

Book Summary & Reflection – Linking Navajo Ideology into Student Affairs

“Dr. Alvord, I liked so much what you said about Navajo beliefs, but I am wondering – do these concepts have relevance for other cultures, for non-Indian peoples?” (Alvord & Pelt, 1999, p. 195). Absolutely, they absolutely do. (This follow-up sentence is coming from my voice, but it is also the response that Dr. Alvord gave when asked this question). I have always been fascinated by practices and beliefs that Native American/Indigenous peoples follow because of how closely it aligns with the values that I have been able to shape for myself. *The Scalpel and the Silver Bear* is an autobiography about Dr. Lori Alvord, it details the journey on how she infused her Navajo culture into her practice of western/modern medicine and the intersectional challenges between the two. As I read about the author’s journey through medicine, I looked for the parallels between medicine and student affairs, such as how healing is required in order for one to fully develop as a growing person and in order to navigate life. I was intentional about connecting the values that were present in this story to my practice in student affairs, and it was fun to see that Dr. Alvord would eventually go into student affairs work after years of medical practice. From being the first Navajo woman surgeon, to becoming the associate dean of students in Dartmouth’s medical program with the intention of giving back to her tribe of people, this journey encouraged me to reflect on how I am developing as a rising student affairs professional.

The book invites you into the life of a Navajo who is constantly breaking barriers for her community by incorporating her sacred culture into the environments that she is in. The first few sections of this book highlight how a woman from a marginalized and oppressed background was able to navigate through cultural, class, and educational differences in order to be in the

medical position she is in now. The message of the story then shifts by showing how the intersection of modern ideology and Navajo ideology clash when it comes to practicing medicine. Dr. Alvord was able to come to terms that her Navajo ways provide insight overcoming challenges that modern medicine faces, but it involved a rigorous process of self-reflection and resilience. This story invites the reader to see how healing is a sacred process to Navajos, and how it is tied through the connections that one has with various natural energies. Although it was challenging for the author to realize that she would need to break certain Navajo principles in order to practice modern medicine, it was refreshing to see how she didn't allow society to completely oppress her culture and eliminate it from her identity as a Navajo surgeon.

The Navajo ideas that were presented throughout the book, both in relation to medicine and to life in general, truly resonated with me because I was able to feel the impact of each message through the pages of the book. The idea that everything in life is connected, that there are bonds between humans, spirits and nature, and that healthy relationships are key to a healthy life are some of the first few concepts that are introduced in this book. "Walking in Beauty" (Alvord & Pelt, 1999, p. 3), a way of living that states that a balanced and harmonious life is at the base of Navajo healing, guides the integration of Navajo ideology into medicine for the author; it also serves as the base for how I approach student affairs and student development. "Chantways" (Alvord & Pelt, 1999, p. 6), a healing approach that involves song and the recognition that there is power in song, is an approach that I use to guide my self-care and to ensure that I am at optimal levels of health. I truly believe that the experiences that we as humans collect are all connected in some way and that there are higher powers in nature guiding our development as lifelong learners and souls. I've come to take ownership that the ideology behind

how I carry myself and that work that I do is unique, that it is a spiritual approach to impacting the lives of others.

Connecting thoughts from both student affairs and counseling, I understand that students/clients will come from a wide variety of backgrounds and have a wide variety of beliefs that they hold to be true for themselves. Student affairs educators have a responsibility to create safe and brave environments for students that promotes learning and expression. Taken from the *Student Personnel Point of View*, a historical guiding document in the field, student affairs work serves towards the goal of “education for the application of creative imagination and trained intelligence to the solution of social problems and to the administration of public affairs” (American Council on Education, 1949, p. 2). Psychological counselors have the responsibility to listen to the challenges that their clients face, make meaning of the roots causes that one faces, and then work with their clients to come up with pathways towards forward progress. Taken from the *2017 APA Multicultural Guidelines*, guideline 8 states that “psychologists seek awareness and understanding of how identity evolves as a function of [biosociocultural, developmental stages, and life transitions] intersections, and how these different socialization and maturation experiences influence worldview and identity” (APA Multicultural Guidelines, 2017, p. 5). As I learn through the diverse array of students that I interact with and build relationships with them, I will be able to learn from new perspectives that will continuously contribute to my growth as a professional (Hays, 2016).

Continuously learning through all my interactions and challenges with students is how I can constantly learn how to create promising environments for my students to develop in. I appreciated how open the author was about the challenges that she faces because it gives us a

more direct perspective to how oppressed Native American/Indigenous peoples are in modern society. There are a variety of times where the author states that even though Navajo ideology is the true way of life, white ideology is what would help her move forward through her practice in medicine. Dr. Alvord's recollection of what it felt like to navigate Dartmouth college, an institution that exploited the natives for its own personal gain but still valued natives at its core, was a way for her to take more notice to how her identity as a Navajo woman was essential to her overall perception of self. One of the biggest challenges between her Navajo ideology and western medicine lies in her practice in surgery. She states that it is against Navajo belief to touch/invoke the body of another, and it is even more taboo to be in contact with the internal organs and soul of one's body. The cost of her education and future was one where she had to carefully balance out two contradicting ideologies and find compromise between them.

When applying the challenges of having to conform to the dominant method of practice over one's cultural values, I challenged myself to think about what my response would be if someone were to shut down my spiritual approach to student development. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to navigating working with students, so I need to take ownership in how I approach the work that I do. I see myself as the student affairs practitioner that will not only guide students on how to become better in their role, but I also aim to guide them on a path to becoming a better version of themselves. I truly think that spiritual development is something that needs to be addressed within students so that they can be mindful of that concept, but it is a realm that isn't explored as much as other topics around student development.

As I am learning about higher education and student affairs through Indiana University's graduate program (which is #4 in the nation), I think about how much richer my knowledge has grown thanks to the sacrifice I made in separating myself from my home culture. I feel that there are parallels between my professional journey and that of Dr. Alvord because of how we had to separate ourselves from our heritage, and infiltrate predominately white spaces in order to widen our knowledge of the field that we are entering. When working with students, I need to come in to these various spaces with an open mind to the type of people that I will interact with and refrain from judging people without knowing who they are fully as individuals. If I want others to be respectful to my unique approach to holistic student development, then I need to be respectful and listen to the different mindsets that students bring to the table. Having the privilege to learn from a student population in Miami, Florida during undergraduate work and now in Bloomington, Indiana for graduate studies, puts me in a fantastic opportunity to learn from two populations that are different in nature.

“If all the members of my team worked together harmoniously and in concert... and if we tried to gain the trust, respect, and understanding of the patient, we could create better surgical outcomes. We ourselves would be happier and less stressed as well” (Alvord & Pelt, 1999, p. 75). This reflection resonated with me because it reminded me of the importance of relationship building as it related to my role in student affairs - building a connection with students is a process, and it's something that has to come organically over time. As I continue to navigate student affairs, this book has reminded me of the importance of building harmonious energy within one's own self, and building that connection between students and colleagues; this book validated my belief in spiritual energy and the power that it can have in my professional work.

Ahéhee' (Thank you in Navajo)