

Cultural Literacy

Discussant Alexis Sherman

Boston University – M.A. International Relations & Religion in the Middle East, 2009
Skidmore College – B.A. English Literature, 2006

Disclosures

- Liberal arts education
- Frequent world traveler
- Daughter of two doctor parents
- I work at a law firm (specializing in reproductive technology).

- *The Scalpel and the Silver Bear* is Dr. Alvord's personal memoir— it is both a story of her individual journey between and among two cultures. In addition, it is also a story filled with tremendous insight and wisdom, and it speaks to the greater human condition of our ever-present, ever-changing modern, globalized society.

The Scalpel and the Silver Bear

- “In a time when there is great confusion about how best to treat the human body, to care for it as it ages or becomes sick, my story may shed light on how two cultures can gain knowledge from each other – knowledge about health and wellness, about the bodies and spirits we are given at our birth, and about ways to care for them” (p. 10).

The Scalpel and the Silver Bear

- “I am continually reminded of the simple truth about my life: 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.” (p. 8)
- “neither here nor there” (p.9)

The Scalpel and the Silver Bear

- “I was like Spider Woman, a character in Native American folk tales and stories who wove her life through the world, part here, part there.” (p. 19)

- “My interest in this scientific way of looking at the world was magnified with each class I took. Biochemistry, chemistry, anatomy, physiology, even calculus had the same internal logic as much Native American cosmology. The way the white blood cells attack an intruding virus, the way too much or too little of anything disturbs the body functions, the way tissue defends or repairs itself – it was all *hozho*, the beautiful balance of the universe, rephrased in scientific terms” (p. 37)

Cultural Literacy

- Learning how to “read” another culture(s)
- Becoming “fluent” by understanding beliefs, societal structure, means of communication, etc. to ultimately enhance the two-way dialogue between people of different cultures
- A vital skill needed for the 21st century – we are all “exiles” or outsiders to some degree

Cultural Literacy and Medicine

- Issues of language, TRUST, religion, literacy, etc. and how they impact access to care
- Being able to communicate with people of different cultures may help build trust in a medical system that lacks trust from minorities
- What's at stake – an individual's access to health care that helps them become well.
- Dr. Alvord shows us the importance of learning how to communicate culturally (p. 144-145).

The Scalpel and the Silver Bear

- “My Western medical training told me that the eight-year-old girl could die if we did not remove her appendix right away. But her grandmother’s fears and objections were just as real and true. The two worlds were colliding. The solution lay somewhere in the uncharted territory between them” (p. 144).

“The challenge of providing infertility services to a low-income immigrant Latino population”

-a study by Nachtigall et al. (UCSF and UCLA)

- Published in Fertility and Sterility, July 2009
- Four major challenges in providing care:
 - Communication – language and cultural
 - Continuity – residents rotated frequently
 - Bureaucracy – appointment scheduling not compatible with work schedules
 - Accessibility – limited availability and affordability

Egg Donation and Embryonic Stem Cell Research..... in Iran

- Assumption – religion and science are at odds.
- Our own misconceptions are a reflection of our cultural values – not theirs.
- In Islam, science is embraced and celebrated.
- There is no religious objection to embryonic stem cell research in Iran. In fact, the highest religious authorities have issued statements supporting the research.

