

Introduction

When I first started writing this book, its title was going to be, *My Spiritual Journey to Egypt and Peru as a Member of James Arthur Ray's Inner Circle*. I even hoped the charismatic and highly intelligent James Ray would write the introduction. A lot has changed in the last year.

To be more precise, it changed in an instant.

On October 8, 2009, while vacationing in Maui, my husband Richard and I started receiving phone calls and texts from friends who were in Sedona and participating in the now infamous sweat lodge run by James Arthur Ray. Other mutual friends relayed messages from those who were too ill to call us directly. We heard an acceleration of tragic news: many of our friends were injured, some severe enough to be treated at a hospital; one dear friend was on a ventilator; one was in critical condition (and eventually died); and two were dead. After experiencing a James Ray sweat lodge two years earlier, I knew his version of this ancient ritual was an accident waiting to happen. At most, I was expecting someone to suffer some degree of brain damage. Even I did not foresee James going so far as to literally bake his clients to death!

Our minds immediately filled with should haves, would haves, and could haves. Should we have been there? We had planned to serve as volunteers at the seminar, but we backed out for several reasons. I felt the sweat lodge run "James Ray style" was dangerous and, sooner or later, something really bad was going to happen. We were growing more and more disillusioned by his rapidly growing aggressive behavior. Had we been at Spiritual Warrior 2009 in Sedona, we would have been among the people most likely to stand up to James, as we had in the past.

Earlier in 2009 in Peru, James called us "the trouble makers in the World Wealth Society." It's a designation we are not ashamed to hold, especially considering what happened just two months later at Spiritual Warrior 2009. The World Wealth Society (WWS) consisted of the people to whom James referred to as his "inner circle." We were among the original-founding members. Could we have been even more vocal about our concerns? How could we have communicated more clearly to those whom we had previously warned? At what point do you have to let people follow their own path?

After the tragic events took place in Sedona, I stopped writing my book. Who would be interested in what I had seen and learned, especially when it concerned what I had been taught by James?

During Christmas 2009, we visited my parents in Prescott, a town close to Sedona. We also decided to visit our friend, Vera, the tour organizer of our trip to Peru with James. She convinced me the message of my journey still needed to be told, maybe now more than ever, so people could better understand the events that led up to that tragic day, how it could have happened, and why the people who suffered and died in that lodge were there in the first place.

From January of 2007 until the end of 2009, Richard and I attended twenty-seven seminars and events presented by James Arthur Ray. The media dubbed him "The Rock Star of Personal

Transformation,” a term he liked to use, even at the end of his emails. He promised to instruct us in a mix of spirituality and quantum physics that would transform our lives. We would have to agree there has been a transformation in our lives; we now have a regular meditation, supplementation, diet, and exercise program. We have traveled to Egypt and Peru with him, and explored the ancient spiritual teachings from those areas. Through James, we met our current financial advisor, our anti-aging doctor, and many of our dearest friends. This all came at a very high cost, somewhere around \$200,000.

We did not set out to spend this much money on our spiritual growth. Before we met James and started to follow his teaching to “live (and spend) from the outcome” (translation: don’t let your current situations dictate how you live now), we would have been considered financially conservative. To James, our current state is a result of how we thought in the past. He spoke of basing current decisions on how we want to be in the future. For many things, this approach works well. Financially, this worked very well for James, though not necessarily for his students. Was that a flaw in his teaching, or by his design? I will let you, the reader, decide.

All of this would have continued if not for a very sad, disastrous day on October 8, 2009. We felt certain after the problems with the 2007, and especially the 2008, sweat lodges James would tone down the heat and number of rounds he administered to a more reasonable level. After the injuries at his previous events, why didn’t he get the message he was literally playing with fire?

A lot of questions to be sure. Many I hope to answer in this book. I will show you the James we knew before his appearance on Oprah and Larry King Live, the “old” James, and what happened after those appearances that led up to this disaster. Since the Spiritual Warrior seminar in September 2007, I voiced my concerns about the safety of the participants in James’ extreme sweat lodge experience. I sent out an email on October 10, 2007, rating that activity 0 out of 10 because of its danger. This email appears later in the book. Our vocal opposition to his practice of pushing people too hard, and our attempts to find less dangerous options for all of us, is partially why we locked horns with James in the lobby of a Peruvian hotel, where a heated argument took place just weeks before the Sedona tragedy.

At the same time, we are very appreciative for all we have learned from James. Therein lies the dilemma we and his other students face: separating James the man from the often-deep quality and wisdom of his teachings. We need to be able to separate the message from the messenger.

It is my primary intention to show those who attended his seminars were not mindless cult followers. We are like-minded people, many very successful in our careers and businesses, who knew the way we treat each other and our environment can and must improve. We are people who constantly endeavor to hold ourselves to a higher level of integrity in our daily actions. Because of our association with James, we learned and made tremendous strides in our lives.

When you finish reading this account of my experience, I hope you are better able to understand how intelligent and caring people could follow James Ray into a grossly overheated tent and stay there while he slowly cooked them to death. Why is it important for you to know this? So something similar doesn’t happen to you or someone you love. Our instructor was a human being with his own agenda and issues. At what point did his prime directive switch from helping his students improve themselves—and the world around them—to focusing squarely on himself, his ego, and his personal financial wealth?

Our extended family of James Ray seminar participants and WWS members are struggling to find closure, which will not come for most until long after the forthcoming trials are completed, and the legal system metes out its determination. We are working together to find and validate

the value of the lessons we learned and the changes we made in our lives, while identifying and finding a way to accept our teacher's shortcomings. What do they say about converting and manifesting skills and talents? Those who can, do; those who can't, teach.

As with any issue, especially one as emotionally charged as this, two main camps have formed. First, there is the group who want to see James thrown in jail for a very long time. The other side of the spectrum consists of chronically co-dependent people. It doesn't matter what James does; they will continue to hold him on a pedestal. As Buddha taught, the true way is the middle path. To find peace in your soul the answer will lie somewhere in the middle of these two extremes. That's where many of us fall now.

Most of all, I do not want James' actions to cast a permanent shadow on the desire of many people to learn and grow. There are many great teachers out there, but at some point, we have to become our own gurus, take what we have learned, and apply it to how we live. The unfortunate reality is that with spiritual teaching, like any other product being sold, we have to be careful consumers—even if our teachers are of a religious or spiritual nature. I am not a big fan of regulation, but unless some steps are taken to provide full disclosure of event contents and the presenter's qualifications, this type of tragedy can happen again.

*Connie Joy
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