

4. Beyond the backpack, Quindlen introduces the metaphor of fingerprints (para. 10). Which metaphor works better for you? Why?
5. Is Quindlen suggesting that the graduates should lower their expectations and goals? Explain your answer.
6. Quindlen quotes Lily Tomlin (actress, comedian, writer), Catherine Drinker Bowen (writer of semifictional biographies), Carl Jung (psychiatrist), and George Eliot (novelist) (paras. 9, 14, 18, 22). What is the effect of citing such a variety of sources?
7. In her speech, does Quindlen sympathize more with the values of the community or the individual? Explain.

Walking the Path between Worlds

LORI ARVISO ALVORD

The first Navajo woman surgeon, Lori Arviso Alvord (b. 1958) is currently the associate dean of student and minority affairs and assistant professor of surgery at Dartmouth Medical School. She received her BA from Dartmouth College and her MD from Stanford University. At the start of her career, she served as a general surgeon in the Indian Health Service in her native New Mexico. She has been honored with numerous awards, including the Governor's Award for Outstanding Women from the State of New Mexico (1992) and the Outstanding Women in Medicine Award from the University of Missouri–Kansas City School of Medicine (2001). Her autobiography, *The Scalpel and the Silver Bear*, describes her efforts to combine Navajo healing practices with Western medicine. The following passage from that book focuses on her journey from the reservation to Dartmouth.

Today Navajo children are still standing on the playgrounds where I stood, facing the critical decision I would face after I graduated from high school: to leave the rez, or to stay and cleave to traditional ways. To let the desert live inside them, or to try to wash it away. They too hear the voice of the wind and the desert, smell the strong smells of our people, and feel the ways we came from. “*Decide*,” the world whispers to them, “*you must choose*.”

I chose to leave and get an education, following the path of the books I loved so much. But leaving Dinetah was a frightening prospect. Navajo people believe we are safe within the four sacred mountains that bound the Navajo reservation — Mount Taylor, San Francisco Peak, Blanca Peak, and the La Plata Range. In our creation stories it is the place of our origins, of our emergence to the surface of the earth from other worlds below, the place where Changing Woman and First Man, Coyote, the Twins, and the monsters in our legends roamed. These mountains are central to everything in our lives. To leave this place is to invite imbalance, to break our precious link with the tribe, to leave the Walk of Beauty,

and to court danger. It was a dangerous step, that into the unknown, unguarded world.

In our song called the Mountain Chant, each of the sacred mountains is honored. The words describe each mountain and its special qualities.

The mountain to the east is Sisna'jin
It is standing out.
The strong White Bead is standing out
A living mountain is standing out . . .
The mountain to the south is Tsoodzil
It is standing out.
The strong turquoise is standing out
A living mountain is standing out . . .
The mountain to the west is Dook'o'oošłííd.
It is standing out.
The strong white shell is standing out.
A living mountain is standing out . . .
The mountain to the north is Dibé Ntsaa.
It is standing out.
The strong jet is standing out.
A living mountain is standing out . . .¹

If I left, I would leave the enclosed and sacred world within the strong mountains, standing out.

I made good grades in high school, but I had received a very marginal education. I had a few good teachers, but teachers were difficult to recruit to our schools and they often didn't stay long. Funding was often inadequate. I spent many hours in classrooms where, I now see, very little was being taught. Nevertheless my parents always assumed, quite optimistically, that all their children would go to college. I don't remember any lectures from my father on the importance of higher education — just the quiet assurance that he and my mother and Grandmother all believed in us.

My college plans were modest; I assumed I would attend a nearby state school. But then I happened to meet another Navajo student who was attending Princeton. I had heard of Princeton but had no idea where it was. I asked him how many Indians were there. He replied, "Five." I couldn't even imagine a place with only five Indians, since our town was 98 percent Indian. Then he mentioned Dartmouth, which had about fifty Indians on campus, and I felt a little better. *Ivy League* was a term I had heard, but I had no concept of its meaning. No one from my high school had ever attended an Ivy League college.

¹Aileen O'Bryan, *Navajo Indian Myths* (New York: Dover, 1994).

At my request, my high school counselor gave me the applications for all the Ivy League schools, but I only completed Dartmouth's because I knew there were fifty Indians there.

I waited anxiously, and one day the letter came. I was accepted, early decision. I was only sixteen years old. As I was only half Navajo in blood, I wondered if this meant it would be only half as dangerous to me to leave Dinétah, the place between the sacred mountains. Half of me belonged in Dinétah, but the other half of me belonged in that other world too, I figured. Still, in my heart I was all Navajo, and I instinctively felt afraid of the move. I had seen those who went away and came back: the Vietnam veterans, broken and lost, who aimlessly wandered the streets of Gallup, the others who came back but had forgotten Navajo ways.

My memories of my arrival in Hanover, New Hampshire, are mostly of the color green. Green cloaked the hillsides, crawled up the ivied walls, and was reflected in the river where the Dartmouth crew students sculled. For a girl who had never been far from Crownpoint, New Mexico, the green felt incredibly juicy, lush, beautiful, and threatening. Crownpoint had had vast acreage of sky and sand, but aside from the pastel scrub brush, mesquite, and chamiso, practically the only growing things there were the tiny stunted pines called piñon trees. Yet it is beautiful; you can see the edges and contours of red earth stretching all the way to the box-shaped faraway cliffs and the horizon. No horizon was in sight in Hanover, only trees. I felt claustrophobic.

If the physical contrasts were striking, the cultural ones were even more so. Although I felt lucky to be there, I was in complete culture shock. I thought people talked too much, laughed too loud, asked too many personal questions, and had no respect for privacy. They seemed overly competitive and put a higher value on material wealth than I was used to. Navajos placed much more emphasis on a person's relations to family, clan, tribe, and the other inhabitants of the earth, both human and nonhuman, than on possessions. Everyone at home followed unwritten codes for behavior. We were taught to be humble and not to draw attention to ourselves, to favor cooperation over competition (so as not to make ourselves "look better" at another's expense or hurt someone's feelings), to value silence over words, to respect our elders, and to reserve our opinions until they were asked for.

Understanding the culture of Dartmouth was like taking a course in itself. I didn't know the meaning of fraternities or the class system (divided into the haves and the have-nots) which were so important there at first. Had the parents of my fellow students taught them survival skills through camping, tracking, and hunting? Did I have any interest in making four-story-high sculptures out of ice for Winter Carnival? Did they respect their elders, their parents? Did I know which fork to use at a formal dinner? What sort of ceremonies did their "tribes" practice? While they pondered such burning questions as the opening day of ski season, I was struggling just to stay warm during the frozen New Hampshire winter and not slip on the ice!

Indian reservations and pueblos could almost be seen as tiny Third World countries, lacking as they did electricity, indoor plumbing, and paved roads. When the Native American students arrived at Dartmouth, one of the first things we were told was that we could attend high tea at Sanborn Hall at four o'clock daily. I walked around the campus in awe, like a peasant visiting the castle of a great king.

The very stately, beautiful, and affluent campus could be intimidating and alienating. The college's unofficial mascot was the "Dartmouth Indian," a tomahawk-wielding red man whose presence was everywhere on the campus, in spite of the Native community's protests. He was like those TV Indians we had watched when we were little and thought so alien. Imagine young Native students seeing white students wearing loincloths and paint on their faces, jumping around with toy tomahawks. Like the rest of the Native community, I was shocked by this caricature.

I remember, distinctly, feeling alienated while walking around Dartmouth's campus that first year. By my sophomore year I understood what it meant to be invisible. People looked right through me — I moved around the campus as unseen as the air. Outside of my freshman roommate, Anne, I never made a close non-Indian friend. I wonder if other students of color felt the same way.

I was very homesick, wishing I didn't have to miss so many familiar events: the Navajo tribal fairs, the Zuni Shalako, the Laguna feast days, the Santa Fe Indian market, the Gallup ceremonial. Everyone at home was having a great time eating wonderful food — roasted corn from the Shiprock market, posole, red chile stew, venison jerky — and I was stuck in a library far away. I missed watching the Apache Devil Dancers and the Pueblo Buffalo Dancers. I missed the sight of Navajo traditional clothing, emblazoned with silver and turquoise, and the pink-and-purple-splashed sunsets of New Mexico. I missed that smell — that smell we had tried to wash away at our laundromat so long ago — the smell of wildness, the desert, and the Navajo world.

Sometimes I wondered: If I'd had a *kinaaldá* ceremony, could I have been stronger, more independent, better able to face this loneliness and alienation, less unassured. The *kinaaldá* is part of the Blessing Way set of ceremonies performed for girls when they reach puberty. Blessing Way tells the story of Changing Woman (a central Navajo deity), and the *kinaaldá* celebrates her coming into womanhood. The family and community gather around her, she is sung to, and her female relatives massage her from head to toe, giving her the power and strength of womanhood. A large corn cake is baked underground in a corn husk-lined pit, and the girl sprinkles cornmeal over the top. Each day for four days, she runs for a mile toward the new sun, toward her new life. It gives a young woman strength and power, confidence and security, as she goes through menses for the first time. She takes that strength and those "good thoughts" with her into the world. I could have used that assurance. Because my family was less traditional, my sisters and I did not have *kinaaldá* ceremonies, although we attended

those of our cousins. Nevertheless, since the Navajo culture is matriarchal, I think I was better prepared as a woman in a "man's world" than many white women I met.

A few things at Dartmouth, however, were comforting and did make me feel at home. For one thing, dogs roamed the campus freely. They didn't belong to anybody in particular but to everybody and were fed and cared for by the entire campus. Muttlike, wily, always after something to eat, they reminded me naturally of rez dogs. And everywhere I looked[,] playful squirrels ran around, reminding me of the prairie dogs who run around their prairie dog cities on the mesas and sit up on their hind legs to watch the cars drive by.

Academically, due to my strong reading background, I held my own in classes like literature and social sciences, but I was totally unprepared for the physical and life sciences. After receiving the only D of my entire life in calculus, I retreated from the sciences altogether. The high school at Crownpoint had not prepared me adequately to compete with the Ivy Leaguers. Furthermore, I had an additional problem. As I mentioned earlier, Navajos are taught from the youngest age never to draw attention to ourselves. So Navajo children do not raise their hands in class. At a school like Dartmouth, the lack of participation was seen as a sign not of humility but lack of interest and a disengaged attitude. My Navajo humility was combined with a deep feeling of academic inferiority; it was hard to compete with students who had taken calculus and read Chaucer in high school. I sat in the back and tried not to reveal my ignorance.

This sense of being torn between worlds was reflected even in my studies: I chose a double major, psychology and sociology, modified with Native American studies. I received honors in my freshman seminar as well as in two Native American studies courses that stressed writing. As a result, I found myself thinking of teaching Native American studies as a career, and perhaps also becoming a writer.

In fact, I loved Dartmouth's Native American program. It had the tough job of recruiting students like us, who were very high risk. We frequently had had only marginal high school preparation; many were reluctant to come to school so far from home; and like skittish wild horses, some would turn tail and run home at the least provocation. We found great comfort in one another, for although we came from many different tribes, our experiences at Dartmouth were similar: We all felt disconnected from the mainstream student body. For the women, it was even worse. At the time I arrived on the scene, Dartmouth had only recently changed from an all-male to a coed student body, and many of the men resented the presence of women on campus. Referred to as cohogs instead of coeds, women were shunned for dates; instead girls were bused in from nearby women's colleges on weekends. Social life was dominated by the fraternities, and, if we went to their parties at all, we were often ignored.

For all these reasons, the few Native American students at Dartmouth coalesced into a solid community who did almost everything together. Our group was made up of Paiutes, Sioux, Cherokees, Chippewas, Navajos, Pueblos, and many other tribes. We were friends, lovers, rivals, enemies. I have been a part of

many other groups since then, but nothing compared in intensity to the experience of being a member of that Native American student group.

Though we often felt as though we didn't belong at Dartmouth, the ironic truth is that we did belong, or rather, we were entitled to be there. Eleazar Wheelock, the Connecticut minister who founded Dartmouth College in 1769, did so with funds that came from King George II, who wished to establish a place to "educate the savages." The college flourished, but for literally hundreds of years its original founding purpose was not honored. "Educating savages" was not on the real agenda; it had simply been a way to get land and money. Before the 1960s fewer than twenty Native students graduated from Dartmouth. Then in the 1970s the Native American studies program was developed by college president John Kemeny and writer Michael Dorris, and Dartmouth began to take its mission in earnest.

We Indian students all knew why we were there. Without the vision of Kemeny and Dorris, we would never have had an opportunity to set foot on the grounds of such an institution, let alone actually enroll. We were there because of the generous scholarships the college had given us, and the money from our tribes.

Some years later, reflecting back on my college experiences, I realized something else. 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. It provides a feeling of inclusion in something larger, of having a set place in the universe where one always belongs. It provides connectedness and a blueprint for how to live.

At Dartmouth the fraternities and sororities seemed to be attempts to claim or create tribes. Their wild and crazy parties that often involved drugs and sex seemed to me to be unconscious re-creations of rituals and initiation ceremonies. But the fraternities emphasized exclusion as much as inclusion, and their rituals involved alcohol and hazing initiations. Although they developed from a natural urge for community, they lacked much that a real tribe has.

I began to honor and cherish my tribal membership, and in the years that followed I came to understand that such membership is central to mental health, to spiritual health, to physical health. A tribe is a community of people connected by blood or heart, by geography and tradition, who help one another and share a belief system. Community and tribe not only reduce the alienation people feel but in doing so stave off illness. In a sense they are a form of preventive medicine. Most Americans have lost their tribal identities, although at one time, most likely, everyone belonged to a tribe. One way to remedy this is to find and establish groups of people who can nurture and support one another. The Native American students at Dartmouth had become such a group.

Our new "tribe" had its ceremonies. Each year, in a primitive outdoor amphitheater called the Bema where concerts and plays were sometimes put on, we held a campus powwow. Feathered fancy dancers and women in "jingle

dresses” or in beaded and brightly colored fabric would spin and step to the drums of Plains Indians or to songs from an invited singer from a pueblo. The women would whirl, their shawls swirling and twisting into corkscrew shapes around them. They’d dance to two big hide-stretched drums, encircled by the men, who struck the drums rhythmically and sang. Their voices wove and resonated, rose and fell above the steady heartbeat of the drums. This ceremony was a chance for the Native and non-Native communities to come together as one. I felt then, briefly, that I belonged.

In the evening after the powwow the singing and drumming would continue at a party called a “49” — but here the ancient rhythms were mixed with modern English lyrics. The songs we sang could be romantic, funny, or political; they could be about reservation life and pickup trucks or the Bureau of Indian Affairs. They always sounded the same though, with a blend of voices rising around a drumbeat, and a melody that pulled out our memories of childhood songs.

Dartmouth was good for me. Singing with the other students melted some of my historical grief and anger into a larger powerful force, a force I would take with me into the world. I gained a new kind of family and tribe, with new songs that held us together. Once again, songs had the power to heal.

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Exploring the Text

1. What different views of community did Lori Arviso Alvord experience as she moved from her home in New Mexico to college at Dartmouth?
2. What is Alvord’s primary method of organization in this essay?
3. What is the effect of including the Mountain Chant?
4. What impact does the physical landscape in Hanover have on Alvord? Why does she describe the landscape in such detail?
5. Which details of life on the reservation does Alvord recall in paragraph 15? Cite specific ones, and explain their importance. Why is the *kinaaldá* ceremony especially significant?
6. Describe Alvord’s tone in the two paragraphs on the history of Dartmouth and its Native American studies program (paras. 21–22)? Cite specific language and examples to support your response.
7. Ultimately, what is Alvord’s attitude toward Dartmouth? Cite specific paragraphs to support your response.
8. What does Alvord mean in the concluding paragraph by “my historical grief and anger”?