**

3.5\*

I discovered this book after having watched "Medicine Woman" on PBS, the story of the first Native American female physician and her continuing impact on Native women physicians and health care administrators. The documentary was so enlightening that I sought out the memoir written by one of the contemporary physicians featured in the film. Lori Arviso Alvord, M.D. is that woman and this is her story.

Dr. Alvord is a fascinating character whose story seems in many ways miraculous. She was educated in a reservation school that was not up to the standards of white schools but despite that, her intellect and determination took her to Dartmouth and eventually to medical school at Stanford. She became one of the few women Navajo surgeons; it was a herculean accomplishment. Her achievement should be celebrated by women as well as those who strive for more equality within the health care system.

This book was written in 1999 so some of her commentary on the state of health care now feels more historical than pertinent to today (though there are other considerable challenges that have arisen). This book should be read as a discussion of a unique way of framing the mind-body-spirit connection that was a fashionable area to explore in the 90s but seems to have become less important to people in the secular 21st century. That does not diminish its value. In fact, her holistic perspective has value to environmentalists given the connection being discovered between planetary health and human health.

As a Native American, there were unique challenges to her becoming a physician, or even getting a basic education. And having a Native American father and a Caucasian mother brought its own struggles as she tried to bridge two entirely different worlds. The author wasn't raised in traditional Navajo ways; she adopted much of that as she aged and began her practice in an Indian Health Service hospital on her reservation in New Mexico. Her discovery of certain Navajo healing practices that have since been validated in research was intriguing. Her effort to reduce the stress of her patients as they approached surgery and encountered a foreign culture (the medical system) was admirable and has been demonstrated to improve outcomes (stress is detrimental to human health in a variety of ways). There is now a term for teaching practitioners how to work with people who are not western European in heritage: cultural competency.

Her discussion of the importance of harmony (Walking in Beauty) was especially engaging and important. She links health/healing to the harmony of the world beyond the individual: animals, ecosystem, the land, human social relationships. Again, we are learning more and more about the importance of health as a set of interrelated factors far beyond humans. Using Navajo beliefs to explain this view was pretty terrific.

This memoir doesn't cover very much of her life and focuses more on her discovery of the value of her people's own indigenous practices to caring for people in a more integrated way when they are ill. Her philosophy uses the best of modern medicine along with the wisdom of traditional Native healers to achieve better outcomes in a more compassionate and enlightened way.

My one criticism is that she sometimes suspends critical thinking and embraces any healing practice she encounters as valid for its supposed healing effects. She doesn't distinguish between things that make people feel spiritually comfortable ("beliefs") but that have no evidence to support their reputation for healing, from those things that do in fact have an actual scientific basis for healing. This is especially evident when she searches for ways to manage her pre-eclampsia during her first pregnancy, visiting a medicine man for a prayer ceremony that requires a long trip alone across New Mexico and Arizona. Given her health at the time, this was risky, something she doesn't emphasize enough, and the ceremony had no impact on her condition, which required an urgent C-section. In other words, there were times when her judgment was clouded as she attempted to embrace and honor her culture.

Despite some reservations with the book (the writing is pretty pedestrian; she uses far too many medical

terms that aren't explained; it's impossible to read some sections easily because there is no guide to pronouncing Navajo words - it would have been better to translate them with the Native word in parentheses), I recommend the book for people who are interested in Native American culture (as I am) and in Integrative Medicine concepts. Most Integrative Medicine is founded on incorporating either herbalism or Asian health care practices. I haven't seen anything that bridges Native American culture and Western medicine. This book successfully does that and the unique piece here is including the whole environment in the quest for health through harmony. Dr. Alvord has made an important contribution to the literature.

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### **Laura says**

Excellent read. Fascinating to see how Alvord was successful in making a career in western medicine whilst still keeping her Native American cultural beliefs. Awesome to see her take advantage of minority opportunity and truly succeed.

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### **Dhartridge says**

I am rating this 4 rather than 3 stars because the combination of three interesting (to me) topics: medicine, a woman's success in a male dominated profession, and Native American experience. It is a quick and interesting read. The author is now a Dean at Dartmouth, the college I associate with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris.

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