In my professional life, I am in May. Dr. Alvord is the first female Navaho Tribe member to become a surgeon. Her remarks to the graduates of the class of 2007, excerpted here.

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.

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.

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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, and interconnectedness. 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.