



Race & Social Justice Initiative | **Dr. Ben Danielson**

The interview below has been edited for clarity from a recent 2023 interview with Dr. Ben Danielson.

DR BEN DANIELSON

Can you tell us a bit about yourself and what you think healing and belonging can look like in pandemic recovery?

I've lived in the Seattle area for three decades, and what I love most about being part of Seattle's past and present is that I'm embraced and loved by an incredible Black community here. I feel a sense of belonging and connectedness to people from almost every corner of this city. I'm honored to be part of this city and part of the people that make this city wonderful.

When I think about this concept of healing and belonging, I think of the wake and winds of the pandemic. So many of us have been asking for a reckoning on racism.

The impact of racism is especially significant to me because it is so foundational, is so woven into the very intricate and deep roots of the way our country was started, manifested, built on, enriched, and continues to grow and change. It is part of every piece of that fiber.

And when racism is in there that deeply and importantly, people still resist conversations about it. People still try to not quite see it. People still hope that we can explain it with something else, like, poverty or maybe it's only about place

or something like that.

When we get into those conversations, (those I'll call diversions from this deeply rooted in the fiber of our society issue, racism), we deny ourselves the opportunity to really envision and act toward a community that can be well.

How can Seattle become a city where everyone can thrive?

Well, let's look at the opposite of what that question poses? How can we *not* create a Seattle where everyone thrives? What cost are we incurring by *not* creating a space where everyone can thrive? We've created spaces where some are encouraged, allowed, ushered towards thriving, while others are held back in ways big and small, obvious and not obvious.

What are we denying ourselves the possibilities to be?

How can we not create a space where we honor everyone's talents—not talents, measured against some bar or norm—but our individual gifts and talents blazed with their own color, in their own light?

How could we not want a Seattle where every child from every family and community background, every perspective, every ability, every source of power and beauty thrives?

How could we not want a place where every child and person has a chance to thrive and, I mean thrive because they are seen, adored, and Beloved?

When it comes to talking about and solving important issues like thriving, there's no lack of ideas, no lack of brilliance, no lack of solutions, no lack of incredible pathways that can lead to thriving. There's no lack of brilliant people bringing solutions to the front. But there's maybe a lack of will, there's maybe a lack of stepping outside of ourselves and seeing something greater. There's maybe a lack of a willingness to let go of false comforts, even when that illusion holds us back from a beautiful future.

I've been spending some time trying to cultivate my sense of abundance. Much of my training as a doctor means that sometimes when we discuss policy or resource allocation, it so often comes from a space of scarcity, or of pitting one entity against each other. Thanks to great mentors and people who have been patient with me in their teaching I am learning that we can reject scarcity. That zero-sum mentality that avoids bolder approaches to realizing equity in Seattle.

What is your question to the City of Seattle about pandemic recovery?

How can we have more conversations about collective liberation?

When I think about city governance and that big machine that is the City of Seattle on the seal, on the paperwork, on the website, in those offices, I realize that this entity is made up of people, often people with deep roots and connections to community, often people with their own stories that are a little bit lived outside of that workspace and a little bit lived inside and sometimes feel like there's a chasm, a space between them that needs to be bridged. I would want to ask someone in the work of governing the city of Seattle, what are they doing to advance collective liberation? How do they understand the idea of collective liberation?

I want to see the City of Seattle accounting for harm. How can The City of Seattle begin to build repair into its actions today? Seattle cannot move forward towards healing without actually addressing, accounting for, and repairing the harm that has been done. Because guess what? Everything that we've been trying before has not been working when it comes to equity.

Because I only want to vote for people who have a vision for collective liberation. I feel like that's almost the description of the job of governing a city, of providing the resources and the infrastructure for a city.

What is your ask to Communities?

I want to hear from that single mom or primary caregiver, like, what do you see? How do you connect to collective liberation? What would you be doing differently to see collective liberation come to life in our area? I want to ask a child if I could find the right words, like what does that mean to you? That idea that we share an opportunity to thrive, what does that bring to you in terms of your power?

The Sankofa bird that looks back over time and understands the past to move forward into the future is one of my favorite images. The past, the present, and the future become all one thing. Understanding the past, seeing what's happening in the present, and asking us to look towards a future that is this beautiful, bright, and full of opportunity and promise. Healing.

What is your definition of healing?

Healing is transformational.

Healing is transcendental. Hearing and seeing is healing. It's a kind of healing that calls for an important acknowledgment. I see those wounds. I know how I've been complicit, how our society has created and how generations of harm have caused those wounds that remain open today. I see these. I understand those.

What comes up for you when you hear the phrase "Racism is a Public Health Crisis"?

We know how deeply racism affects everything.

For me it means that I'm not going to stand in front of you anymore and put-up charts that prove to you that racism is a factor here. Because *we know* how deeply that racism is enacted. And I'm not going to pause and slow down the process of change by continuing to make the argument about racism as a factor. We are stating it's a given that racism is a public health crisis.

No more definitions needed.

No more charts needed.

We need action today, action that is informed by our public, by our communities, by the wisdom and strength of our communities most harmed by racism.

We also have to think in a way that also honors and respects the "public" in public health that says that, you know, the best solution to, you know, your own answers. You don't need to pass a test for our city to support you in the way that you say you need to be supported.

Until we start acting in that way, we're not going to make changes.

Making the statement that racism is a public health crisis: It is a key that turns that engine on.

It is a way for us to step into action that we've denied ourselves and we've been denied for far too long.

Let's Imagine Healing • Belonging • Unity

2023 RSJI Summit

Thursday, March 23: City of Seattle Staff Day |
11 am-2:30 pm, 3-4 pm (Mixer)

Friday, March 24: Community Day |
4-7:30 pm

LEARN MORE AND REGISTER HERE

bit.ly/RSJISummit

