



*Dr. Alvord, associate dean for student and multicultural affairs and assistant professor of surgery at Dartmouth Medical School, gave the commencement address to the College of Medicine Class of 2007 in May. Dr. Alvord is the first female Navajo Tribe member to become a surgeon. Her remarks to the graduates of 2007 are excerpted here.*

**As a surgeon,** in my professional life, I am able to bring healing to my patients, drawing together the best of medical research and surgical innovation gained over the last century of medical progress.

Yet I also carry with me another kind of healing, which comes from my people — the Navajo. This healing cannot be dated.

It is very ancient.

It includes concepts of the word “healing” that are quite different from what the term usually connotes in the halls of Dartmouth Medical School. Part of my vision in life is to combine what is best from both worlds — as different as they are.

When I finished my training to be a general surgeon, I became aware that although I had been trained to be a good doctor, a good surgeon, I had not been trained to be a healer. I think I lost some of my humanity over the course of a surgical residency. Residency can change you. So first, don’t lose who you are. Don’t lose yourself.

Remember to stay true to who you are.

I decided I needed to learn to be both a surgeon and a healer. And so, I went back to the healers of my own

tribe for answers. And I found far more than I ever thought possible.

I realized something recently, about the keeping of knowledge. Western civilization has millions of libraries, filled with books, and these books hold the knowledge accumulated over time. But the question is: Which books should we read? What is the most important knowledge? Cultures with oral traditions did not have libraries. But they had ceremonies. I think of ceremonies as the distillation, of all the very most important knowledge. And this is why ceremonies are so special.

Our people still practice the ceremonies that have been with us since ancient times. Within the ceremonies lies a blueprint for how to live an enriched, healthy life, and how to heal others. The foundation for the ceremonies rests on a central spiritual premise that all things in the universe, including humans, are created by a life force, which is within all things, and connects all things. We believe we are not technically separate from one another, or anything else in our world.

When Europeans first encountered Native American cultures, they dismissed much of it as inferior. Indigenous religions were considered primitive compared with other theologies. But there is a connectedness and complexity within the ceremonies, which mirrors that of the universe in which we live. In my tribe, the Navajo, ceremonies are blueprints for how to live a life that is whole and balanced, a life connected to all of creation, a life that honors all living things. Our healing and our spirituality are one and the same.

Navajo ceremonies teach that all wisdom, all life, arises from one source: “Sa’a naghahi bik’e hozho.” It is our name for our creator — a unifying force that is within all things, connects all things, and creates all things. This phrase is also translated as: “To live one’s life with spiritual beauty.” Healers, medicine men in our tribe, have described it as “Universal Mind,” indicating that the universe is the source of creation, and that the universe has a consciousness, and we are all part of this consciousness. Because it is within all things, we, as humans, are not separate from other humans or the rest of our world.

The ceremonies teach Navajos to live in “hozho,” a word that embodies a combination of beauty, harmony, balance and peace. It includes the teaching that humans should honor and respect other humans. When prac-

ticed, this life way is capable of enhancing family and workplace stability. Strong interpersonal relationships help build strong families and communities.

Our ceremonies and culture also help us develop healthy minds and bodies. Ceremonies encourage this process through physical and mental purification. “Hozho” includes thinking about the future in a good way, and is very similar to what we now call “positive thinking.”

Ceremonies empower the mind, through purification, and through visualizing the future in a positive way.

An attempt to live in harmony and reduce conflict helps to reduce stress; and reducing stress has healthy side effects. The field of psycho-neuroimmunology, (the mind’s influence on the body), also known as “mind-body medicine,” has shown that stress and depression are capable of suppressing the immune system, which interferes with our ability to fight infections and to defend against cancer. Ceremonies help to heal, protect, and empower the mind, and that in turn helps reduce stress, and helps our immune system fight disease. Thomas Hatathlii, one of our medicine men, says this: “The mind is the foremost energy that we have as humans. Ceremonies are done to empower the mind, and if that can happen, the rest should follow (physical healing).”

It will be important, as we move forward in medicine, to understand that patient’s minds, and their mind states, are every bit as important to the process of healing as the attention and treatments we give their bodies.

As we learn more about healing, art has emerged as a healing force. When the mind encounters certain forms of art, the joy, delight, or awe it experiences is capable of relieving stress, of counteracting depression, thereby possibly helping the immune system. Navajo ceremonies include layers upon layers of art — woven together, integrated.

From the beauty of the prayers and chants and the images they evoke, to the powerful rhythms of the drums, and the music that carries the words forward, art moves through ceremonies as both the background and the foreground, as both the earth and the air. Art is expressed in paintings made with sand. The Yeis (katchinas), our spiritual guardians, are represented in

the sandpainting images; visual images of the stories the ceremonies describe. In the same way, dancers represent the spiritual beings and animal guardians described by the ceremonies. Headdresses are made of deerskin, buffalo skins, eagle feathers, spruce branches. Buckskin clothing and moccasins are worn. Even the smallest objects used in ceremonies are art forms. Medicine bundles contain beautiful corn pollen bags, prayer feathers, small carved animal spiritual guardians, and earth from the four sacred mountains. The combined effect is a tapestry that deeply endorses the belief that art has the power to heal.

The concept of healing extends to the health and healing of all things, not just humans; to our communities and the natural world. Everything is interconnected.



Ceremonies are often performed for the purposes of healing. Many of the forces of healing used in ceremonies have already been described. These principles are now beginning to be used by other healing systems as well. Western medicine is waking up to realize that healing exists beyond procedures and medications. Studies have started to prove the power of other healing realms such as support group therapy, music therapy, healing and the arts, animal therapy, massage therapy, and so on. The research is still in its beginning stages, but points to the concept that healing can be influenced by multiple forces within our lives, that we are deeply interconnected to all aspects of our lives, and that we may use these interconnections to achieve healing.

I believe that healing environments can be created that incorporate many aspects of ceremonies. Among these are creating a space of trust and deep support for patients, developing an environment for staff that is supportive and that encourages building teams that have good working relationships, and developing spaces that are visually beautiful and comfortable for both patients and families. We have begun to move away from cold, sterile medical surroundings of the past, but we still have worlds of healing that are waiting to be included in medical models of the future.

We may soon understand that elements of art, ceremonies, sustainability, and healing are deeply woven and interconnected. The cultures of Native people encourage the recognition of interconnectedness, a “systems thinking” interpretation of the world.

I also want to address how we care for patients, and the creation of “healing environments.”

Balance, harmony, and wholeness are not part of most surgical training programs. But the best surgeons don’t operate on gallbladders or spleens or hearts, they operate on the people who own them. People with lives, children, and their own beliefs.

And though a surgical procedure focuses on a single organ, when I operate, I try always to remember: I am opening a person, a human being: I am putting my hands inside their body.

I try to remain aware of the whole person-body, mind, and spirit, the harmony of their entire being.

Caring for our patients is a very profound privilege, we have license to travel to a country no other person can visit — to the inside of another person’s body, a sacred and holy place. To perform surgery is to move in a place where spirits are. It is a place one should not enter, if they cannot enter with hozho.

And even if you do not believe that the human body is sacred, remember that it is very special, especially to the person who owns it.

It should be touched with great respect, and great care.



The medicine men tell us that the air we breathe travels all around the earth, and has existed on the planet for millions of years.

Breathing connects you to the rest of the world in this way.

The words that move out from your lips, these same words move from within you, and travel out into the world.

They can bring healing, through the care with which you speak to patients, through the gentleness with which you speak words that are hard for them to hear.

Your words bear your mark.



How we touch our patients is also very important.

The wisdom from our tribe says that our hands are very special.

Universal winds, a part of the life force I described previously, enter through the whorls on the palms, the feet, and the top of the head.

Our hands are very special.

They are our ambassadors to the rest of the world.

They carry our goodwill.

Your hands will touch many patients over a lifetime, and they will serve you well when you touch a patient with gentleness.



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*In 1905, when the College of Medicine completed its third home at the corner of Prospect and Pearl streets in Burlington, the main lecture room where students spent so much of their time was named Hall A. The Hall A magazine section seeks to be a meeting place for all former students of the College of Medicine.*

