

Death of an Old Paradigm

SEDONA – Two people died immediately following a “New Age-type” sweat lodge experience near Sedona. A third died nine days after being in a coma and suffering from damage to multiple organs. A total of twenty-one people were hospitalized with miscellaneous illnesses ranging from dehydration to kidney failure.

As many as 68 people are reported to have packed into a tarpaulin-covered dome at the remote retreat center called Angel Valley, about 6.5 miles south of West Sedona along Oak Creek.

The event was hosted by James Arthur Ray for a "Spiritual Warrior" phase of his "Journey of Power Experience" series of lectures presented across the country.

Participants told Yavapai County Sheriff's Office investigators they paid between \$9000 and \$10,000 for the experience. Ray was in the shelter at the time of the illnesses, refused to be interviewed by investigators, and left the facility shortly after the incident.

The Sheriff's Office says the victims of the Spiritual Warrior wealth building seminars, led by self-help guru James Arthur Ray, arrived Saturday and by Tuesday began a Vision Quest that included a 36-hour period of fasting and spiritual exercises. By daybreak on Thursday, participants were given breakfast and urged to drink water. The sweat lodge experience began about 3 p.m. Two hours later, when 58 hot rocks had been placed in the sweat lodge and doused with water to create steam, participants were being dragged to the doors of the dome as they fell. Emergency calls to 911 indicated that initially two people were not breathing, had no pulse, and a nurse was offering CPR.

The chief of the Verde Valley Fire District, Jerry Doerksen, and his public information officer, Merry Shanks, told the press about what they described as the "most significant mass casualty event the Verde Valley has ever experienced" from a medical emergency. When Doerksen arrived as incident commander, all of the victims were already outside the domed structure. He said that "as the number of patients increased, the critical patients were getting worse and those getting better were improving." He kept calling for more support.

Seven ambulances were used, plus three medical helicopters. One helicopter returned for a second trip.

Police said participants were highly encouraged, but not forced, to remain inside the ‘crudely built’ sweat lodge for the entire two-hour ceremony.

Fire department reports released Tuesday show the incident wasn't the first involving a sweat lodge ceremony at the resort.

Verde Valley Fire Chief Jerry Doerksen said his department responded to a 911 call in October 2005 about a person who was unconscious after being in a sweat lodge.

One of the Angel Valley owners confirmed that Ray was leading the ceremony during the 2005 event.

Horrrifying.

As we initially heard the news, we kept asking each other, "How could this have happened? What went wrong? Was it only experiencing a sweat lodge that contributed to the deaths and illness or is there more to this story?"

Raising so many more questions than just 'what happened?' Raising some hard questions we all need to look at if we are leading or participating in activities designed to expand our soul's potential.

Initial news reports called the sweat lodge a 'New Age' ceremony, referring to people coming to Sedona for New Age spiritual experiences.

The Sweat Lodge: There is nothing New-Age about sweat lodges. Some form of a sweat lodge has been observed and recorded for over four hundred years, in many cultures.

Lakota elder Black Elk is reported to have said: "The sweat lodge utilizes all powers of the universe: earth, and things that grow from the earth; water; fire; and air."

(from the Wild Rose Dreamers Lodge, <http://www.thewildrose.net>)

"The sweat lodge symbolizes the womb of Grandmother Earth and the heated stones represent her body, which supports all life. The fire that is used to heat the rocks represents the perpetual light of the world, and is the source of all life and power. The water slowly releases the heat in the stones, which rises as steam and permeates the air to create a hot, humid atmosphere conducive to manifestation of the particular intent of the ceremony.

"Every tribal group has its own traditions. Overall, there is no right or wrong way to engage in a sweat lodge ceremony, other than to enter the lodge with an open mind and be prepared for cleansing of negative emotions, healing of physical ailments, clearing of mental concerns and/or releasing of spiritual blockages. Intent within integrity is the key to the positive outcome of the ceremony.

"A major side effect of a sweat is the cleansing of undesirable toxins from the body. Bacteria and viruses cannot survive at temperatures much higher than 98.6 degrees. The rise in temperature also stimulates the endocrine glands and facilitates the release of negative ions into the air, inducing relaxation and alertness.

“Donations are requested to cover costs of expenses for upkeep of the lodge. Traditionally, participants bring medicine gifts and tobacco for the sweat lodge leader and fire people, as well as food to share following the ceremony.”

It is also noted that traditional lodges are made to breathe. That means that the materials used to cover the lodge need to be breathable, natural materials such as blankets. Not tarps, as has been suggested to be used at Angel Valley. Plastic tarps trap heat and air. If all people are breathing the same air, and there’s no place for carbon dioxide to go, eventually everyone is breathing carbon dioxide. According to InspectAPedia, “symptoms of high or prolonged exposure to carbon dioxide include headache, increased heart rate, dizziness, fatigue, rapid breathing, visual and hearing dysfunctions. Exposure to higher levels may cause unconsciousness or death within minutes of exposure.”

Many Native Americans have been vocal about the building of the Angel Valley sweat lodge, as well as their concern that money was paid for participating in one. If the sweat lodge represents the womb of Grandmother Earth and you charge money to enter it, that’s considered prostitution. There is no greater sacrilege to the sweat lodge.

So how exactly was the sweat lodge constructed?

According to the Yavapai County, a permit was needed to construct the sweat. A permit was never applied for. **If a permit had been applied for, and received, could lives have been saved?**

Did the lodge leader know how to facilitate it appropriately?

How does a participant know if a lodge leader is facilitating appropriately?

Native Americans have said that facilitating a lodge means being aware of all participants and how they are doing. Monitoring their reactions to the sweat and the toxins being released. Assisting them in whatever way is necessary.

Money:

What about the amount of money being charged for this event? Some people are absolutely outraged, based on the inclusion of the sweat lodge, and also based on the fact it is a large amount of money. The Web site for Ray’s Spiritual Warrior program reads, “There is no sacrifice — only greater and more magnificent results, wealth, adventure and fulfillment. You owe it to the rest of your life to get to Spiritual Warrior as quickly as you can. The investment is only \$9,695 per person.”

What amount of money is worth your life?

Would people feel differently about this event if it were free?

What if Ray had charged \$100,000?
How would people feel then?

It's a huge contrast when someone like Drunvalo Melchizedek offers a five day spiritual meditation workshop for a mere \$555. Meals and lodging are extra, just like with the Spiritual Warrior program.

Not including a sweat lodge.

One Ray follower mentioned that money is often seen as evil and negative, and yet there's power in choosing how you want to spend it. As an energy exchange, you get what you pay for.

Or do you?

What amount of money is considered an acceptable energy exchange for a spiritual experience?

What amount of money is considered an acceptable energy exchange for a life?

What kind of person pays almost \$10,000 for a spiritual experience?

What do they expect to get for \$10,000?

Responsibility:

As a leader, as a participant, as a co-creator of our life events, just how far do we take responsibility?

Shouldn't leaders and teachers be responsible for imparting information that is accurate and in alignment with their higher self?

Shouldn't leaders and teachers monitor the actions and reactions of their students?

Isn't it their responsibility to assist their students to be the best they can be, in whatever way that is?

Shouldn't participants have the freedom of action to take the information that is in alignment with their higher self and do what they're guided to do with it?

And if something doesn't feel right or isn't in alignment, shouldn't participants have the power to stop doing whatever that is?

If that's the case, then why include a clause in the Spiritual Warrior waiver that says, "Please read carefully. By signing this agreement you are waiving all rights to compensation in case of injury."

The second paragraph reads:

“I am fully aware and understand that I will be given the opportunity by the Company to participate in physical, emotional and other activities during the Event, some of which may take place outdoors and/or require the participants to be isolated from one another and/or include very loud music. These activities may include physical exercise (e.g., hiking, swimming, yoga, team games), Holotropic Breathwork (a psychotherapeutic approach believed to allow access to non-ordinary states of consciousness), a sweat lodge ceremony (a ceremonial sauna involving tight, enclosed spaces and intense temperatures), and/or a Vision Quest (a multiday, solitary, personal and spiritual quest in the wilderness without food or water) (the “Activities”). I am fully aware that I may suffer physical, emotional, financial or other injury during any of the Activities and there is and can be no assurance or guarantee regarding my health or safety in connection with my participation in the Activities. I understand that (1) there are inherent risks in the Activities; (2) people may have been seriously injured by participating in the Activities; and (3) if I voluntarily choose to participate in the Activities, there is a risk that I may receive injuries requiring medical attention. I fully understand and acknowledge that there is no requirement whatsoever that I participate in the Activities. If I do choose to participate in any of the Activities, I affirm that I have not been nor will I be coerced or persuaded in any way to do so and I assume full responsibility for and risk of any injury sustained in connection with the Activities, whether caused by the negligence of Releasees or otherwise.”

Obviously in our country, where litigation is everywhere, a lawyer prompted this release.

As a participant, would this release give you some concern?

As a participant, is this even a necessary statement if we are able to exercise our free will?

Was there anything keeping the participants from exercising their free will?

It was reported that James Ray stood at the doorway of the sweat during the 2 + hour ceremony. It is said that participants were 'highly encouraged' to stay, but not forced.

What does that mean?

What is highly encouraged?

At what point is that different from strongly prevented?

Certainly, if there were high levels of carbon dioxide and little fresh air ventilation, participants were likely feeling dizziness, fatigue, experiencing rapid breathing, along with visual and hearing dysfunctions. And it would be unlikely they could have been self-responsible enough to get up and get out of the lodge.

Bringing us back to the lodge leader responsibility.

With sixty plus people, how could a leader possibly monitor the actions and reactions of all the participants? How could a leader live up to his/her responsibility as a leader? And if it's true that he stood at the doorway, he had more ventilation than anyone else did.

Where were the three that died?

And if the account of the 2005 sweat lodge incident with an unconscious participant and Ray as a leader is accurate, then why wasn't something learned from that? How do you go from having one ill participant to twenty-one ill and three deaths?

The rest of the time....

Most of the press reports and concerns have focused on the final ceremony in the sweat lodge.

What about the activities leading to the sweat lodge? What about the vision quest, the fasting, and the 'spiritual experiences'? Weren't there some red flags raised as concerns for how this retreat was being conducted, the safety of the participants, and the actions of the leader?

How were any participant concerns dealt with?

How would a highly spiritual leader respond to participant concerns?

What type of participant would stay in a retreat , unable to express concerns or unwilling to?

Where do we go from here? What is the greater good that can surely spring forth from this?

*Maintaining responsibility to self, others, and society.

*Practicing discernment for what is in alignment with our higher selves. And what isn't.

*Acting in alignment with our higher selves. Even if that means expressing something that isn't popular with a group.

*Living our power. Not giving it away to anyone. For any reason.

*Forsaking the entrapments of the ego.

*Living in our hearts.

*Treating others as we wish to be treated.

Above all, learning from our opportunities, and choosing alignment with the divine. Every time.

The new world paradigm of responsibility to self and others. Self-empowerment to decide what is in alignment for each of us and act on it.

It couldn't happen without the end of the old world paradigm of ego entrapment.

In the end, it isn't about how we die. It's about how we choose to live. Responsibly. From the heart. In alignment with our higher selves.

This article was written Oct. 21. By the time you read this, more information will be available, I'm sure. Hopefully, the questions raised here will assist everyone as a leader and participant in spiritual retreats.

I thank all participants of this event for their courage and their desire to create change in the world. My heart-felt condolences to all who have suffered.

Phoenix Rising Star