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The Scalpel and The Silver Bear (Book Review)

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Lori Arviso Alvord, M.D., and Elizabeth Cohen Van Pelt, *The Scalpel and The Silver Bear*, Bantam Books, 2000. Reviewed by Harvey Fenigsohn.

In *The Scalpel and the Silver Bear*, Lori Arviso Alvord relates the inspiring story of her life as she became the first Navajo woman surgeon. Never forgetting her native roots, Dr. Alvord strongly advocates blending western medicine with the traditional healing of the Navajos. She reveals how Native Americans' almost miraculous curative practices transcend the limitations of today's medical science with its dominant emphasis on pathology and technology. We learn that modern medicine has much to gain from the spiritual values of an ancient people.

The daughter of a white mother and an Indian father, Dr. Alvord's childhood in New Mexico straddled both worlds, but she seems to have responded most deeply to her Navajo heritage. In this moving, compelling autobiography, we follow her from her earliest days on the reservation to her undergraduate years at Dartmouth and on to Stanford for medical school and residency. Dr. Alvord then went home to the reservation as a surgeon at Gallup Indian Medical Center, determined to better the lives of her people. She currently practices at Dartmouth Medical School and serves as Associate Dean of Student and Multicultural Affairs and Assistant Professor of Surgery and Psychiatry.

Bright and ambitious, Lori Arviso originally left New Mexico to attend college on a scholarship. As a woman and as a Native American, she felt doubly alienated, but found comfort with the few Native American classmates at Dartmouth. She learned to overcome the Navajo's characteristic reticence and reserve, distinguishing herself academically and gaining admission to Stanford's prestigious medical school where she completed her surgical training. Again finding herself in the minority--an Indian woman in general surgery--she more than proved herself by becoming chief resident in a field traditionally dominated by white males. Returning home, she dedicated herself to merging the medical expertise of a skilled surgeon with the holistic medicine of a native healer.

At Gallup, she encountered patients reluctant to establish eye contact, fearful of being touched, resistant to having organs removed from the body - in short, thoroughly intimidated by Dr. Alvord's modern methods. She soon realized that only by winning her patients' trust could she really be most effective. She learned to approach them gradually, to establish her credibility as a fellow Indian, and always to respect their native beliefs. Dr. Alvord explained how the Indians strive to live a life in harmony with the natural world. Concerned with the whole being of a person, tribal medicine is based on a healing philosophy called "Walking in Beauty." The Navajos sensed their mystical connection with the universe, seeking a balance of body, mind, and spirit.

With this wisdom, Dr. Alvord convinces us that there is more to medicine than science. From her, for example, we learn the power of song in healing. When an old man was sick in the Gallup hospital with cancer, a *hataali*, or medicine man, performed a "sing," a ceremony of chanting. The elderly Indian was being treated with chemotherapy, radiation, and surgery, but he began to

show signs of recovery only after the trusted shaman sang at his bedside. The medicine man gave his patient something modern medical science could not provide - hope.

Dr. Alvord is quite aware that today's physicians might well dismiss such unscientific practices, considering them to be based on ignorance and superstition. She is not advocating that modern medicine adopt the healing rituals and ceremonies of the Navajo. Instead, she emphasizes how native medicine provides a model of personal care far too often missing from today's hospitals and doctors' offices. As she writes:

Now, more than ever, patients themselves feel removed and forgotten, powerless in the face of the institutions that were created to help them ... modern medicine has become a one-way system - from physicians to patient. Physicians do the directing, talking at their patients ... listening on the part of the physician is becoming lost ... Patients want to be involved ... They want to feel more than a set of organs and bones, nerves and blood, and participate in restoring their bodies to health.

As a surgeon at the reservation hospital and later, as a medical school professor at Dartmouth, Dr. Alvord has stressed the need for physicians to respect the emotional and spiritual needs of their patients as well as their physical requirements. For her, the ideal hospital would combine state-of-the-art technology with a serene, warm, and comfortable setting, one with natural light and free of the harsh, sterile, clinical atmosphere of so many modern facilities. She points out that respected medical journals report the benefits of community and spirituality in reducing patients' mortality and promoting their healing.

In speaking out, Dr. Alvord's voice has been heard. Her memoir is now read in many undergraduate and medical school courses, and is popular with reading groups around the country. In demand as a speaker, Dr. Alvord has garnered numerous honors including two honorary degrees and an Outstanding Women in Medicine award. In her life and in her spirit, Lori Arviso Alvord is indeed a woman who demonstrates what it means to "Walk in Beauty."