

Morten Tolboll

James Arthur Ray and the sweat lodge tragedy

James Arthur Ray (born November 22, 1957) is one of guest speakers in the film *The Secret*, and is a co-author on the book. So Ray is also an advocate of the Law of Attraction; his teachings have been described as “including a mix of spirituality, motivational speaking, and quantum physics” (see my articles **The New Thought movement and the law of attraction**, and **Quantum mysticism and its web of lies**).

James’ father was an Oklahoma preacher in occasional poverty for a decade until 1973 at Red Fork Church of God in Tulsa. At times they had to live in the church office. Money and spirituality were central to him. “the hardest part of my childhood was reconciling how Dad poured his heart into his work, how he helped so many people and yet he couldn’t afford to pay for haircuts for me and my brother,” Ray wrote in his 2008 book *Harmonic Wealth*. “How could a loving God keep me from Cub Scouts on account of not being able to afford a uniform?” coming to the conclusion that wealth and spirituality were not mutually exclusive.

Ray dropped out of junior college, joining AT&T, the phone company, as a telemarketer, then as a sales manager teaching sales techniques. Ray had taught Stephen Covey Motivational seminars while at AT&T.

Ray said he began searching for more, reading about quantum physics, studying with a Peruvian shaman, with Amazonian witch doctors and a Hawaiian kahuna, travelling to the Egyptian pyramids. Finally he said, he fell into a deep depression and wandered in the Sinai desert for 10 days. Finding himself in the cave where Moses is said to have rested before receiving the Ten Commandments.

“That is where it all came together for me,” he wrote, “where the final pieces of harmonic wealth and the quantum physics material I had studied for a decade took form.”

According to Grant Cardone, James Ray consulted him for methods in 2000 to increase sales at business seminars, and was warned to teach only sound business practices. After this time, Ray began incorporating sleep deprivation, fasting, fire and glass walking, and sweat lodge methods after studying in South America.

Former attendees of Ray's seminars have reported unsafe practices and lack of properly trained medical staff in 2005. A New Jersey woman shattered her hand after she was pressured by Ray to participate in a quasi-martial arts board-breaking exercise. After several unsuccessful untrained attempts, the woman sustained multiple fractures during the seminar that was held at Disney World.

Participants of a Ray's "Spiritual Warrior" exercise in 2006, after signing waivers, were told to put a sharp point of arrow used in archery against the soft part of the neck and lean against the tip. A man named Kurt sustained injuries during this exercise as the shaft snapped and the arrow point deeply penetrated his eyebrow.

In July 2009, Colleen Conaway attended a seminar hosted by James Ray International in which the attendees were directed to dress as homeless people. She fell to her death at the Horton Plaza Mall in San Diego. She died as a result of injuries, and according to police, she had no identification on her person.

In 2005, preceding the tragic events of October 2009, a serious injury involving hospitalization was reported at the Angel Valley Ranch during a "Spiritual Warrior" retreat led by Ray. Verde Valley fire Chief Jerry Doerksen's department responded to an emergency call that a 42 year old man had fallen unconscious after exercises inside the sweat lodge.

In 2009, Ray was the brightest and most influential star in the New Age-firmament. He had been catapulted into public consciousness on the back of *The Secret*. He rode the *Secret's* slipstream. He appeared on Winfrey's show again, on Larry King and on numerous other television and radio programmes. By 2009, Ray was at the apex of his success and influence. Two of his books, *Harmonic Wealth* and *The Science of Success* had made the New York Times bestseller list. He was represented by the William Morris Agency.

Ray was on the road for 200 days a year, preaching his very American gospel of success. It wasn't just his message that resonated so powerfully; it was his charismatic presence and delivery. The goodlooking, athletic 6ft tall Ray would roam the stages of large halls and convention centres, a New Age revivalist preacher, pumping rock music and precepts for positive living (about such Large Group Awareness Training (LGAT) – which also Tony Robbins uses – see my article

Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP) and Large Group Awareness Training (LGAT).

By 2009, his company, James Ray International, based in Southern California, was making close to \$10m a year. He would soon be making much more than that, he believed, as the natural successor to first-generation New Age stars such as Deepak Chopra. Ray told followers he planned to become the first New Age billionaire. In March 2009, Ray bought a 7,234 sq ft house in Beverly Hills for \$4m.

On October 8, 2009, at a New Age “Spiritual Warrior” retreat conceived and hosted by Ray at the Angel Valley Retreat Center in Yavapai County near Sedona, Arizona, two participants, James Shore and Kirby Brown, died as a result of being in a sweat lodge exercise. Eighteen others were hospitalized after suffering burns, dehydration, breathing problems, kidney failure or elevated body temperature. Liz Neuman, another attendee, died October 17 after being comatose for a week.

Spiritual Warrior was a five-day workshop. Although the cost of the course was very high - \$9,600, plus travel and accomodation – Ray promised it would be transformational. Kirby Brown (who used her life savings to pay) felt lucky she was allowed to sign up: Spiritual Warrior was Ray’s pinnacle event, usually reserved for those who had completed all of the other courses in his Journey of Power Experience programme, which cost more than \$20,000.

As a way of showing their commitment to transformation, Ray wanted each “Warrior” to shave off their hair. The 56 people on the retreat hereafter spent the first two days listening to lectures by Ray. Ray made them watch clips from *The Last Samurai*, the Tom Cruise movie about an American who has to embrace the Samurai culture in Japan. On the third day, Ray made everyone play what he called the Samurai Game. In an article in *The Guardian* (guardian.co.uk, Friday 8 July 2011, by Christopher Goodwin) one of the attendees, Beverley Bunn, is interviewed:

“James played God,” Bunn says. “He had on a white robe with a gold belt. You couldn’t talk to God. If you talked to God, he killed you.”

One of those who tried “talking to God” was Kirby Brown, who asked if she could use the toilet. Ray screamed, “Die! Die!” at her until she fell to the ground, not allowed to move for hours. She was so desperate to urinate, she later said, that she had to hold back vomit.

Before the Samurai Game, Bunn went up to Ray and told him that, as 40 out of the 56 people had already done, including a reluctant Brown, she would shave her head. “I

don't give a fuck what you do," Ray snapped. "Shave your head. Don't shave your head. It doesn't really matter." Bunn says this retort stunned her, and made her even more concerned about what she had come to see as Ray's egotism and arrogance.

"The way we were treated was really bizarre," she says. "After paying \$10,000, we were told, 'you can't talk to James unless you are told you can. He doesn't eat with you. If he drives in the golf cart, you're not allowed to wave at him or acknowledge him or say hi.'"

After the Samurai Game finished, around midnight, the Warriors were led out into the desert for what Ray called a Vision Quest, which he said was a Native American spiritual tradition.

The Vision Quest is an idea he ripped off from the Lakota hanblechya ceremony, and the "sweat lodge" is stolen from the Lakota inipi ceremony, both of which are considered sacred by Native people. They weren't authentic hanblechya or inipi ceremonies, of course, because people had to pay to participate and because they weren't run by Native elders (more about the New Age abuse of Native peoples ceremonies below).

During Ray's "Vision Quest" the attendees fasted for 36 hours before the sweat lodge. Participants were left alone in the Arizona desert with a sleeping bag, although Ray offered them Peruvian ponchos for an additional \$250. After this experience, participants ate a large buffet breakfast before entering the sweat lodge. A site owner reported she learned after the event that participants went two days without water before entering the lodge.

Ray gathered them all together to talk about the sweat lodge event, based on another Native American ceremony that he said he had studied. A traditional sweat lodge is a small, tented area, which, like a sauna, is taken to a high humid heat as water is poured over hot stones. During a lodge, usually with 10 people, a Native American shaman will lead the participants, chanting and helping people deal with the altered states they may go through.

"It will be the most intense experience, the most intense heat that you've ever experienced in your entire life, I guarantee that," Ray told them. "You will feel as if you're going to die. But you see the true spiritual warrior has conquered death and therefore has no fear and no enemies in this lifetime or the next, because the greatest fear that you'll ever experience is the fear of what...death. You will have to get to a point where you surrender and it's OK to die."

“When I saw the sweat lodge, it concerned me because I thought it was going to be more like a teepee shape with ventilation at the top,” Bunn says. “This was a low dome covered with plastic tarps and blankets. I was worried we were going to suffocate, but I thought he must know what he’s doing because he’d done it before.”

Some 56 people were crowded into the sweat lodge, which was less than 5ft high in the middle and just 30 inches at the sides, and about 24ft across, with only one exit. It was completely dark. Ray started chanting and pouring water on to the red hot rocks that were brought into a pit in front of him.

So, participants were crammed into a four-foot tall sweat lodge, packed with superheated rocks, in a ceremony that was supposed to induce a “rebirthing” experience.

The problem with this is the tendency within New Age, where they reduce religion (the traditional spiritual traditions and their spiritual practices) to psychology and psychotherapy. Ray is - like the Czech-American psychiatrist Stanislav Grof and his therapeutic technique “Holotropic Breathwork” - combining Cathartic psychotherapies with Regression psychotherapies, and is calling this technique a spiritual practice with an ancient shamanistic lineage. The intention is to provoke paranormal phenomena of the same kind as those known from spiritual crises (the awakening of kundalini, para-psychic opening, Hero’s journey, the shamanic crisis, channeling, close encounters with UFOs, memories from past lives, near-death experiences, possession states, peak experiences – see my article **Spiritual crises as the cause of paranormal phenomena**).

The misunderstanding, and the following misleading of people, happen because of the psychologizing of these phenomena. Like Grof Ray wrongly thinks, that these experiences correspond with the theories within Cathartic psychotherapies and Regression psychotherapies, and that the goal is to re-experience or re-visit them; that is: you have go through heavy ordeals of cathartic and/or regressive kind, and experience death and rebirth (especially known from the shamanic illness and the Hero’s journey) in order to experience healing and personal transformation (in the appendix I explain the problem of this in depth).

Bunn says that by the second 15-minute round, when one man began staggering around, in danger of falling into the pit of hot stones, it was becoming clear that “this was really heavy duty”. By the fourth round, the intense heat and lack of air were more than Bunn and others could bear.

“I said I needed to get out, and other people were saying they were having trouble,” Bunn recalls. “But James kept saying, ‘You can get through this. Its mind over matter. Ignore what your body is telling you.’”

During the fifth round a disoriented man began screaming and yelling after he fell into the pit, badly burning his arm.

“People started vomiting,” Bunn says. She saw an unconscious woman being dragged out. “Then James Shore, who had helped pull the woman out, came back to his place, next to Kirby, and shouted, ‘She’s not breathing! I can’t get her to move!’ Everyone was yelling.

“James went really ballistic and shouted, ‘Everybody quiet down! I’m in charge here! The door is now closed and this round has now begun and we will deal with that at the end of the next round.’ Ray continued the ceremony for the full eight rounds, continuing to admonish people not to leave.

At the end of the eight round, after some two hours, it was obvious that Ray’s transformational sweat lodge had become a tragedy. A number of people were unconscious inside, others were being dragged out, vomiting and foaming at the mouth.

“There was a lady in front of me, unconscious,” Bunn says. “We were pushing and dragging her towards the door. That’s when I passed Kirby, and I heard this snorting sound coming from her. I didn’t know if she was passed out or asleep, but it was a really bizarre gurgling, snorting sound.

“Once I was out, I saw a woman called Sidney on her side, barely breathing, not responding to anything, her eyes rolled back on her head, mucous coming out of her nose and mouth. A lot of other people couldn’t walk or anything. Their motor skills were gone.

“I saw this other lady and she was on her side passed out. No one was with her and her arm was turning blue. I started helping her, and I rolled her over and her eyes were rolled back in her head, but she was breathing. Then I walked to the next person and he was unconscious. I rolled him over and he was breathing, but he opened his eyes and all the blood vessels had burst in his eyeballs. Another man was yelling, ‘I’ve had a heart attack! I’ve had a heart attack!’

“A woman was screaming, ‘James Ray! I want to fuck James Ray! James, why did this happen? James, I love you! I want to fuck you!’ She was going crazy. People were holding her arms and legs.

“I started looking for Kirby, but I couldn’t find her anywhere,” Bunn continues. “I looked in the tent and I could see they were doing CPR on James Shore. His stomach was going up and down, up and down. Then I saw Kirby’s stomach going up and down. They were doing CPR on her, right next to James.” Both were foaming at the mouth and had turned purple.

“Ray was standing about 10ft from where they were doing CPR on Kirby and James,” Bunn says. “I looked to see if there was any expression on his face, any kind of emotion, but he just stood there the entire time. He never helped anybody. He never did anything. He just stood there.”

Ambulances and paramedics arrived. “One of them asked, ‘What happened here?’” Bunn recalls. “We said that it was a sweat lodge and she said, ‘You people are fucking idiots.’ That’s exactly what she said. Shortly after that, the helicopters started flying in.”

Nineteen people were taken to hospital suffering from heat exhaustion, some with kidney failure. Kirby Brown and James Shore, a 40-year-old father of three who worked for an internet company, died that day. Liz Neumann, 49, a divorced mother of three, was in coma for more than a week before she died. Autopsies attributed the deaths to heat stroke and organ failure.

Police from the local sheriff’s department arrived at Angel Valley around 6pm. “When I asked (his assistant) where James was, he told me that he was up at the main building eating dinner.” 2 Sgt Frank Barbaro said. “I thought this was interesting since emergency medical services was airlifting and transporting subjects at this time.”

After talking to his lawyer, Ray refused to answer any questions. He didn’t talk to any of the survivors. The following morning he took the first flight out of Arizona. A few days later he was back on the road, preaching.

About five days after Kirby Brown’s death, Ray called her parents. “Instead of an apology he said, ‘This is the most awful thing that has ever happened to me in my life,’” Ginny Brown, Kirby’s mother, recalled. He sent the family a cheque, marked “Honor of Kirby”, for \$ 5,000.

“Considering Kirby paid \$9,600 to be there, plus room and board, a \$5,000 cheque was just an insult,” Tom Mcfeeley, Kirby’s cousin, says.

On October 15, 2009, print media began reporting that Ray conducted a conference call with some victims, one of which recorded this call and provided it to the AP. During this call, a self-described “channeler” said that they had communicated with the dead and said they “were having so much fun” out of their bodies that they didn’t want to return. When Ray was later asked whether, “in some divinely or cosmically ordained way, this was the victims ‘time to die?’” he replied: “I don’t think I am qualified to answer that.”

Native American experts on sweat lodges have criticized the reported construction and conduct of the lodge as not meeting traditional ways. Native American leaders expressed concerns and prayers for the dead and injured. The leaders say the ceremony is their way of life and not a religion. It is Native American property, protected by US laws and the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The ceremony should only be in the hands of sanctioned lodge carriers from legitimate nations.

Traditionally, a typical leader has 4 to 8 years of apprenticeship before being allowed to care for people in a lodge. Participants are instructed to call out whenever they feel uncomfortable, and the ceremony is usually stopped to help them. Characteristic of the New Age environment is its combination of Eastern philosophy with Western psychology/psychotherapy, and latest with various management theories and coaching techniques, and the herein built-in fount of “spiritual” educations, where they, in order to sell to so many as possible, conscious or unconscious, neglect the grounding of experience (see my article **Management theory and the self-help industry**).

An example is the calling to Shaman, which traditionally required that the Shaman aspirant was a person who had went through tremendous ordeals, the so-called Initiation Crisis, or Shamanic Illness (the Shaman was a chosen human being – a rare specialist – see my article **Spiritual crises as the cause of paranormal phenomena**). The modern Shamanism (New Age Shamanism) is a form of Shamanism, which has been accommodated postmodernism (for instance Serge Kahlili King’s book *Urban Shaman*). This form of Shamanism is standing in overt contrast to classic Shamanism, as regards the demands to the Shaman. Now everybody can, through various types of Shaman educations, learn it, as the phrase goes, regardless whether you have any experience or not. It is an ”user-friendly” form of Shamanism - and therefore also saleable in massive quantities. A way of creating success and wealth.

The typical scene is the white middle aged American woman, who out of boredom, and who probably never even has met a Native American, take a course (extremely expensive) in a few weekends, whereafter she can call herself Shaman (with a certification, which even true classical Shamans haven't got), and earn a lot of money taking people as clients. Relativism and subjectivism justifies it. Anything goes.

Today you can draw all kinds of "spiritual" educations in an automat, if only you have money enough. They are typical taken in a few weekends, after which you get yourself some homemade title as coach, psychotherapist, therapist, shaman, healer, clairvoyant or spiritual teacher of one or the other kind. There almost seem to be speculated in creating new peculiar titles. But such educations can of course not give the sufficient competence, neither spiritual or educational.

But New Age worshippers don't care, they have relativism and subjectivism as justification (see my article **Six common traits of New Age that distort spirituality**).

Back to James Arthur Ray and the sweat lodge tragedy. The lodge was said to be unusually built from non-breathable materials. Charging for the ceremony is extremely inappropriate. The number of participants was criticized as too high and the ceremony was said to be too long. The importance of respect for elders' oversight helps to avoid sickness and injury during these sacred acts.

The tragedy was characterized as "plain carelessness", with a disregard for the participants' safety and outright negligence.

The Native American community actively seeks to prevent abuses of their traditions. The Angel Valley owners announced they have accepted Native American friends' help to "heal the land".

On February 3, 2010 Ray was arrested in connection with the death of the participants of his sweat lodge ceremony, and came on trial for manslaughter. He pleaded not guilty.

During the trial Ray tried to continue his business unabated, but later settled into a half-seclusion in his Los Angeles mansion, continuing to market new web videos about Harmonic Wealth and defend himself on his website.

As the authorities and others started to look more closely at Ray, it came evident that a lot of his claims were untrue. People with whom he had studied and worked with

insisted he had lied about it. Ray had for example claimed that he had worked two years for the Covey foundation, although the company has no record of him as an employee or contractor. The Peruvian shaman with whom he claimed to have studied turned out to be a tour guide. Even his claims of childhood poverty were undermined by people who grew up with him. And, as mentioned, Ray was also denounced by Native Americans for abusing their rites and traditions. Some years before the 2009 tragedy, Ray had been “approached several times by native leaders and told he was not trained to run Native American ceremonies”, said David Sitting Bear, a Cherokee Indian who lives in Sedona.

Pamela White is writing in an article [New Age outrage](#) (October 29,2009) that both the vision quest and sweat lodge ceremonies can be dangerous if run for the wrong reasons in the wrong way by the wrong people. The former involves putting someone on a mountain for four days of singing and prayer with no food or water. An inipi is a purification ceremony involving anywhere from an hour to several hours of praying and singing in the heat of the pitch-black sweat lodge.

Native spiritual leaders grow up observing and participating in the ceremonies of their people. They train for years before taking the mantle of leadership on themselves; as a result, they know how to run them safely and respectfully. Their focus is on service, not self.

Sadly, most media outlets know little about traditional Native ceremonies, and some of the coverage has been painfully ignorant. After the tragedy CBS ran a morning news segment about the tragedy, ending with the question, “How dangerous are these ceremonies?” and telling viewers that Ray didn’t have a building permit for his sweat lodge structure.

As a result, many in the Indian community are wondering when Guru Ray’s bungling of his “sweat lodge” ceremony will result in additional obstacles and hassles — Pamela White calls it “white tape” — for Indian people who want to pray in their traditional ways. Already, just holding an inipi comes with hassles enough.

White writes furthermore, that in Boulder Native people used to hold inipi ceremonies on Valmont Butte. Then one night (after the tragedy), a sweat lodge was broken up by law enforcement officials, who got a complaint about the fire and didn’t know that Indian people have used the Butte, which they consider sacred, since before white folks came to this valley. Try to imagine being forced out of your church or synagogue in the middle of prayer. It was a desecration.

Once apologies were issued and it was established that Indians can, indeed, use Valmont Butte for sweat lodge ceremonies, additional hassles arose. The spiritual

leader who ran the lodges was told he would have to get a permit for the fire before planning a ceremony. As a result, Valmont Butte has fallen silent, and songs are now sung elsewhere.

[If people had the proper respect for Native culture, the three people who died in Sedona would still be alive.]

Who wants to get a permit to be able to pray?

Many Indian spiritual leaders worry that local and state governments will use the Sedona debacle as an excuse to regulate Native inipi ceremonies. Fire permits.

Building permits. Maximum occupancy regulations. Licensing. The potential list goes on.

If people had the proper respect for Native culture, the three people who died in Sedona would still be alive. And yet Ray and those like him — men and women who pirate Native culture — probably don't think of themselves as being disrespectful. Something about the Native way of life calls to them, and they respond, seeking connection. But too often they respond in an egoistic way, demanding rather than humbly asking and bypassing tradition in favor of shortcuts to personal fulfillment.

White writes that a dear friend of her — a Native spiritual leader — has had strangers show up at his door, checkbooks in hand, wanting to know how they can arrange an Indian naming ceremony so that they can finally get the Indian name they picked out for themselves (inevitably something with “Wolf ” or “Eagle” in it). He's had men and women come to him uninvited, holding pipes they bought in tourist shops, wanting to be made “pipe carriers.” He's had people he doesn't know ask him how much he charges to run a vision quest ceremony.

If it weren't so pathetic and insulting, it might be funny, White writes.

For so long, the message from the Native world has been, “If you respect us and want to know more about our way of life, approach us and ask in a humble way.”

How sad it will be if James Arthur Ray's selfish actions, which have already sown tragedy enough, bring trouble to the elders who have safeguarded these ceremonies for centuries.

On June 22, 2011, a jury found Ray guilty of three accounts of negligent homicide in the October 2009 deaths of Kirby Brown, James Shore and Liz Neumann. Ray's potential sentencing options ranged from probation to as long as nine years in prison.

After a nearly four-month-long trial, James Arthur Ray was on November 18, 2011, sentenced to two years in prison.

"There is a factor of deterrence that is very prominent in this case," Yavapai County Superior Court judge Warren R Darrow said. "I find the aggravating circumstance is so strong that probation is simply not warranted in this case."

Family members had been especially angry about Ray's seeming indifference after the event, saying that neither he nor his staff called (note that James Arthur Ray's Law of Attraction philosophy teaches people to ignore what they find negative!!). They said they found out what happened either from police or from calling around to area hospitals on their own after hearing news reports.

Before the sentencing, Sheila Polk, Yavapai County prosecutor, said Ray "led the life of a pretender, and there are predictable consequences when one leads a life of pretense."

Prosecutors made the case that Ray had ignored plenty of warning signs that his events were becoming dangerous and that his stated desire to become the world's first "self-help" billionaire led him to become increasingly careless at his events.

Members of the American Indian community sat through almost the entire trial in silent protest of Ray's misuse of a sacred tradition.

But for now, Ray plans to offer his brand of positive thinking to his fellow inmates as he begins his two year stint in prison, his family said.

Ray doesn't seem to have listened to what Virginia Brown, mother of victim Kirby Brown, 38, of Westtown, N.Y., said: "My heart's been ripped out. My life has been blown apart, and the pieces are yet to land," "Mr. Ray is selling something that is faulty and needs to be recalled ... Please take him off the market."

Virginia Brown is here saying something very important, that seems to have been overlooked during the trial, namely the problems in Ray's teachings.

Personally I am precisely focusing on the scientific, philosophical and spiritual distortions in Ray's teaching (or The Law of Attraction as such), which I claim is the main reason why the tragedy happened.

I am not a prophet, but I would guess, that when Ray comes out of prison, he will continue the same teachings, and he will rise to more success than ever. This is

namely the typical reaction in religious movements – due to the thought distortion called *Cognitive dissonance* – see my book **A dictionary of Thought Distortions**.

Already during the trial against Ray, several Law of Attraction devotees were out writing on their blogs and websites about the tragedy, with headlines such as: “The James Arthur Ray Trial doesn’t mean that The Law of Attraction is not true”. Not surprisingly they all involve especially two statements, that just confirm my critique:

1) It was not the law of attraction that failed, it was James Arthur Ray. He simply used the law of attraction in a wrong way; it was Ray that failed, not the law of attraction.

Peculiar, since James Arthur Ray until the trial was used as an example on how you use the law of attraction in the right way (there is a lot of people today, that have to delete statements on websites and in books). How precisely he used the law of attraction in the wrong way is impossible to get a valid answer to. As I say in my article **The New Thought movement and the law of attraction**, one of the main problems of the law of attraction is the use of positive psychology (where the “positive” is about material glory, money, success, personal power, sex, beauty) and where you have to ignore, repress, turn your back to everything you find negative. That was precisely what James Ray did: he just followed the teachings (his behaviour is not due to that he is a psychopath, though it reminds about it – see my article **Humanistic psychology, self-help and the danger of reducing religion to psychology**).

It is typical for law of attraction devotees to claim, that if it doesn’t work for you then it is your own fault. Besides that this is an invalid ad hoc clause, then it also induces in people a so-called false dichotomy. False dichotomy is a misleading conception of possible alternatives. A dichotomy is a division in two alternatives. Often seen in the expressions Either/or – If/then, as for example: ”Either you are with us, or you are against us” – ”if I’m not always a success, then I’m a fiasco”. It is very known within cognitive therapy that false dichotomy is the main reason for shame, anxiety and depression. Spiritual seen positive psychology leads to compensatory karma – see for example my article **What is karma?**

In close connection with this is the fact, that I haven’t found any statements yet, that combine the Ray trial with any ethical evaluations (except those who have given up the law of attraction theory, or haven’t vested too much interest in it). The statements are typically devoid of ethical thoughts about the incident (which again works as an insult against survivors and relatives). The reason is, that it is very difficult, if not

impossible, to combine the law of attraction with any valid ethical foundation without undermining the law of attraction itself.

This leads to:

2) After having said that Ray used the law of attraction in the wrong way, the devotees keep on postulating the same things, which Ray himself also have said, namely that the Law of Attraction is about loving yourself, and how this will attract material glory: money, success, personal power, sex, beauty, etc., etc., etc. – and that this is the basic universal spiritual principle behind the creation.

As an example of the above two statements, read Meryl Davids Landau's article [*Does the James Arthur Ray Trial Mean There's No Law of Attraction?*](#) (Huffington Post 06/12/2011). Remember to scroll down and read the comments to the article.

Meryl Davids Landau is the Author of the new spiritual womens' novel, "Downward Dog, Upward Fog." It also shows how the New Thought movement and the law of attraction are closely related to a new kind of feminism (see my article **The new feminism and the philosophy of women's magazines**).

Appendix

In July 2011, Chantal Lavigne of Quebec died as a result of a personal development seminar. Some month later a coroner's report confirmed that Lavigne was accidentally "cooked to death" during a class called "Dying in Consciousness." Participants were wrapped in mud and plastic, covered with blankets, and left immobilized for about nine hours. Cardboard boxes were placed over their heads and they were encouraged to hyperventilate. Lavigne died of hyperthermia when her body was unable to dissipate heat properly.

The seminar was held at a spa called Ferme Reine de la Paix and organized by Gabriella "Seréna" Fréchette. In her work as a holistic healer, Fréchette channels "Melchizedek," a mysterious king and priest that appears in the book of Genesis (see my article **Paranormal phenomena seen in connection with channeling**). Lavigne had already completed 85 personal development seminars at the spa, for which she paid more than \$18,900.

This seminar may be related to the conscious dying movement, which explores ceremonies from world traditions such as Shamanism and Tibetan Buddhism that emphasize both preparing for death and gaining spiritual insight through near-death experiences. In audio recordings of the session, Fréchette allegedly states, "The time

has come for this body of death that you believe is yours...Death is freedom...death is the truth.”

This is not the first time tragedy has resulted from holistic therapies that involve heat and confined spaces. In 2000, ten-year-old Candace Newmaker was accidentally smothered to death during “rebirthing therapy” that involved wrapping her in blankets and sitting on her to simulate the experience of birth. The therapists received prison sentences of 16 years.

And then there is James Arthur Ray’s poorly constructed homemade sweat lodge ceremony that also was supposed to induce a “rebirthing” experience.

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation consulted Dianne Casoni, a criminologist from the University of Montreal who studies “cultic groups” including self-help groups. Casoni expressed concern both about the influence holistic health providers gain over their clients and the lack of oversight over such seminars. Holistic healers have, in fact, been framed as sinister and manipulative charlatans at least since nineteenth century.

The problems of traditions such as New Thought, water cure, and mesmerism (see my article **Hypnosis, hypnotherapy, and the art of self-deceit**) foreshadowed later concerns over cults. One blog has already labeled Fréchette, “a deranged New Ager.” A Quebecois commenter called her “un garou de seet” (a cult guru).

The problem is shortly told the tendency, within New Age and the self-help industry, to reduce religion (the traditional spiritual traditions and their spiritual practices) to psychology and psychotherapy. An example is the Czech-American psychiatrist Stanislav Grof, who in his therapeutic technique “Holotropic Breathwork” is combining Cathartic psychotherapies with Regression psychotherapies, and is calling this technique a spiritual practice with an ancient shamanistic lineage. He even claims that this technique is able to skip years of meditation within the traditional practices. The intention is to provoke paranormal phenomena of the same kind as those known from spiritual crises (the awakening of kundalini, para-psychic opening, Hero’s journey, the shamanic crisis, channeling, close encounters with UFOs, memories from past lives, near-death experiences, possession states, peak experiences – see my article **Spiritual crises as the cause of paranormal phenomena**).

The misunderstanding, and the following misleading of clients, happen because of the psychologizing of these phenomena. Grof wrongly thinks, that these experiences correspond with the theories within Cathartic psychotherapies and Regression psychotherapies, and that the goal is to re-experience or re-visit them; that is: you

have go through heavy ordeals of cathartic and/or regressive kind, and experience death and rebirth (especially known from the shamanic illness and the Hero's journey) in order to experience healing and personal transformation.

In my article **A critique of Stanislav Grof and Holotropic Breathwork** I show what the misunderstanding consists in.

All articles and books referred to are available in free PDF Versions. Links can be found on my blog: www.MortenTolboll.blogspot.com

Copyright © 2014 by Morten Tolboll.

Terms of use:

http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/deed.en_US