The Scalpel and the Silver Bear Study Guide

The Scalpel and the Silver Bear by Lori Alvord

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The Scalpel and the Silver Bear is the autobiography of Dr. Lori Arviso Alvord, the first female Navajo doctor in the United States. Alvord was raised in a small town named Crownpoint on a Navajo reservation adjacent to New Mexico. She grew up the daughter of a Navajo man and a white, blond woman, feeling torn between Navajo and modern American worlds. The book tells the story of Alvord's attempt to integrate the core insights and wisdom of her two cultural traditions. She intends her book to serve two other purposes as well: to tell the story of how one Navajo broke the glass ceiling and to illustrate the medical knowledge latent in Navajo rituals and taboos.

Alvord argues that modern medicine has lost any sense of spirituality. One of the most intimate things you can do with a person, in Alvord's opinion, is to cut them open and change what is inside of them. Navajos traditionally do not allow themselves to be cut open and are afraid to touch the dead. Alvord was thus raised with a profound sense of reverence about the body and found her interest in surgery coming into conflict with it.

Alvord became convinced early in her career that the Navajo philosophy of the harmony of all things, The Beauty Way, could be used to aid in the healing process for her patients, especially Navajo ones. She argues throughout the book that hospital staff should try to form communities of care, to integrate families and communities into patient care and to show respect for the culture and histories of patients.

The Scalpel and the Silver Bear has fourteen chapters. Chapter 1, Chantways, relates Navajo health culture to the reader and introduces Dr. Alvord's practice, birth and childhood, along with the histories of her grandmother, mother and father. Chapter 2, Walking the Path between Worlds, discusses the relationship between Alvord's Navajo culture and her experience in college. Chapter 3, Journey Down the Medicine Path, explains how Alvord decided to become a surgeon and how her desire both amplified and alienated her from her connection with her Navajo roots.

Chapter Four, Life Out of Balance, clarifies how Alvord learned to be a better doctor for her Navajo patients and discusses treating her patients for gallbladder problems. Chapter Five, Rez Dogs and Crow Dreams, examines the terrible struggle that many Navajos and Native Americans generally have with alcoholism. Chapter Six, Ceremony Medicine, focuses on the role of the medicine man or woman in Navajo culture and how they often possess wisdom about healing despite being unacquainted with modern medicine. Chapter Seven, Spiritual Surgery, shows Alvord starting to explicitly integrate Navajo philosophy into her medical practice. Chapter Eight, The 'Navajo Plague' discusses a hantavirus epidemic among the Navajo.

Chapter Nine, Two Weddings, explains Alvord's relationship with and marriage to Jon Alvord. Chapter Ten, At the Big Medicine Space, explores Alvord's life at her hospital in Gallup, New Mexico. Chapter Eleven, Do Not Try to Count the Stars, and Chapter Twelve, The Spirit Horse's Bridle, focus on Alvord's pregnancy and her associated visit to a medicine man. Chapter Thirteen, A Knotted Sash, tells the story of her son Kodi's

birth. Chapter Fourteen relates the story of Alvord's grandmother Grace's death and her family's decision to leave Gallup for Dartmouth, where Alvord would take up a prestigious position at the medical school and start to integrate her Navajo philosophy into medical practice there.

Introduction and Chapter One, Chantways

Introduction and Chapter One, Chantways Summary and Analysis

The Scalpel and the Silver Bear is the story of a girl from a small town on a Navajo reservation who grew up to be a surgeon, Dr. Lori Arviso Alvord. It also focuses on how the ancient tribal practices of the Navajo can help expand the American medical system's ideal of healing. The first element of the story shows that great and surprising things are possible, the second indicates that there really is wisdom in Navajo healing practices.

Modern medicine has great technology but has lost that which heals best: relationships, lifestyle and community membership. Patients often feel forgotten and powerless; the physician dictates healing to the patient. Patients are made passive. But patients are then nothing more than a machine to be tweaked. Alvord learns this lesson by becoming as good of a healer as she was a surgeon.

Those who perform medicine rites amongst the Navajo are those who see the individual as a whole person whose relationships must be in harmony with others to be healthy. The multidimensional form of healing associated with this view is called 'Walking in Beauty'. Dr. Alvord wants modern American medicine to learn to walk in beauty.

Chapter 1, Chantways, explains that in Navajo culture, one of the most important parts of healing involves singing a person to wellness through a chantway, a song used to cure. The Navajo are not the only culture who thinks singing matters for wellness.

Dr. Alvord is the first Navajo to become a surgeon, which has allowed her to observe two styles of medicine operating at once. She worked as a surgeon in Gallup, New Mexico and she lived the contrast between the two forms of medicine daily. Alvord's father was full-blooded Navajo, her mother white. Thus Alvord is two different people in two distinct roles.

Dr. Alvord worked at the Gallup Indian Medical Center fifty miles from the little town of Crownpoint where she grew up. Life there was hard and the people were impoverished. Navajos did not dream of a bigger life, though Dr. Alvord was still encouraged by her mother. The Navajo discouraged talking about themselves or drawing attention to themselves. They are taught to be humble, but Alvord thinks her story is important to those Navajo girls who want to see great possibilities for themselves and for those who want a broadened concept of healing.

Alvord was born Janette Lorraine Cupp in a military hospital in Tacoma, Washington. Afterward, Alvord's father moved Alvord and her mother to the reservation where Alvord

was raised with her sisters, Karen and Robyn. Most people on the reservation spoke Navajo as their first language. Alvord grew up listening to stories about her clan and people from her Navajo grandmother, Grace Cupp.

Grace encouraged her granddaughters to be both Navajo and American. But while Grace was proud to be American, Alvord grew up knowing that the Navajo had been broken and murdered by whites. Alvord inherited the grief of her people, much like Jews and black Americans. She grieved for her family and became angry.

Alvord's mother was accepted by the Navajo though she was always slightly outside of the culture. Her parents encouraged Alvord to become educated. After medical school, Alvord returned to serve her tribe, though the Navajo mistrusted Western medicine. Alvord softened them to Western medicine by respecting Navajo practices. Slowly she allowed her Navajo past to affect her medical practice. The Navajo do not respond well to the quick, impersonal style of Western doctors, as they are private, dignified and social. They try to live in harmony and balance with all and see sickness resulting from things falling out of balance. For the Navajo, religion and medicine are one.

Alvord believes that the benefits of Navajo healing practices will eventually be scientifically verified. She wants to teach future surgeons how to respect Navajo practices. Training doctors must be broader than it is today. Today, medical training and culture is all about cost management.

Chapter Two, Walking the Path between Worlds

Chapter Two, Walking the Path between Worlds Summary and Analysis

When the Navajo grow sick, they often wonder which local ritual or norm they broke. If they do not heal, the medicine man must help them. This image of life is not how Indians are presented in the Western media. Alvord and her sisters never thought the Indians had anything to do with them. As a child, Alvord often had to choose between playing with whites or Navajo. Her grandmother Grace understood the conflict, as one of her grandfathers was a medicine man and the other, Jesus Arviso, was a Spaniard translator adopted into the tribe. Grace's life contained many distinct cultural experiences. She married an Irishman and gave birth to Alvord's father, though later it was revealed that her paternal grandfather was a Navajo man.

Women have a strong role in Navajo culture; their society is more matriarchal. Women have war names and keep property. Alvord always had a strong sense of herself as a woman and as a result had accordingly come to associate herself with the bear. In accordance with this totem, she wore a small silver bear necklace. Alvord eventually had to make her own decision about whether she would leave or stay on the reservation. She chose to leave for her education, though she was frightened. While she did well in high school, her education was marginal.

Alvord's initial college plans were modest until she met a Navajo student attending Princeton, where there were only five Indians. She therefore sent an application to Dartmouth (the only Ivy League school at the time with more than fifty Indians). Alvord was accepted. When she arrived, she felt awash in green. There was not much green in Crownpoint and the culture shock was enormous: people talked too much, cared too much about material wealth, were too competitive and proud. To Dartmouth students, the reservation would be a third world country.

Initially, Alvord felt invisible and homesick. Academically, Alvord could hold her own in literature and social science, but not in physical and life sciences. Due to cultural reasons, she never raised her hand in class. She ended up majoring in psychology and sociology, with a minor in Native American studies. She loved the Native American program. The students did almost everything together. Alvord remarks that white people do not understand tribal membership, fraternities to the contrary. In the end, Dartmouth was good for Alvord and she gained a new kind of family.

Chapter Three, Journey Down the Medicine Path

Chapter Three, Journey Down the Medicine Path Summary and Analysis

Alvord had been fascinated by human anatomy since high school and interested in medicine since she held a job at a reservation pharmacy when she was fourteen. She also began to read about anatomy. When she finished Dartmouth, her fascination with anatomy remained strong. Alvord also knew that she could not return home, so she found a job as a research assistant for brain physiologist, Gary Rosenberg, at the University of New Mexico.

The pay was awful and the job was not very glamorous, but Alvord learned a lot. Rosenberg encouraged her to go to medical school. Initially she thought she wasn't capable, but the idea seized her. After a few weeks, she decided to try the sciences again; this time she did well in biology. The body seemed like the Navajo philosophy of the universe. Alvord then found that the logic of anatomy extended to other subjects, and she began to see her how her Native American theology could aid her educational process.

Preparing to apply to medical school was difficult; Alvord had almost no money. Alvord was accepted to Stanford, near where her sister, Karen, went to school. Her father was very excited. Stanford also had a vibrant Native American community. The first years at Stanford were difficult; Alvord studied alone and studied hard. She could not bring herself to participate in discussions or answer questions in class. Still, the logic of the body moved her.

One of Alvord's greatest challenges was the dissection of her first cadaver. It was difficult for her for many reasons, especially because the Navajos have a strong cultural rule to never touch the dead. At death, the Navajo believe that the good part of the person leaves the body and the evil part stays behind. There may once have been good reasons for the taboo, but Alvord decided it no longer served a purpose. Nonetheless, she felt that she had to violate her conscience. However, she pushed through because she knew that doing this would help her cure thousands of people.

The obstacles in medical school were conquered one by one, but Alvord always felt like she was moving away from her Navajo ways. Alvord was in love with surgery, which she saw as one of the most intimate forms of human contact, closer even than sex. Surgery would become her passion, though there would be obstacles, such as her gender, which was a barrier at the time. At the time, only a handful of Native American surgeons existed. She seemed to be the first Native American female physician.

While at Stanford, Alvord would come home to New Mexico for periodic rotations. Working there, she met her future mentor, Dr. Lujan, a Native American from the Taos and San Juan Pueblo tribes, and a great surgeon. Lujan worked with patients from two small pueblos, Acoma and Laguna. He taught Alvord how to relate to patients, especially Native American ones. Lujan empathized in a profound way. Alvord would become Lujan's surgical assistant though Lujan initially discouraged her due to the challenges associated with the job, such as handling severe illnesses and being a member of an ethnic minority. Lujan made sure that Alvord knew that she would always have to work harder than others. Alvord would encounter a lot of skepticism about her abilities, both as a Native American and as a woman. That said, Alvord found that some surgeons were committed to integrating women and minorities.

In med school, though, race and gender didn't really matter, just your academic standing. While this had advantages, Alvord found herself acting 'white' and mourning the loss of her Navajo roots.

In early 1987, while working at Santa Clara Valley Medical Center, Alvord had a major setback. Her residency was emotionally and physically exhausting. Alvord began to have severe fevers as a result of the stress and one day it got out of control. She had a pleural effusion on her right side, an infection which broke through her lung wall and invaded her chest, which required drainage. She would have to fight for her life; 30% of patients with the disease died.

During her illness, Alvord began to understand what it meant to be a patient, as she noticed things most doctors did not. This was incredibly important as it helped her understand medicine from the patient's perspective. Alvord also realized that in violation of her Navajo upbringing, her life was not in balance; she worked long hours, with high stress and poor eating. A few months later Alvord returned to New Mexico to recover. She returned to normal and went on to become a surgeon. Next, Alvord returned home to start her practice. She joined the Indian Health Service and took a job at the Indian hospital in Gallup, New Mexico, fifty miles from Crownpoint.

Chapter Four, Life Out of Balance

Chapter Four, Life Out of Balance Summary and Analysis

The fact that Alvord was a doctor often meant that her fellow tribespeople did not recognize her as Navajo. Her appearance, due to her training as a surgeon, often made her look like she was not Native American at all. Coming back to the reservation was difficult. Gallup, where Alvord lived, was a reservation border town that spilled into West New Mexico. Alvord found a home in a beautiful part of town. She found two dogs quickly. Her grandmother Grace moved in with her. Alvord's home was conveniently close to the hospital. She felt at home, richer than she left. Her job was in the Gallup Indian Medical Center.

Many of the doctors at the center (GIMC) found Navajo patients difficult to treat and hard to understand. Further, many of Alvord's people took poor care of themselves, were impoverished and alcoholics. Superstitions among the Navajo were also challenging.

The GIMC had its own unique culture. The higher positions were almost all held by Anglos. Navajos are often uncomfortable with death, so it was impossible to handle end-of-life decisions carefully. Alvord and the other Navajo doctors knew that Navajo patients had to be handled with care.

Alvord discussed a gallbladder surgery on a Navajo woman named Evelyn Bitsui. During surgery there were complications and Evelyn had a stroke, partially paralyzing her right side. It was not clear why on a medical level but Alvord felt that she knew intuitively through her Navajo side. Alvord had been thinking about how to integrate Navajo cultural norms into patient care, looking into developing a bicultural philosophy of harmony.

Alvord knew that her bedside manner needed work; she was often impatient with those who did a poor job and she did not like to be questioned. Alvord was quick-tempered as well. She wanted to be a better doctor. Alvord thought that one reason Evelyn's surgery went wrong was because Alvord did not know her and Evelyn had sensed her fatigue, anger and frustration. Some evidence suggests that patients have some awareness during surgery. Alvord decided not to let her temper interfere with her patients. She wanted to make them comfortable. Traditional Navajo healers are expected to lead by example, teaching their patients to Walk in Beauty, but physicians live under stress and there is little expectation that they will take care of themselves emotionally.

Alvord wanted to change things; among other things, she tried to speak in Navajo which helped her patients relax. She also started to touch her patients. The manner of traditional healers also helped her.

Chapter Five, Rez Dogs and Crow Dreams

Chapter Five, Rez Dogs and Crow Dreams Summary and Analysis

Chapter five opens with accounts of patient histories. Alvord always found these descriptions dehumanizing and unharmonious. Further, many of the maladies she encountered were due to alcohol, something Native Americans, particularly men, were especially vulnerable towards. Gallup had fifty bars for fifty thousand people and drunk driving arrests exceeding ten thousand a year. Sometimes Alvord saw alcohol as a 'lubricant of domination' that allowed Europeans to dominate non-Europeans. The leading cause of death among the Navajo was motor vehicle accidents. Alvord recounted some cases of alcohol-related incidents. Even Alvord's father had an alcohol problem and she came to see it as a disease.

Robert Cupp, Alvord's father, was by any account an extraordinary human being; he knew everyone, every animal and every geographical location in the area. He understood the interconnectedness of the world. He also taught his daughters simple Navajo insights. Whites had tried to bar him from speaking Navajo in school, along with many others. They were forced to assimilate partly for racist reasons; they were told that their forms of life were inferior. The 19th century brought a physical genocide and the 20th century a cultural genocide for the Navajo. Robert Cupp had been deeply oppressed by the cultural condition and rank of the Navajo and he took to drinking in order to cope. Alvord saw her father as two people. Eventually Alvord's father would die in part due to his alcoholism; he was buried in Albuquerque but Alvord feels his presence all around her.

Chapter Six, Ceremony Medicine

Chapter Six, Ceremony Medicine Summary and Analysis

The Navajo had no word for cancer, so one of Alvord's patients named it. Alvord's Navajo patients could not comprehend it. They could not believe it was not contagious. Cancer scared Alvord enormously; after the millions poured into cancer research, good cures were still not available. Among the Navajo, it was a great horror, supposedly caused by an evil action or bad deed. Much of Alvord's observations were associated with a patient named Carolyn Yazzie who had breast cancer. Alvord decided to have Carolyn arrange a song for herself and to bring in a medicine man.

Carolyn disappeared for a week; Alvord found her at a Night Chant, a ceremony held for the sick. Many showed up for the ceremony and the songs sung told of the beauty of the universe. Alvord described the beauty of the ceremony. Everyone there was there to help a girl get well (not Carolyn). For nine days they would dance and, despite her medical training, Alvord knew it would have a powerful effect, helping the girl to return to harmony and balance.

Alvord contacted Carolyn after the ceremony and Carolyn reported that her sister said the cancer was her fault. She wanted an answer as to what caused the cancer. Alvord told her otherwise but she knew that Carolyn's life lacked beauty. A medicine man eventually performed a ceremony for her, and while it was not as elaborate as the one described earlier in the chapter, it gave Carolyn great calm. She decided to go through with the surgery and Alvord removed her tumor.

A few months after the surgery, the GIMC got a new ICU and had a medicine man bless it; Alvord describes the ceremony. She had been hesitant to go to a medicine man herself, but was happy to have them help her patients. After watching the ceremony, Alvord was determined to see a medicine man one day.

Chapter Seven, Spiritual Surgery

Chapter Seven, Spiritual Surgery Summary and Analysis

Chapter Seven opens with Dr. Alvord visiting a clinic in Crownpoint and seeing a patient named Dezbah Tsosie. She needed to have her gall bladder removed, but the medicine man had told her this, as Navajos often get large gallstones. Ancestrally, the Navajo ate lots of grains, beans and limited meat. Modern American diets are hard on the Navajo as a result. Alvord had performed many gall bladder surgeries; people can live well without gall bladders.

Alvord had come to treat the whole person, not just the organs, to focus on the harmony of their being. At Gallup, Alvord was becoming more intent on gaining the trust of her Navajo patients. Her patients felt like she worked magic on them. In her, the healer and doctor were merged. Alvord noted that the medicine men taught the West many things, such as the use of Quinine to treat malaria, the use of evergreen tree bark to treat scurvy, and how to use willow bark to cure pain.

Alvord often found that professional surgeons looked at human beings like machines, but she emphasized that they work on real, live people. Accordingly, Alvord would respect arrangements by the Navajo to have ceremonies prior to surgery. It is important to keep the mind healthy to heal the body. Many Navajo opposed the idea of surgery initially, but Alvord pushed the idea that surgery could be performed in a holy way. Navajos also often wanted their removed organ and tissues back, even in circumcision.

Alvord performed the surgery on Dezbah. A few days later, she saw Dezbah for a check-up. Alvord agreed with the medicine man who told Dezbah that she was healed.

Chapter Eight, The 'Navajo Plague'

Chapter Eight, The 'Navajo Plague' Summary and Analysis

Florena Woody, a patient on whom Alvord operated, mysteriously died a week after her surgery for no apparent reason. It later turned out that she had shown up to the Crownpoint clinic with severe respiratory distress. These symptoms were very rare. Alvord was deeply upset: Florena had had elective surgery and apparently she had somehow died from it. Perhaps during her gallbladder removal Alvord had cut a duct that let bile spill into the abdomen which in turn caused an infection. The autopsy determined that she died of 'catastrophic asphyxiation'. Her fiancé, Merrill Bahe, had a similar illness on the day of Florena's funeral.

Alvord and Sue had not caused the problem, but they were still perplexed: what had caused the illness? More deaths occurred over the next week, and among young people. The medicine men pointed to a surprising large harvest of piñon nuts. Something was out of balance. The news story went national; a dozen major laboratories got involved. Many started to think that the disease was the result of how the Navajo lived, a terrible stereotype. Every dominant culture accuses subordinate cultures of being unclean.

People kept dying. One day, a Navajo silversmith named Betty Cowboy came to the GIMC complaining of symptoms that often indicated the mystery illness. Alvord admitted her overnight. By the morning, she was terribly ill and after being rushed to the University of New Mexico hospital in Albuquerque, she died.

The medicine men suggested that the large piñon nut harvest had increased the number of rats in the area which meant more rat droppings. The medical researchers confirmed that the rodent droppings had a virus in them. The disease was rare in developed nations but the Navajo were a poor people living in remote areas. Further, Navajos hunted often and spend a lot of time with animals. The particular 'hantavirus' that had killed so many people had spread among the Navajo early in the century. Alvord thought back to the Beauty Way principles and the idea that illness results from life being out of balance. The medicine men helped figure out the answer, but no one in the media acknowledged it.

Chapter Nine, Two Weddings

Chapter Nine, Two Weddings Summary and Analysis

Practicing medicine amongst the Navajos led Alvord to expect the unexpected, but Alvord was not prepared for what happened to her next. In 1993, Alvord was involved in surgery and happened to be assisted by an Army Special Forces medic trainee named Jon Alvord. They had positive interactions several times and after a few days, Jon asked her to lunch. (Dr.) Alvord had no idea why she asked him, but decided to go.

At lunch, they made small talk. It turned out that it had taken Jon two weeks to get the courage to ask her out. Additionally, he was twenty-three, she thirty-four. Alvord decided not to let the age difference bother her. In Alvord's dating career, she'd dated all kinds of people, most of whom were Native Americans. She had no prejudice against whites, but wanted children that were more than a quarter Navajo. She thought Jon was adorable and she saw no problem dating him for awhile.

They had a good time together until one day when Alvord's dog, Shush, escaped from the yard and was hit by a car. Jon met Alvord at the animal clinic. Shush was badly injured and near death. Alvord said to Jon that she couldn't handle losing Shush, particularly because she was about to lose him. Jon said not to worry, that he was going to come back whenever he had vacations and that he loved her.

Shush survived without her leg and quickly forgot about her disability. Jon was training at Fort Bragg. While visiting him, two months after their first date, Jon asked Alvord to marry him; she agreed. A year after that, in the summer of 1994, they were married. A traditional medicine man, related to Alvord's family by marriage, Ernest Becenti, presided over the ceremony.

After they were married, Jon joined the New Mexico National Guard and started attending community college. While many female doctors did not take their husband's names, Alvord took Jon's. She never much cared for 'Cupp' anyway. She took her grandmother's maiden name as her middle name as well, as it was her Navajo family name. Thus she became Lori Arviso Alvord.

Chapter Ten, At the Big Medicine Space

Chapter Ten, At the Big Medicine Space Summary and Analysis

In Chapter Ten, Alvord was responsible for treating a little girl named Melanie Begay, who had appendicitis. Her grandmother, Bernice, was against the surgery. Alvord's increasing skill with Navajos helped quiet Bernice's fears. Bernice was afraid for anyone to cut her granddaughter in part due to the terrible experience she had with Anglos in her childhood, where she was forcibly taken to white boarding schools where Americans tried to eradicate her culture and language.

Alvord explained how much of the history of the Americans and Navajos was disastrous for the Navajos, creating a history of mistrust and fear. There were allegations that in the 1950s that a number of Native American woman were sterilized by the Indian Health Service, which was, in any event, widely known to deliver substandard care. Alvord herself had mixed experiences there.

Alvord understood Bernice's concern but she had to get her granddaughter treated; she felt torn between two understandable impulses. Bernice continued to resist and Alvord told her it was her decision. Behind Bernice's back, hospital staff were trying to secure a court order to force the surgery. This would be a cultural disaster that Alvord wanted to avoid. After Alvord intervened with Melanie's father, he convinced Bernice to allow Melanie to have the surgery, in contradiction to traditional Navajo deference to mother-in-laws.

Chapter Eleven, Do Not Try to Count the Stars

Chapter Eleven, Do Not Try to Count the Stars Summary and Analysis

Alvord became pregnant, though she did not realize this until her fourth month. One of her friends worried that her job was stressing her out so much that it would harm the baby. Alvord stopped watching violent television and movies, tried to avoid confrontations and arguments and took other relevant actions. All in all, Alvord was happy that she was pregnant. Her pregnancy caused her to become reacquainted with those who were suffering all around her.

Alvord felt some pelvic pain and was encouraged to see a medicine man, but she refused at first. As she began to feel the effects of disharmony in her lif, she began to reconsider. It turned out that her pelvic pain was caused by pregnancy-induced hypertension or preeclampsia. She would have to rest and stop doing surgery. Her problem was common but could be serious. Alvord was bored. Eventually she went against doctor's orders and saw a medicine man.

Chapter Twelve, The Spirit Horse's Bridle

Chapter Twelve, The Spirit Horse's Bridle Summary and Analysis

Chapter Twelve opens as Alvord is driving to Tuba City to see a medicine man. She mentions that they decided to name her baby Kodiak, for the great black Alaskan bear. Despite the risk to 'Kodi', Alvord felt that she had to go see the medicine man, that it was best for them both. Alvord had always dreamed about the trip. She was going to see a medicine man or 'hataalii' named Thomas Hataathlii. He performed the Beauty Way ceremony and was a counselor at the Tuba City Hospital with the Indian Health Service. He'd also sponsored workshops for Dartmouth Native American students.

Thomas was a cool, young medical professional who kept traditional Navajo ways. He was young, but had wisdom and shared Alvord's duality. Thomas was a handsome, incredibly young, athletic-looking man and probably younger than Alvord was at the time. They began their meeting with small talk, discussing their clans. Alvord relates some of his family history and his call to be a holy person. It turned out that in 1995, Thomas was the youngest Navajo medicine man. He had also performed the Blessing Way ceremony and knew parts of the nine-day Night Way ceremony.

Eventually Thomas asked what brought Alvord to him. Thomas next said a prayer for her and the baby. Then they went to his trailer to perform a ceremony. Thomas donned his traditional garb and then looked like a medicine man. He started to sing with the glottal music of the Navajo and helped Alvord hold a medicine bundle. The songs overwhelmed Alvord with a feeling of beauty. After the ceremony, Alvord had a profound sense of peace.

Chapter Thirteen, A Knotted Sash

Chapter Thirteen, A Knotted Sash Summary and Analysis

The Navajo celebrate a baby's first laugh, which is a sign that the soul has been attached to the body.

Alvord and Jon had decided to induce labor. She would go to GIMC for the procedure. Despite frustration with some of the procedures, she felt pretty happy. When a Navajo gives birth, many rituals are carefully followed, rituals Alvord wanted to observe. Some rituals are described. Then Alvord reviews Kodi's birth.

The first two days of induction were full of rented movies, reading and Scrabble. Her contractions grew, but she still enjoyed herself until the third day when the drugs started to kick in. Her mother and sister, husbands in tow, were visiting. Alvord's bodily condition edged her towards a C-section. She wanted to remember her misery throughout the procedure when she was treating her patients. During the procedure, Alvord's mother brought in a medicine woman named Maria Herrera, who wanted to do a prayer. The prayer ritual involved a red sash that was placed on Alvord's body which was tied in knots. Jon then undid the knots on the medicine woman's instructions. Alvord's sickness seemed to subside afterward.

Unfortunately, the doctors had to do a C-section, but eventually Alvord held Kodi in her arms. Kodi was seven pounds, four ounces at birth. His full name was Christopher Kodiak Alvord; his Navajo ancestry was clear in his appearance. A few months later, Jon, Kodi and Alvord drove to the top of Mount Taylor and buried the umbilical cord in accord with Navajo custom. The combination of Western medicine and Navajo ways had produced her baby boy.

Chapter Fourteen, Mount Taylor in the Rearview Mirror

Chapter Fourteen, Mount Taylor in the Rearview Mirror Summary and Analysis

When Kodi was two, Alvord's grandmother had a massive stroke in the middle of the night. Her grandmother, Grace, lived a week but never woke up again. She died at ninety-one. Alvord's grandmother never knew that Alvord had been offered a job working at Dartmouth Medical School. They were going to move and Alvord would help with the Dartmouth Native American Program. Her understanding of Navajo philosophy would help her practice medicine, as she learned how to respect and empower her patients. She had hesitated to share her discoveries but eventually moved beyond her fears. As time went on, her life story spread, leading her to give commencement addresses and to be written up in the Chicago Tribune and The New York Times. Her audiences were enthusiastic.

Alvord would tell her audiences about the disharmony in the lives of so many sick people, about those who disliked their neighbors, neglected their bodies and became lazy and fat. People became too absorbed in getting rich. The Navajo healer tracked sickness to the stress that comes from imbalances. Alvord also extends her concept of community to the community level, speaking about gang violence, elder neglect, and child abuse and drug use. Even harmony in the ecosystem matters. 'Walking in Beauty' became a whole philosophy of wellness.

Alvord would often describe her ideal of the perfect hospital based on her philosophy. The ideal hospital would not smell like or appear like a hospital; instead, it would be filled with comfort and beautiful plants and rooms. Each person the patient encountered would give comfort. The ideal operating room would be full of a community that worked together smoothly and knew one another. The healthcare system had to change too, though Alvord did not know the policy answer. She argues that new clinical studies support her beliefs, about how, say, social activities and relationships are tied to lower mortality rates, as do religious commitment and proximity and number of living offspring. Illness and healing have a multifactorial nature.

Alvord hated to be away from her tribe and Navajo patients, but the benefits would include breaking another glass ceiling and helping others follow a medical path in the future. She also hoped to learn more about managing health systems, as the Navajo would soon run their own health care system independent of the Indian Health Service. Alvord wanted to aid in the transition. The Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center was the most beautiful hospital she had ever seen; it was close to her dream hospital.

Sometimes Alvord's new demands were overwhelming; she worked with four other associate deans to plan for the medical school. However, the work was challenging and

exciting. She still performs surgery and teaches Dartmouth medical students. Eventually her students led her to extend her philosophy to non-Navajo cultures. As Jon, Kodi and Alvord left their home, Alvord told her father's spirit that she would not be gone long and that she would take her home's spirit with her.

Characters

Dr. Lori Arviso Alvord

Dr. Lori Arviso Alvord was the first Navajo female surgeon. Today, she serves as the Associate Dean of Students and Multicultural Affairs for Dartmouth at the Medical School. She also holds an assistant professorships in surgery and psychiatry.

Alvord's story tells much more about her life than her current occupation. Alvord grew up in Crownpoint, a small town on the Navajo Reservation in New Mexico. Though she had a white mother, Alvord was fundamentally raised Navajo, in Navajo culture. However, her parents encouraged her to get an education and when she went to college, she found her way into science and ultimately medicine. College at Dartmouth and medical school at Stanford were challenging for her, as it was difficult for someone with her unique background to fit in.

In Alvord's medical practice, she was fundamentally challenged to choose between her Navajo cultural heritage and the modern Western practice of medicine. Instead of choosing, Alvord eventually chose to try and integrate the two, combining the 'Beauty Way' of the Navajo with Western medicine. Over time, as Alvord matured, she found that by connecting with her patients, speaking to them in their native language, respecting their customs, etc., that she could combine spiritual and physical healing to help her patients be healthy.

Alvord's personality comes out prominently in the book. While she discussed her internal struggles, we learn mostly about her drive to succeed, her frequent feelings of insecurity and her sense of alienation. We also learned that Alvord had to fight to control her temper and regularly let herself be overwhelmed by stress.

The Navajo

Also known as the Diné, the Navajo are currently the second largest tribe of Native Americans in the United States. As of 2000, there were nearly 300,000 people in the United States of Navajo ancestry. The Navajo have their own governing body, the Navajo Nation. It manages their reservation in the Four Corners region of the United States. Many Navajo still speak their native language. Navajos tend to live in eight-sided homes called hogans, which are often mentioned in the book. Today, hogans are mostly used for ceremonial purposes. Initially the Navajo were mainly hunter-gatherers, but learned farming from the Spanish and the Pueblos. They are thought to have descended from a language family called Athabaskan which likely once corresponded to a community in Northwest Canada.

Recent Navajo history has been disastrous. After conflicts with the United States government, the Navajo were forced on the 'Long Walk of the Navajo' when 9,000 Navajos were forced to walk 300 miles to Fort Sumner in New Mexico to a reservation.

Navajos were forcibly reeducated by the United States government. The process of reeducation, forcing the Navajo to learn English, continued well into the second half of the twentieth century. The Navajo, like many other Native Americans, are seriously impoverished and suffer from severe levels of alcoholism.

Alvord's experience as a Navajo reflected all of these features, but she experienced the Navajo's culture of medicine men, their philosophy of the Beauty Way, their often superstitious approach to medicine and death in unique ways as a physician. Perhaps her most important goal as a surgeon was to connect with her Navajo patients and treat them with respect.

Grace Cupp

Alvord's grandmother, who was her closest family member and lived with her for many years.

Jon Alvord

Alvord's husband and father of her child. Jon, ten years younger than Alvord, was always supportive and helpful to Alvord.

Robert Cupp

Alvord's father, who, in her view, was an extraordinary man who ultimately succumbed to alcoholism.

Lujan

Alvord's mentor and a Native American surgeon in New Mexico. Alvord assisted Lujan in the summers during medical school.

Carolyn Yazzie

One of Alvord's most important patients who directly and indirectly taught her the importance of integrating Navajo culture into her medical practice.

Medicine Men and Women

Haathalii, or medicine men and women, were the spiritual leaders of the Navajo. Not only did Alvord try and integrate them into the lives of her patients, but even went and saw one herself.

Kodiak Alvord

Alvord's child, who is the topic of several chapters.

Thomas Hataathlii

The very young, athletic, medicine man and counselor who helped Alvord towards the end of her pregnancy.

Objects/Places

Crownpoint, New Mexico

Alvord's small, largely Navajo, hometown.

Gallup, New Mexico

The locale of the GIMC and Alvord's medical practice.

The GIMC

The Gallup Indian Medical Center, Alvord's place of work for much of the book.

Dartmouth

The New Hampshire College where Alvord felt like an alienated outsider, save for the other Native American students.

Stanford

Alvord had a challenging, but rewarding experience in medical school at Stanford.

The Beauty Way

The Navajo philosophy of harmony in nature as a source of wellness in human beings.

The Silver Bear

The trinket that Alvord wore on a necklace that represented her Navajo heritage.

The Scalpel

The symbol of Alvord's life as a professional surgeon.

Chantways

Songs used for the purpose of healing.

Navajo Ceremony

Alvord came to realize that Navajo ceremonies were very important parts of the Navajo, allowing themselves to undergo surgery. They were also meaningful for many other reasons, including within Alvord's own life.

The Navajo Plague

A hantavirus the killed a large number of Navajo in the early 1990s. The medicine men ultimately figured out that a rainy season that lead to a large pinon nut harvest which increased the rat population, producing more rat feces infected with the virus. Alvord used this example to show how the medicine men sensed that illness came when life was out of balance.

Integrated Medical Practice

Alvord believed in integrating Navajo culture and philosophy into her Western medical practice.

Alcoholism

Alcoholism was a rampant problem in the Navajo community, especially among men.

Ancient Wisdom

Alvord saw a lot of useful medical knowledge in the ancient wisdom of the Navajo.

Poverty and Oppression

Alvord often mentioned that one challenge for the Navajo was their history of poverty and being oppressed by Anglos.

Themes

Between Two Worlds

The central theme of The Scalpel and the Silver Bear is Alvord's experience both as a surgeon (represented by the scalpel) and as a member of the Navajo Nation (represented by the silver bear). Alvord grew up in Crownpoint on the Navajo Nation reservation. She was poor in a poor community and while her father faced many of the struggles of other Navajo men (such as alcoholism), both her father and mother encouraged her to get an education. However, her experience at Dartmouth led her to feel alienated from whites. While she connected with the Native American students at Dartmouth, she did find herself culturally drifting away from her Navajo roots. This alienation only increased in medical school. Alvord gave one powerful example of this when she had to dissect a human cadaver despite the fact that Navajo custom demands that the dead not be touched.

When Alvord graduated from medical school, she was happy to return to New Mexico to work in Gallup, only fifty miles from her home. She found that she could hardly connect with her Navajo patients. Over time she learned more of the Navajo language and began to speak to her patients in their native tongue. She also used her knowledge of Navajo culture to integrate her patients' customs and beliefs into her medical practice.

Alvord was increasingly influenced by the Navajo philosophy of The Beauty Way, which emphasizes the unity of nature. Alvord saw her worlds integrated when she brought her Navajo philosophy into her medical practice, but also into her life as a whole (such as when she went to see a Navajo medicine man during her pregnancy).

Navajo and Western Medicine

The scalpel and silver bear symbols do not represent Alvord's identities as Navajo and white, but as Navajo and a surgeon. Thus, there is a tie between her role as a surgeon and her role as a Navajo. How could one's ethnicity and one's profession be understood as contrasting opposites? Alvord sees the Navajo as having their own medical and healing culture. Medicine men in Navajo culture look to disharmony when illness arises. They seek to heal others by integrating them with their communities, expanding their support networks and performing group ceremonies for the purpose of healing.

While Western medicine has a lot of science on its side, it is often practiced in a heartless way by a broken American medical system. Hospitals are barren, doctors and patients are alienated and support networks are rarely a deliberate and explicit part of the healing process. Alvord sees a lot of wisdom in Native American views on healing as a supplement to Western medical practice and has aimed to bring the two together into a single medical philosophy.

Alvord also thinks that the Navajo medical philosophy has actually solved real medical mysteries. For instance, in Chapter Eight, Alvord discusses the mystery of The Navajo Plague and how it was the medicine men who first tracked it to an increased rat population because they noticed disharmony in nature. Thus, the medicine men actually had something to teach Western medicine on its own terms.

Breaking the Glass Ceiling

Becoming a surgeon led Alvord to break two glass ceilings—one for Navajos and another for women. Alvord is the first Navajo woman surgeon in history, to our knowledge. Becoming one presented a number of challenges. First, as a Navajo, Alvord would not ordinarily have been encouraged to excel. Navajo are rarely encouraged to compete and, especially, are not encouraged to bring attention to themselves in order to secure advantages. Thus, many Navajos do not dream big futures for themselves. When Alvord reached Dartmouth, she faced a fantastic culture shock, finding white culture to be overly competitive, loud and stressful. She did not have the heart to compete and stuck almost exclusively to interacting with other Native American students.

After college, Alvord was not entirely sure what she wanted to do with her life until one of her teachers, where she served as a research assistant, encouraged her to go to medical school. When Alvord decided to go to Stanford, she took on the major challenge of entering a white male dominated profession where, at that time, women were seen as unfit to be surgeons by the profession as a whole. Alvord was told, and found it to be true, that she would have to work twice as hard to prove herself to everyone else, in order to show that she was the same as any white male surgeon in ability. In the end, Alvord succeeded and hopes that her example can inspire Navajos (and particularly Navajo girls) to dream big.

Style

Perspective

Dr. Lori Alvord, the author and main character of The Scalpel and the Silver Bear, has a reflective and divided perspective on her life. It is reflective in that Alvord is keenly aware of her emphases in the book. She makes her themes explicit and draws clear lessons from her story. There is no guesswork when it comes to Alvord's view. The perspective is also fundamentally divided because of Alvord's experience as a Western-trained surgeon and a member of the Navajo nation. As mentioned at several points in the guide, Alvord self-consciously develops a dual identity between her two lives.

Alvord's initial identity is as a member of the Navajo nation, though with a white mother and a father partly integrated into Western culture, she was always set apart in terms of the expectations her family had for her. When Alvord made it to Dartmouth she stuck to her Native American fellow students, but began to grow alienated from her Navajo roots which were only deepened in medical school. When Alvord returned to New Mexico to work as a surgeon, she slowly recovered her Navajo identity and began to weave it into her medical practice.

Alvord's conception of Navajo philosophy seems to be as a form of pantheism. The divine is understood as the harmony of all things, of the earth, the weather, plants, animals, human beings, human bodies, human families and human communities. For Alvord, The Beauty Way embodies this fundamentally pantheistic worldview which helps inform Alvord's medical practice in terms of viewing healing holistically, that is, in terms of a wide range of factors, both physical and social.

Tone

The tone of The Scalpel and the Silver Bear combines Alvord's concern for patients with her love of Navajo culture and her tendency towards anxiety and stress. Many of the chapters show Alvord's concern for her patients, particularly the Navajo ones. Several chapters are built around a single character or family, all of whom are used to illustrate some important theme of the book. The tone associated with these patients is one of deep concern, worry and profound respect. Even when Alvord describes patients who are obviously being difficult and make decisions on irrational bases, she speaks kindly and respectively.

Alvord's tone becomes glowing and spiritual when she starts to speak about The Beauty Way and the medicine men and women in her culture. She sees Navajo spirituality as containing deep and eternal truths about the nature of the universe and human beings. Thus, the tone becomes spiritual, bright, airy and effervescent.

Many places in the book have an anxious and worried tone when Alvord's life becomes challenging or when one or more of her patients are sick or dying. For instance, the tone

is often one of concern when Alvord's pregnancy is discussed, or when she is in a period of her life where she feels alienated from others, such as her experiences early in college. When the Navajo Plague is discussed, the tone is at its most tense.

Structure

The structure of The Scalpel and the Silver Bear is simple; it contains a short introduction and fourteen relatively short chapters. The chapters occur largely in chronological order, though once they reach Alvord's career as a surgeon, some of the events are out of sequence. The introduction explains the major themes of the book, whereas Chapter 1 ties Navajo culture to Alvord's practice. It reviews Alvord's birth and childhood, along with the pasts and backgrounds of her family members. Chapter 2 explains Alvord's experiences in high school and college at Dartmouth. Chapter 3 is about Alvord's choice to become a surgeon and the relationship between that decision and her ties to Navajo culture.

Chapter 4 shows Alvord starting to integrate her Navajo philosophy and Western medicine practice. Chapter 5 focuses on the challenges alcoholism poses for the Navajo community. Chapter 6 explains the importance of the medicine person for the Navajo and how much of their wisdom is relevant for modern people. Chapter 7 takes Alvord into the explicit practice of integrating Navajo philosophy and Western medicine. Chapter 8 examines the Navajo Plague and its relationship to the wisdom of medicine men.

Chapter 9 focuses on Alvord's marriage to Jon Alvord. Chapter 10 discusses Alvord's life at the GIMC. Chapter 11 and Chapter 12 focus on Alvord's pregnancy and her experiences meeting with a medicine man for herself. Chapter 13 tells the story of Alvord's son, Kodi's, birth. Chapter 14 ends the book with the twin events of Alvord's grandmother's death and Alvord's move back to Dartmouth.

Quotes

"I was a good surgeon, I was not always a good healer." (Introduction, 3)

"At the basis of Navajo philosophies of healing is a concept called 'Walking in Beauty.' It is a way of living a balanced and harmonious life, in touch with all components of one's world. This is a path to better health and healing and life." (Introduction, 3)

"I live between two worlds. In one of them I am a dispenser of a very technologically advanced Western style of medicine. In the other, people are healed by songs, herbs, sand paintings, and ceremonies held by firelight in the deep of winter." (Chapter 1, 8)

"The scalpel is my tool...but may 'Silver Bear', my Navajo beliefs and culture ... are what guide me." (Chapter 1, 16)

"The outside non-Indian world is tribeless, full of wandering singular souls, seeking connection through societies, clubs and other groups. White people know what it is to be a family, but to be a tribe is something of an altogether different sort." (Chapter 2, 32)

"The body was very much like the Navajo philosophy of the universe." (Chapter 3, 37)

"Navajos do not touch the dead. Ever." (Chapter 3, 40)

"Ever since I finished my surgical training, I had been developing a set of idea about how to care for patients. The concepts I was beginning to form were bicultural, drawing heavily on a philosophy that is in essence very Navajo." (Chapter 4, 72)

"Mile marker 47. My father's spirit pulled me each time I passed it. It was as though he cast out with his fly-fishing rod there, and it hooked my soul." (Chapter 5, 89)

"[The Medicine Man] had performed a ceremony for her...that had greatly calmed her and made her feel her body's harmony was restored." (Chapter 6, 102)

"Their medicine was for the whole human creature—body, mind, and spirit, their community, and even the larger world." (Chapter 7, 112)

"It wasn't the deer mice who were ultimately responsible. Ask the medicine men. They'd known all along how life had fallen out of balance. It was the rain." (Chapter 8, 127)

"I have a vacation in two weeks, and I'll come back to see you. I love you, Lori." (Chapter 9, 133)

"Probably the Begays had brought Melanie to GIMC, 'the big space where medicine is given' only as a last resort." (Chapter 10, 144)

"It is beautiful all around me." (Chapter 12, 165)

"I will have to remember this degree of misery when I am treating really sick patients." (Chapter 13, 178)

"I could now speak from personal experience about the combination of Western medicine and Navajo ways: It has produced my beautiful, healthy baby boy." (Chapter 13, 181)

"I am taking you with me, I thought, if only in my heart." (Chapter 14, 196)

Topics for Discussion

What are Dr. Alvord's two worlds? How are they different? How does Alvord integrate them?

How did college and medical school alienate Alvord from her Navajo roots? How did she recover them?

What is Alvord's conception of Navajo philosophy? How does it relate to her ideal of medical practice?

How did Alvord become a better doctor throughout the book, particularly with respect to her Navajo patients? Describe some actions she took.

Discuss two of Alvord's Navajo patients and explain what they taught her about Navajo culture and about being a good doctor.

Explain Alvord's relationship with medicine men and women and what led her to see Thomas Hataathlii.

Compare and contrast Alvord's experience at Dartmouth as a college student and as a professional surgeon and teacher.