



## **Intuitive Medicine Summit™**

### **Indigenous Spirit-Inspired Medicine**

#### **Lewis Mehl-Madrona**

Lisa: Welcome to this session of the *Intuitive Medicine Summit* where we'll explore ways to participate in our own healing with my guest, Dr. Lewis Mehl-Madrona. Our topic today is "Indigenous Spirit-Inspired Medicine." Lewis Mehl-Madrona, MD, PhD comes from Cherokee heritage on his mother's side and Lakota heritage on his father's side. He is currently an associate professor of Family Medicine at the University of New England in Maine and teaches in the Family Medicine Residency of Eastern Maine Medical Center. His latest book is *Remapping Your Mind* written with Barbara Mainguy. He's here with us today. Lewis, thank you so much for setting aside some time to join us today. Welcome.

Lewis: Thank you.

Lisa: Well, now you started off down a fairly conventional path, studying medicine at Stanford and then pursuing family medicine and psychiatry. What brought you to connect with traditional elders?

Lewis: I've always been connected with traditional elders. I grew up in the Cherokee world and eventually made my way to Pine Ridge Reservation where my father was from. So, it's always been a part of my life. It really wasn't some decision. It was more of a decision to study conventional medicine.

Lisa: Okay, all right. Then let's talk about that. How do traditional elders actually cultivate relationships with beings in the spirit world?

Lewis: Well, the idea is that healing comes from the spiritual dimension. The more powerful or the people who are recognized as being perhaps more capable of healing certain conditions work to develop relationships with spiritual beings who can help, though, of course, they don't always respond to our requests. They're not at our beck and call. But the idea is that you cultivate relationships with spiritual beings who come and help you sometimes when you call them when you

need them, if they decide to. That's pretty much true, I think, throughout North America, that idea.

Lisa: What is it that causes them to, how do they choose whether they're going to assist or not?

Lewis: We don't know. It's beyond our paygrade. There are many things that we don't know. It's a great mystery.

Lisa: Yeah, that's an excellent answer. There's no going past that, is there? When working with the spirit guides, what sort of instructions would they perhaps offer for people's healing?

Lewis: Well, the funniest one that I ever encountered was a spirit told a traditional healer to tell a woman to eat watermelon, to eat a watermelon every day for 30 days. I asked him, I said, "Why?" He said, "I don't know. This is just what the Spirit told me." So that's what he told her to do.

Lisa: Did it work?

Lewis: Well, she got better. I can't say that it worked. I mean, it could have been the fact that she did what she was told that worked, that she invested in an activity that moved her toward wellness in her mind.

Lisa: I love that. That's just fascinating because it's got really nothing to do with medicine per se, but it was a healing. That's wonderful. You've already given a great example, but let's talk a little bit more about how indigenous spirit-guided practice is different from mainstream and intuitive medicine specifically.

Lewis: Yeah, I think so because it has to do with cultivating relationships with spirit beings and making offerings and showing respect and trying to do what they tell you because they're not happy if you don't do what they tell you, or if you don't offer something of yourself, that we always have to give something in order to receive something.

Lisa: Right, right. Now, I also understand that one of the differences is that, in conventional medicine, there's sort of a cookie cutter cures or treatments where if you've got this condition, this is the pill or this is the treatment. But it doesn't work that way with spirit-guided medicine, does it?

Lewis: No, it doesn't. I have a good story about that. I took an elder who comes from the blood tribe to a medical convention in which he was on a panel. A nurse in the audience asked him, "How do you treat arthritis?" He said, "I don't know her. Why don't you bring her around to the house? I'll get to know her and then I'll let you

know." Obviously, he was tongue in cheek. He knew what he was doing, but he was clearly pointing out the difference between the allopathic system and the indigenous healing system. That he didn't see himself treating allopathic diseases. He saw himself working with individuals and trying to provide what would help them independent of what the allopathic physicians thought was wrong with them.

Lisa: So then how do you apply this approach within your own life and your own career?

Lewis: For the most part, I live in two worlds. In the allopathic world, it's not so easy, though sometimes I'll say to someone, I just have a feeling that it might be useful to do x or what comes to me. If they say, why, I don't know. This is something that that came to me. Take it or leave it. In the indigenous world, it's more coming out of ceremony and offering to someone what comes to me from my relationships with spirit beings. I remember there was a woman, well, now she's a man, which is complicated to figure out pronouns, but when I first saw her, she was a woman, and she'd had a horrendous childhood. She became pregnant with her grandfather's child at age 12 and more terrible things like that. When I met her, she could barely get out of her car. She was so frightened of the world. But she would get out of the car to do a ceremony together. A spirit told me that she needed a medal, that I should tell her that she deserved a medal for taking on the abuse so that her siblings wouldn't receive it. I told her that, that, hey, this spirit who happened to be in the neighborhood told me that we need to give you a medal because the spirit says that you didn't realize what you were getting into when you picked the life that you picked, that you took on more than you could chew. But regardless of that, you protected your siblings, and for that you deserve a medal. We fabricated a medal for her to wear. It was really the beginning of her healing, that she could change her perspective on what had happened to her. A lot more happened after that, but that was the beginning.

Lisa: That's really a very touching story. Thank you for sharing that. It's brought tears to my eyes. I assume then that that was a very healing gesture?

Lewis: Yes, indeed, indeed.

Lisa: Well, then let's go back to when I was asking about, well, when you told the story about I don't know arthritis. How, in your view, is treating people different from treating a specific illness?

Lewis: Within the indigenous view, or at least the ones that I know, illness arises out of imbalance and disharmony. The way to restore health is to restore balance and harmony. In the Lakota language, we talk about wicozani, which is health, which is balance. Imbalance is towaci'cow'pta, which literally means head on its side or out of balance. What this elder would offer would be, in essence, individualized

medicine. He would be determining in what way the person was out of balance and in disharmony with other people, with nature, with the spirit world, with the plant people, the animal people, with all of the universe, and then working to help her restore harmony and balance. That might involve plants to help her, but the plants would speak to him. The plants would tell him which ones were available to help her to restore harmony and balance. It wouldn't necessarily be an allopathic one-to-one correspondence. Well, this plant is used for arthritis, and this plant is used for asthma. I mean, there is some of that awareness that does exist. But if the plant speaks it, it takes precedence over that sort of awareness of what, in general, plants are good for.

Lisa: I'm wondering, since we're speaking about indigenous elders, indigenous wisdom, would this only apply to people who are descended from indigenous peoples, or is this something that anybody can use?

Lewis: I've taken people of all origins to work with elders. It doesn't seem to be dependent on your origins. I think it's dependent on faith. It's dependent upon being humble and coming in a good way. Most of the elders whom I know will work with anyone who approaches them in the right way. Part of what I've done in my life is to train people for how to approach elders in the right way because if you walk onto the reservation and you say, I'm looking for a healer, everyone will say, I don't know any of those. We don't have any of those here. So that's not the way to approach things. Often it requires performing some task, washing dishes for the social or setting up chairs for a ceremony. It can involve showing that one is willing to be helpful and then being accepted. A lot of what I've done is to coach people for how to behave and how to approach a traditional elder.

Lisa: I was asking about non-indigenous peoples, but do you find that even those who are descended from these tribal elders, do they need the reminder as well? Do you find that people who are sort of losing connection with their ancestors need a nudge, or do they just get brought back into the fold easily?

Lewis: Occasionally, they need a nudge. Most everyone who's indigenous has a deep respect for elders regardless of how many gangs they've been in even. I'll tell you a funny story about that. I had a client who had a loaded gun. He was afraid that gangsters were chasing him from another state where he had made a bad drug deal. People were scared because we were afraid he might shoot a soccer mom in a van. What I told him, I said, "Listen, dude, your mother and your sisters say you need to give up the gun." He's like, "What?" I'm like, "Yeah, you know how it goes. If the women speak, you have to listen." He's like, "Oh, right. Okay. I'll give up the gun." He gave up the gun. Regardless of his paranoia, which he had some, and his gangster background, he had enough growing up wisdom to know that when the eldest woman speaks, you better listen. Or when a group of women speak, you better listen, and so he did.

Lisa: I think that's great advice for everybody. Thank you for sharing that. I wanted to ask about some of your first books. There was *Coyote Wisdom, Coyote Healing*. Where does the coyote come into play in your work?

Lewis: I'm not always sure of that, but like most people, I hoped for a bear, an eagle, a mountain lion, or some other powerful muse. But wherever I went, coyotes showed up. It became a standing joke that I would show up and the coyotes would start howling. People would say, they didn't do that before. Or I would show up in the morning, there would be coyote prints all over people's cars. I just realized, I guess my muse is coyote. Coyote is kind of cool. I mean, coyote is funny. You've got to give coyote that. Coyote is often well meaning, not always, but often well meaning, though, sometimes takes stupid shortcuts. Coyote is the creature among many tribes who killed off the people-eating monsters so that humans could be safe in the world.

I just found myself surrounded by coyotes. I thought, well, I must have coyote medicine. I do like to joke with people. One of my favorite healing approaches is to make people laugh. That's what coyotes do. I remember once I was sitting on the porch of a farm with some friends, and this coyote staggered into the yard. He was hilarious. He looked drunk. He was staggering all around, and we were all laughing. It was just amazing. All of a sudden, he went lickety-split for the chicken in the yard. It had in its jaws, the mouth. My friend was sitting there with his shotgun, and it was so fast he didn't even lift it. He looked at me and said, "If he puts on that good a show, he deserves a chicken."

Lisa: I got to ask, what are the people-eating monsters?

Lewis: Well, okay, once upon a time, there was a monster so big that its mouth was so large that you would walk into it without even realizing it. Inside of it, it looked like an ordinary landscape except the trees were all barren of leaves, and the grass was all brown. People were starving as the monster digested them. Coyote figured it out. Coyote lit a fire and literally gave the monster heartburn. The fire got so hot that the monster barfed out all the people. Then coyote, he had seven knives with him. He took seven knives to cut a hole into the monster's heart, and all the blood poured out. You can still find those blood clots. There are red rocks in a place in Idaho where the monster died. That's one example of a monster that coyote killed. There's more. There's a story that goes with it.

Once upon a time, spirit chief came to earth and offered the animals powers. Coyote thought, oh, I'm going to get bear's powers, or maybe I'll get mountain lion's powers, or maybe I'll get salmon's powers, or maybe I'll get eagle's powers. The task was to show up at dawn. Coyote was wandering around the camp, bragging about how he was going to have all these incredible powers. He wouldn't

need his wife anymore because he'd get a new one because he'd be so cool and attractive and powerful. He went to his den, and he propped his eyes open with sticks, so that he would stay awake all night. Apparently, he didn't because all of a sudden he woke up and he said, "Oh, it must be dawn. I got to get my new powers." He ran down to Spirit Chief's teepee, and he burst in and he said, "I'm ready for my new powers. I want to be bear. I want to be eagle," et cetera. Spirit Chief said, "Coyote, the sun is already high overhead. Everyone has come and gone, and the only powers that are left are yours, so you're stuck." But Spirit Chief said, "Someone has to kill the monsters that would eat the people, and it has to be you." Coyote said, "Well, I guess that's not so bad. I guess I'm good for something." That's how it came about.

Lisa: So then, in analogy, what would the human-eating monster be?

Lewis: Well, an elder told me that it's Homo economicus, that the human-eating monster is greed personified. Our current monster are the Feringi among us. The Feringi rules of acquisition, all for me and none for you. Really what we're fighting today, I think, is greedy capitalism.

Lisa: That makes beautiful sense. Thank you for that clarity. Then I'm wondering with all that we've talked about here, how can somebody who's listening take the information that you've shared today? Are there any practices? Are there any meditations that they can use to combine the wisdom of coyote to destroy the human-eating monster that has consumed them?

Lewis: I think that we have to build the awareness that we're interdependent and interconnected. The expression for that in Lakota is Mitakuye Oyasin. It means that we're all in this together. Whatever I do affects everyone. I need to be aware of my actions and who they affect. I need to contemplate what I'm doing and who might it be hurting and to try very hard to do good and not to hurt others. It was actually Thomas Merton who spent time with indigenous people who said that you should always do the right thing even if you're convinced that it's not going to work. I think we have to do that. I think we have to spend time in nature. Talk to a tree. Sit with a tree. Sit with the plants. Sit by a river. Listen to what these beings have to say. It is a meditation. It's a quieting of the mind to hear the whispers of the spirits.

Of course, we never believe any one spirit unless we are together in a group of people and discuss the message and decide that it's a good message. Never trust yourself alone. Always share what you've heard with a group of people and get good guidance and direction from the community before acting on any message. But I think we need to quiet our minds. There's that wonderful first documentary that was ever made of, I think it was *Nanook of the North*. This was a guy who could stand still for six hours beside a hole in the ice with a feather over the hole

waiting for it to move which would sickle him that there would be a seal underneath. He would trust his spirit and get the seal. Imagine doing that. That takes incredible contemplation. We all have to cultivate contemplation and cultivate stillness, cultivate listening. It was actually a Frenchman, Jacques Lacan, who said that the greatest gift you can give someone is to listen to them without judgment or interpretation. That's what elders do. They listen to you without judgment or interpretation. I remember taking my wife to meet an elder by the name of Dan Smoke. She sat down with him and she started talking. She talked and she talked and she talked and she talked, and he listened and he listened and he listened and he listened. Finally, she ran out of things to say. She looked at him and she said, "I've never had this experience before. I've never run out of things to say." He said, "Well, good. Now you can get on with your life."

It's an amazing experience when someone just listens to you without telling you what to do or telling you what not to do or judging you or interpreting you. We can all cultivate that skill too. One of the tribes in Australia that I visit, I think they call it dadirri, the deep listening, just to do this. We can all cultivate that too. It's a lifelong practice of watching yourself, because we all judge others because we're trained in this society to do that. When we do that, we need to step back in our mind, typically, ask for their forgiveness. Please forgive me for judging you. We all have our triggers. People that are heavily tattooed, fat people, dirty people, you name it, everyone has their triggers for judging others. When we find ourself being judgmental, that's a practice. The practice is to step back and to say to the spirit world, not necessarily to them, because that could have bad consequences, but to say, forgive me, I'm sorry for judging you. I don't know your situation. I don't know your context. I don't know anything about you. I'm sorry.

We can all cultivate that, practice that every day, and to work on building our compassion for others, our understanding that if someone is suffering, perhaps they've taken on the imbalance in the world for us. Perhaps we should show them respect. We should thank them for being the canary in our social coal mine and suffering so that we don't have to. Among the Dine people and also the Lakota, when someone is ill, it's all of our responsibility to contribute to the ceremonies that will help them to get better but for the grace of someone would be us. We have a duty to be helpful to people who are sick or suffering and to do what we can for them. I think to cultivate these ideas is a really positive thing, and it really does take all day every day because there are so many opportunities to be judgmental or to criticize others. I tell people that we have to work hard to be happy, that it's really easy to be miserable, but we have to really cultivate happiness. It reminds me, there was a wonderful Canadian movie about a psychiatrist in Toronto who realizes that he has no idea what makes people happy. He sets out on a journey around the world to ask people what makes them happy. He has lots of adventures.

When he comes back to Toronto, he's just so happy to see his wife again. She's like, "Wow, I thought I would never see you again." He's like, "No, I figured it out. You make me happy. Being here makes me happy. Breathing makes me happy. Being alive makes me happy. Eating a good meal makes me happy. Waking up in the morning makes me happy. It's no more than that." He had to go around the world to figure that out. He had to go on a journey. Maybe we're all on a journey and we just have to figure that out.

Lisa: It's so fun that as you're talking, we're seeing these rainbows sparkling behind your head as if there are spirits in the room with you. Would you like to comment on that?

Lewis: Well, they might be. They could be. In a two-eyed seeing perspective, they're generated by a device that I got my wife for Christmas that I bought at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. But from another perspective, they could be spirits flying around the room. It could be both.

Lisa: Absolutely. I totally believe it because like I said, as you're telling all these beautiful stories, and that's when I specifically noticed that they were just right around your head. So yeah, we'll go along with that. That sounds like an excellent explanation.

Lewis: Why not?

Lisa: I mentioned your books *Coyote Wisdom* and *Coyote Healing*. You've got a new book called *Remapping Your Mind*. What is that one about?

Lewis: It's about getting to know the beings in your swarm. In Lakota thought, philosophy, there's a swarm around your physical body of all the stories that have made you who you are. In each of those stories, there's a spark, a little spark of the being who told that story. Our minds are non-local. They exist outside of our physical body in this swarm, which connects us to other people, because most of our stories are about relationships, relationships with nature, with other people, with the universe. A remapping your mind is about getting to know the stories that have made you who you are and meeting the beings who told those stories or who are still telling those stories and deciding if you like who you are and if you'd like to change. If you'd like to change, maybe we need to strengthen some minority stories. Maybe we need to give you some new stories, some good stories to live by, some better stories that'll allow you to have less friction in yourself world interface. Maybe we need to loan you some new beings.

One of my favorite examples of that is, so I was working with a woman who didn't want to heat her apartment. You can imagine that that would be problematic in Maine in the winter. Her landlord was really unhappy about that idea because the pipes froze. He was going to evict her if she did it again. She also didn't want to



eat. The reason was because she had relatives who died in the Holocaust and in concentration camps. So she thought, why should she deserve to be warm and to be fed when they weren't?

I contemplated this for a bit with her. I said to her, "Well, wouldn't you have some relatives who might feel good about you being warm and fed so that their suffering wasn't in vain, like their descendants came out okay?" She said, "Well, maybe one or two." I said, "Well, let's figure out what they all look like." In my office, I have a wall full of puppets. I said, "Pick the being that wants you to suffer." She pulled out the Tyrannosaurus Rex. I said, "Now pick the being who wants you to be warm." She picked out a tiny little rabbit. I thought, "Hmm, T-Rex, rabbit, that's not a very even fight." So I said, "Well, maybe we could find a puppet, who could help you to stand up to T-Rex." I said, "Who could do it?" She said, "I know, Kung Fu Panda," because of that movie, just one of those movies that just come out. There's a number of them. I said, "That's a great choice because he would never fight evil without filling his belly with noodles first." She got the panda puppet from my shelf. I said, "You take that panda home. Whenever you're tempted to turn off the heat or to go hungry, you listen to that panda who fights evil and saves the world on a full stomach." So she did. It kept her from being evicted or from starving. She got a better story, which humorously was a Disney story, of all things, not a traditional native story. Power of healing sometimes comes from Disney.

Lisa: Absolutely. I love that story. Thank you so much for sharing that. I love when healing can come about through really kind of simple, homespun ways. I think that was a really nice way to share that. Thank you.

Lewis: Thank you.

Lisa: I'm looking at the clock here. We're not quite out of time yet, but we do have time to bare minimum share your, you've got two web pages. One is [mehl-madrona.com](http://mehl-madrona.com) and then [coyote-institute.org](http://coyote-institute.org). What's the difference between those two sites? What will people find when they visit there?

Lewis: Well, my site, [mehl-madrona.com](http://mehl-madrona.com), is about me, of course. It's all about me. Coyote Institute is a not-for-profit organization which I'm affiliated. Our purpose is to bring forth the wisdom of the indigenous world to help the mainstream world. As a secondary mission, we try to improve the health and wellbeing of people in the indigenous world whenever we can. Those are our two missions. What we do is in service to those missions. We do trainings, and we put up papers to read. We just try and do good in the world. We try and fight Homo economicus. We're battling in true coyote spirit greedy capitalism. Consequently, we don't have much money, so please send us your donations.

Lisa: Absolutely. That's a wonderful message to share. Thank you so much for that. Well, gosh, this has really been an interesting conversation. We've gone in places that I didn't expect to. I've learned an awful lot. Is there anything else that you want to make sure that we talk about before we wrap it up?

Lewis: Just that we really need each other, that we all need to make have more friends. I think one of the most profound things I ever heard was something that Dalai Lama said. He was on a panel and people were saying, "Well, so what's the point of world peace? Why do we need it? What's it all about?" He said, "Well, obviously, it's so we can have more friends, because we all need more friends. That's why we need world peace." We all need more friends, so make more friends. Find a friend. What is it we used to say in grade school? Make new friends, but keep the old one as silver and the other as gold. Good advice.

Lisa: Absolutely. Yeah, I remember singing that in Girl Scouts. Well, I am so glad to make a friend of you today. Thank you so much, Lewis, for being with us. This has been just a delightful conversation. Thank you.

Lewis: Thank you. Thank you.

Lisa: I want to remind everyone, I've been talking with Dr. Lewis Mehl-Madrona. I want to thank everyone for joining us. I hope you enjoyed this conversation in the *Intuitive Medicine Summit*.

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