

# Foreword

By Carole Lieberman, M.D.

If the Law of Attraction is true, then James Arthur Ray must have been thinking some mighty powerful self-sabotaging thoughts to have ‘attracted’ the debacle he’s in now.

In his book, *Harmonic Wealth: The Secret of Attracting the Life You Want*, published a year before the sweat lodge incident in Sedona, James unwittingly revealed the clues that explain why and how he unconsciously attracted this tragedy. As with all unconscious manifestations, the seeds began in his childhood.

“I was the kid with the big Coke bottle glasses and buckteeth who everyone made fun of . . . . To make matters worse, I failed at every sport. I just curled up inside myself to avoid the pain. Since I knew I’d never get the girls being a nerd . . . I became a workoutaholic . . . . Becoming a competitive bodybuilder seemed like the answer to all of my problems. But getting attention from girls for the first time in my life didn’t squelch my feelings of being a loser, an imposter. If anything, it made me more nervous . . . . My body had become big and strong, and yet in my mind, I was still that weakling who sat alone in the cafeteria, terrified of his own shadow. So I got a new motorcycle, believing that having monster horsepower at my command and all the physical freedom that comes with that would finally do the trick and morph me into a bona fide stud. The last thing I remember about my first ride was a set of headlights coming straight on. Then I woke up in the emergency room. That sense of power was gone, replaced by searing pain . . . . I felt cursed, doomed to remain small and insignificant.” And what better antidote to such a curse than becoming a world famous guru? Since the motorcycle didn’t do it for James, he undoubtedly hoped that having lots of devotees and lavish toys would.

“The hardest part of my childhood was reconciling how Dad poured his heart into his work, how he helped so many people, and yet couldn’t even afford to pay for haircuts for me and my brother. Mom would sit on the front porch to give us buzz cuts while the neighbor kids would stand nearby and laugh . . . . How could a loving God keep me from the Cub Scouts on account of not being able to afford a uniform?”

From the time he was a little boy, sitting in the front pew of his father’s Midwest church, listening to sermons about how hard it would be for a rich man to be close to God, James began searching for ways to rationalize how he could possess money, status symbols, fame, eternal youth, sex appeal, and meaningless relationships, while still being spiritual. It did not seem to dawn on him that the concept of being a ‘billionaire spiritual guru’ was an oxymoron.

Becoming a guru was simply a cover-up for James to feel less insecure and inadequate, a false self that he hung on his shoulders like a shroud. It was a psychological defense that precariously hid his ‘inner nerd’. And as his flock and his bank account grew, he fell into the trap of believing his own PR.

James’ debut in the film, *The Secret*, thrust him into the spotlight—with the appearances on Oprah and Larry King Live that he’d been trying to attract for years. He thought his newfound paradise would never end. But, as the buzz wore off, and his popularity and income began to wane, his arrogance, desperation and obsession with death soared. The psychological defenses he

had constructed—his hopes of being the first ‘billionaire spiritual guru’, so that he would have the last laugh on his childhood tormenters—were failing fast. No longer protected from the demons that haunted him, his repressed painful memories washed over him, and drove him to the edge of the cliff he had boasted of in the past. It is no wonder that he attracted the self-sabotaging ‘death’ that occurred at the Spiritual Warrior retreat in Sedona.

Call it a messiah complex, imposter syndrome, wounded narcissism, sociopathy, too many experimental drugs, sadism or a death wish for himself—no one should be recklessly damaged or die in the pursuit of spiritual awakening.

In regard to an earlier time when his life had imploded, James wrote, “My first big lesson was that everything appearing in my world was of my own creation . . . I had no choice but to go deep and look at my life and ask, ‘How have I created all this pain for myself? How have I gotten so hideously off track?’ . . . I wasn’t living as a spiritual person. I had only thought I was . . . Maybe the lesson is that when you begin to think you’re ‘the bomb,’ the universe loves you enough to drop the bomb. Thump.”

If his earlier bomb dropped with a “thump,” the 2009 Sedona sweat lodge tragedy dropped a bomb that went nuclear, decimating his credibility and the James Ray Empire. Unfortunately, the bomb also landed on some of his most devoted followers and, literally, decimated them in the process.

James needs to go back and read his own writings. Some of his spiritual lessons are quite insightful. But, somewhere between shopping for a Porsche and a house in Beverly Hills, taking countless supplements and steroids to try to look like a perpetually young stud, and clinging desperately to the fame and fortune that his appearance in “The Secret” brought him . . . he lost his way.

Ironically, James wrote, “One day, I saw a mother duck and her ducklings crossing the highway. The path was dangerous, but the mother waddled with great purpose. Her babies followed without hesitation, marching in perfect step . . . It provided me with a valuable insight. Being a teacher and an author is a big responsibility. It’s a precarious dance I do: provoking, encouraging, stimulating my students without disempowering them . . . I’m always wary of those spiritual leaders who encourage their students to follow them in blind faith like ducklings, without questioning the path ahead or checking in with their own inner guidance system—spiritual leaders who are unaware that they may be leading their students right into oncoming traffic. I don’t want you to follow. I want you to explore.”

Really? The sweat lodge participants tell quite a different story. Indeed, James’ use of neuro-linguistic programming, hypnosis, crying on cue and other persuasive sales techniques was more insidious than a mother duck’s intentions. His ‘playing God’ and commanding his followers to die, in a game purportedly designed to teach some esoteric lesson, desensitized them to the real danger of his acting like God in the sweat lodge, where he commanded them to be “bigger” than what their inner voice was telling them, and to stay inside. So when he reassured them, “You may feel like you’re gonna die, but you’re not,” they believed him. Before they marched into the sweat lodge, James had painstakingly promoted a growing trust in him by showing his followers that they could accomplish bigger feats than they had ever imagined: breaking blocks of wood and concrete with their bare hands, bending rebar and arrows held to their throat, joining him in his death-defying dance . . . until it was too late.

Tragedy in Sedona is a behind the scenes look at the rise and fall of the James Ray Empire, through the eyes of an ultimately disenchanting follower. Connie Joy takes you on her personal and authentic journey – from being a devoted member of James' inner circle and Dream Team to

realizing that the Emperor has no clothes and trying to warn others. Connie's instincts for self-preservation stopped her in her tracks before it was too late. Others, who followed James into his ill-conceived sweat lodge, were not as fortunate. Three were cooked alive, and the rest were traumatized physically and emotionally, leaving visible and invisible scars that will remain with them forever.

James' megalomaniacal behavior has left a trail strewn with victims—not only those in the Sedona sweat lodge, but those whom he previously disappointed, deluded, and drove into bankruptcy or misery. Yet it would be far more unfortunate if the self-serving actions of this one troubled man, haunted by his childhood demons and driven to increasingly desperate attempts to rid himself of his 'inner nerd,' were to discourage others from pursuing their quest to find answers to life's mysteries and fulfill their most cherished dreams. One shouldn't throw the baby out with the fancy bottled bath water . . . or the aromatherapy candles. One should follow one's own path, study the wisdom that's been handed down through the ages, and even some carefully chosen New Age or modern gurus. But when one's inner voice is shouting a warning to get out of the heat . . . or away from the guru's persuasive psychopathological manipulation . . . it's time to run!

In *Harmonic Wealth*, James wrote, "The Darth Vader move, as I call it – the transition from a man of light to a monster of darkness – can happen at any level. Regardless of how high you grow and evolve, you can still fall . . . . You need to guard against this as if your very life depends on it . . . . The allure of increasing wealth and fame is always a seductive reality, slithering around your ankles, ready to strike in the blink of an eye. It's even seductive for me, and I know what to watch out for, my anti-venom always at the ready because it gets really comfortable receiving adulations and gifts, the accoutrements of success." His own words lead us to the inescapable and ultimate question: where was his "anti-venom" when he needed it most- in Sedona?

Carole Lieberman, M.D., M.P.H. is a Beverly Hills forensic psychiatrist, who examined two of James Ray's followers who were in the sweat lodge that fateful day of tragedy in Sedona. Her background encompasses additional experiences that give her deep insights into self-styled gurus like James Arthur Ray. These include having: spent weeks in the Peruvian Amazon convening with shamans and experiencing their ayahuasca ceremonies, hiked to the vortexes of Sedona with guides of the spiritual and llama variety, been in the 'inner' orbit of other gurus, written *Bad Boys: Why We Love Them, How To Live with Them and When to Leave Them*, and—like James—been on Oprah and Larry King Live.