



Race & Social Justice Initiative | **Matt Remle**

The interview below has been edited for clarity and was taken from a recent 2023 interview with Indigenous activist, father, and community organizer Matt Remle.

Can you tell us a bit about yourself before we jump into what healing and belonging can look like in Seattle pandemic recovery?

Hau mitakuyepi, cantewaste nape ciyuzapi. Lakhol'iya Wakinyan Waanatan emaciyab. Wasicu'iya Matt Remle emaciyab. Inyan Woslal Han ematahan. Wanna Seattle el wathi. Ina Donna Harrison eciyab. Ate Charles Remle eciyab.

Hello My Relatives. With good feelings in my heart, I extend a hand to you all. My Lakota name is Charging Thunder. My mother is Donna Harrison. My father is Charles Remle. My English name is Matt Remle, and my Lakota name is Wasicu'iya. I'm Hunkpapa Lakota from Standing Rock, but I live here in South Seattle.

In my traditional way, I'm letting you know of what we call protocol: letting you know who I am, who my family is, who my parents are, and where I come from.

What are ways you think we can help heal our communities post-pandemic and bring about a deeper sense of belonging?

If we're going to be talking about healing, then we must first talk about healing with our Duwamish, our Suquamish, and other Coast Salish relatives. We need to see the pandemic as a much longer kind of crisis. The pandemic that's been happening to our communities for several hundred years is the settler colonization of this area. And that has yet to be fully addressed or grappled with.

In 1855, the tribes of this region signed a treaty after helping the settlers to survive the harsh winters, teaching them how to hunt, gather and build shelter. Just ten years after that treaty was signed, one of the first acts of the city government was to pass an ordinance to ban Native people from living in the city limits. This followed a 10 to 15 year period of the mass burning down of long houses throughout Seattle and in what is now called King County.

That acknowledgment brings about a sense of belonging, because we can regain what it means to be a guest, to be a good relative, to live in connection and with people who've lived in this area for tens of thousands of years who have a good sense of how to live in balance and in harmony with these territories.

Traditional knowledge is what's going to help us when things like COVID 19, the Spanish Flu, or other pandemics come about, as we look for other ways for healing through traditional medicines and traditional knowledge. So I'd say the first thing in that step towards healing is a recognition of the history of settler colonization. It's not only its historic impact, but its ongoing negative impact on our Tribal communities.

What do you feel can make Seattle a city where everyone thrives?

There's the historical legacies of settler colonialism. The colonization in this area, along with understanding the ongoing colonization happening not only to the Duwamish and Suquamish, but surrounding tribes.

We have to look at things like, say, where Seattle gets its energy from.

We know that Seattle derives its energy from dams and tribes north of here up into the Skagit and Whatcom County areas. We know that this city gets its energy in the form of natural gas from fracked gas sites up in British Columbia, in Alberta, and these sites where they were built and run without the consultation and consent of First Nations communities.

Our Tribal communities continue to be directly impacted from the extraction of energy and resources in their communities, not for the benefit of their communities, but the benefit of Seattle. That is how Seattle derives its wealth. You know, it needs energy to run its city. But we have to look to the source of where the energy is coming from.

We must begin a process of understanding the harms that are taking place to those particular Tribal communities. We're talking about the destruction of land, the loss of land, the loss of resources, the damming of their rivers, and driving folks away from the traditional areas where they hunt and gather food.

And if we look at these fracking sites, we know that places where fracking takes place, they're epicenters for missing and murdered Indigenous women (MMIW) because you have massive man camps that are brought in for men around the world who are working these camps.

We see a mass epidemic of the trafficking of Indigenous Native women into these communities. So if we're going to talk about an equitable city, that's one of the first questions that this city really needs to grapple with and address. That is, how to live in a better coexistence with Indigenous communities that they derive wealth from.

Can you tell us a little bit about your pandemic experience including Indigenous-led mutual aid?

So some of the work that I was involved with during the pandemic was with my job with a local school district. We were considered essential workers and worked throughout the pandemic.

I was involved with going daily to a local school where we packed buses full of food, lunches, and other items to go out and to deliver primarily in the Tulalip Reservation and other areas in Marysville, as well. We would do that every single morning—pack our buses and then drive and deliver food to families. That became much more in the sense that at this time, folks were isolated in their homes. Some said the only times they were coming out often was when our yellow bus was rolling through the neighborhoods.

We saw families waiting in front of their homes for us to come by. We would end up having a lot of conversations with families because we were perhaps some of the only at least face-to-face human-to-human contact. You know, sometimes even just speaking from the bus windows to the families on the ground.

The children especially were so excited to see somebody from their schools. It was a little bit more than just the “delivery of food,” but kind of a human interaction with communities here locally in Seattle. A lot of our Native community in particular really took it upon themselves to deliver food, traditional medicines,

things of that sort to elders and just other Native folks within the community.

A few times I remember getting home from work and there'd be a box on the porch of traditional medicines or foods, for me and it was really a beautiful thing.

How do we intentionally make space to think about Indigenous Sovereignty and racial justice together?

As a Lakota person, here in the Homelands of Coast Salish peoples, I do the very best that I can daily to follow the teachings and protocols of the people who've lived in this land for tens of thousand years. As a good relative.

And in Lakota, we'd say, Lakota kind of means following a good way of life. What that means is an understanding that Indigenous peoples globally have an understanding of how to best live with an ecosystem. I'm not from this region. I don't know how best to live with the salmon and the coastal environments.

One of the important steps that we need to take globally is understanding the rights of Indigenous peoples through something called a 'free prior and informed consent'. This is a process that was developed by Indigenous communities globally coming out of Standing Rock in the 1970s to bring a framework to the global stage.

They have an understanding of how to coexist with the world's Indigenous populations to live in good relation with them, in understanding that there are various Indigenous communities around the globe who best know how to live in coexistence with those communities.

So what that means for a person like myself, a Lakota guest in the Homelands of Coast Salish peoples is understanding that they must know how to live in these areas. They've coexisted with their habitat here for tens of thousands of years. And if you just simply look at how they existed, in balance, and in harmony with this area, they were a very thriving environment and therefore very thriving communities.

If you look at the past 150 or so years since Seattle has existed, the land's largely been decimated to where we now have rivers such as the Duwamish River that are so polluted, we cannot not even eat fish out of there.

So it's not to elevate the tribes, you know, above or below. It's a simple understanding that certain communities carry with them a knowledge that is for the benefit of all of us. And with that is also an understanding around racial justice

that there is an absolute place there for solidarity and support to uplift one another's struggles. Because if we look at who is really behind a lot of the struggles that our communities are facing, whether Tribal communities or Black communities, we often find that it's the exact same forces that are oppressing similar communities.

While issues sometimes might look different, the drivers behind them are the same. And so how can we be stronger in solidarity and strengthening one another and uplifting each other's voices, giving each other platforms, understanding the connection between the various issues.

During our pipeline fight in Standing Rock, we brought that solidarity movement here to Seattle, and the first communities that we worked with were Black youth and with our relatives to the South, looking at private prisons and immigrant detention centers, which we know are just a different form of a pipeline, you know, that school to prison pipeline.

These are different ways which we as organizers can learn to best support, but not speak for other communities, but to speak alongside other communities and how and make them connections. So our efforts are stronger because the forces we're up against are powerful, but I think we are more powerful together.

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

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