

James Arthur Ray

By Dr. Brady Blevins

Date of Birth: November 22, 1957

Books: *The Science of Success; Practical Spirituality: How to Use Spiritual Power to Create Tangible Results; Harmonic Wealth: The Secret of Attracting the Life You Want; The Seven Laws of True Wealth: Create the Life You Desire and Deserve.*

Television Appearances: *Extra, The Today Show, CNN's Larry King Live, The Oprah Winfrey Show, and Piers Morgan Live.*

Movie: *The Secret* (2006)

Audio Works: *Power Transformations: Meditation Techniques for Increased Velocity and Higher Consciousness; Collapse the World; Quantum Creations; and Success Certain Coaching.*

Beliefs: New Age Spirituality, Law of Attraction, New Thought

INTRODUCTION

James Arthur Ray may be best known for one of the darkest moments in his life; the death of three people under his care in a sweat lodge at a New Age “Spiritual Warrior” retreat in October of 2009. Primarily a motivational speaker and author; Ray has connected to millions of people through various media outlets, seminars, as well as being a *New York Times* bestseller.¹ Ray became famous in the self-help industry when he was part of the movie and later book by the same title *The Secret*. After *The Secret* came out, Ray was a guest on Oprah Winfrey’s show and from this appearance he was catapulted into fame and became a sought after speaker and presenter.

HISTORY

James Arthur Ray was born in Honolulu, Hawaii on November 22, 1957. He is the son of a pastor. His father pastored Red Fork Church of God in Tulsa, Oklahoma for about a decade. Ray claims that his childhood was riddled with poverty and hardship, stating that his father worked very hard yet could not afford clothes or haircuts.² He even went as far to say that he questioned God as to why his father would work so hard yet they could not afford the uniform to be a Cub Scout.³ However, a former classmate of Ray’s refuted these claims by saying that; “Ray always dressed well and knew he’d make something of himself.”⁴

Ray has made something of himself in terms of financial gain. Multiple sources have estimated his worth in the millions. This success has been despite a lack of a college education. Ray’s website states that he has “collegiate learning” however; he dropped out of Tulsa Junior College in 1978.⁵ For a while he claimed to have worked for the firm FranklinCovey until *Fortune*, reported in a 2008 profile that the company had no record of him as an employee or contractor.⁶

In the ‘90’s Ray began his career as a self-published author and motivational speaker. His big break came in 2006 when he was a featured speaker in the film *The Secret*.⁷ The main teaching point was the Law of Attraction, which maintains that “thoughts become things” and that people can create reality by transmitting their thoughts into the universe. This teaching was a major part of his seminars and “Spiritual Warrior” retreats. Ray’s retreats carried a price tag up to \$10,000 for five days. Ray is said to have made his millions by pressuring seminar attendees and using varying tactics to “strongly encourage” participants to purchase his books and other materials.⁸

Prior to the infamous sweat lodge tragedy, Ray had been involved with other questionable situations including the death of one of his customers. In May of 2005 at an event held at Disney World, a New Jersey woman shattered her hand after Ray had coaxed her into performing a ritualistic board-breaking exercise.⁹ The woman claimed that Ray bullied her to continue to attempt to break the board despite unsuccessful repeated attempts. She later sued Ray and he settled out of court for an undisclosed sum in 2007. Ray also had another significant issue arise in 2009, just ten

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weeks prior to the sweat lodge tragedy. Ray had a number of customers come to San Diego where they were stripped of their identification, money and other personal belongings and were given worn and tattered clothing. The objective was for them to live as homeless people for a specified period of time. A couple of days into the exercise, a 46-year-old woman from Minnesota committed suicide at a San Diego mall.¹⁰ No charges were ever filed regarding her death. In addition to these events, the *Sedona Red Rock News* reported additional similar incidents with Ray and his customers.¹¹

The most infamous event for Ray occurred on October 8, 2009 at the Angel Valley Retreat Center near Sedona, Arizona where two people died as a result of taking part in a sweat lodge exercise as part of Ray's "Spiritual Warrior" retreat. Nine days later a third attendee also died after being comatose for a week. Ray was arrested four months later on February 3, 2010. His bond was originally set at \$5 million but Ray's attorney stated that he could not afford the bond; it was reduced to \$250,000 and he was released on bail on February 26, 2010. The trial began on May 1, 2011 and concluded on November 18, 2011 when Ray was sentenced to two years in prison after being found guilty on three counts of negligent homicide. He was, however, acquitted of the manslaughter charges. On July 12, 2013, after approximately 600 days in prison, he was granted a supervised release.

In addition to the prison time, Ray was also ordered to pay \$57,514.12 in restitution and \$36,820 in fines and surcharges. He also raised the ire of the Native American community, specifically the Lakota Tribe, who also filed suit against Ray, Angel Valley Retreat Center, the State of Arizona and the United States. The lawsuit cited a breach of the Sioux Treaty of 1868, claiming Ray's sweat lodge practice was inappropriate because he is not Native American and did not possess the proper training.¹² This lawsuit was dismissed in October 2010 after the judge decided that the sweat lodge was a service and not a good.¹³

The courts have not barred Ray from conducting self-help seminars or sweat lodge ceremonies; but he has not hosted any publicized events since his release. Sources close to Ray say that he has not ruled out restarting his self-help business but has not made any plans to begin hosting seminars.¹⁴ On November 25, 2013, Ray appeared on *Piers Morgan Live* and stated that he would not do another sweat lodge ceremony and that he had lost the millions he made as a self-help guru.¹⁵ At the time of this publication Ray has not restarted his self-help career nor has he made any further appearances on network television.

Ray claimed that through his teachings his students would be able to reach their potential and possess their desires. In *The Science of Success*, Ray states; "You are absolutely in control of your own destiny. It's a matter of choice, not chance."¹⁶ When faced with questions surrounding the death of three people at the "Spiritual Warrior" retreat, Ray seemed to contradict himself saying; "Sometimes we fall into the romantic mindset that if I read the right book or I study with the right teacher or I learn the Law of Attraction or whatever it is, the laws of the universe, that I'm not going to have any more challenges or obstacles in my life."¹⁷

TEACHINGS

James Arthur Ray holds a variety of beliefs that carry a common thread of Gnostic ideals, that there is mystical or hidden knowledge he can impart. His teachings contain New Age spirituality while borrowing from other beliefs systems such as the Native American's sweat lodge ceremonies. Ray's specific teaching is the Law of Attraction and New Thought. The Law of Attraction maintains that if one centers his or her thoughts on something and genuinely believes it will happen they will get what they desire. Therefore, a person is a creator just like God is creator in that they can think something into existence, creating their own reality. New Thought accepts the Bible as a spiritual book but does not follow traditional understanding of the text. Ray attempts to appeal to Christians by twisting Scripture so that it appears that the Bible agrees with his teachings.¹⁸

The Law of Attraction: In *The Secret* the author, Rhonda Byrne, suggests that the old idea of a genie in a bottle who is capable of granting one's wishes is not too far from reality.¹⁹ In the movie *The Secret*, Ray explained that the universe does not grant just three wishes but an "unlimited" number of wishes. The premise of the Law of Attraction is that everything is energy and all thoughts transmit this vibrational energy, which is then received or "heard" by the universe. The universe then reflects that same energy (whether positive or negative) back to the one having the thoughts. Therefore, if one concentrates his or her thoughts in a specific direction (such as health, prosperity, love, etc.), the universe will hear his or her thoughts and those desires will become reality.

Ray gives an example of how people can concentrate their thoughts and how the Law of Attraction responds: "You cannot harm another with your thoughts, you only You. If you think

thoughts of love, guess who receives the benefits-you! So if your predominant state is love, the Law of Attraction or the Law of Love responds with the mightiest force because you are on the highest frequency possible. The greater love you feel and emit, the greater the power you are harnessing.”²⁰ This idea of thoughts emitting power is paralleled in similar theories of *Chi* and New Age thought.²¹ Achieving high levels of frequency is tied to the New Age teaching that ultimate reality is energy and an ability to raise ones frequency allows him or her to make connection to the universe. Higher frequencies are obtained by concentrated thought. Thus when one’s levels are at a high frequency, the universe hears those thoughts and those thoughts and desires are then manifested physically.

Ray argues that this is not merely a hope or ideology but is both logical and scientific. *The Secret* states that the Law of Attraction is the Law of Creation and that Quantum Physics provides the evidence that the entire universe emerged from thought.²² Ray along with the other participants of the film and book, *The Secret*, imply that quantum physicists validate this fact. Dr. John Hagelin (Quantum Physicist), Dr. Joe Vitale (Metaphysical Science), and Dr. Fred Alan Wolf (Physicist), are listed in *The Secret* as experts to back up the claim that quantum physics is the scientific explanation of the Law of Attraction.

New Thought:²³ Closely akin to the Law of Attraction, New Thought maintains that the mind and one’s thoughts hold special powers. New Thought’s fundamental teaching is that the mind has the ability to heal the body. Phineas Quimby, whose theories helped create the framework of New Thought, believed that through hypnosis,²⁴ people could heal themselves. He arrived at this thought after observing the placebo affect.²⁵ Horatio W. Dresser, son of two important early leaders of New Thought, summarized one of Quimby’s ideas concerning illness: “Disease is due to false reasoning in regard to sensations, which man unwittingly develops by impressing wrong thoughts and mental pictures upon the subconscious spiritual matter.”²⁶ New Thought places the ability of the mind to be more powerful than matter and teaches that thoughts connect one spiritually with the universe.

New Thought attempts to link itself with Christianity and the Bible by maintaining that there exists only one God. New Thought, however, differs radically from Christianity and monotheism by maintaining that God is impersonal and pantheistic. New Thought can be described in this manner because it teaches that one is capable of reaching a divine nature and that God is an impersonal force. The God of New Thought should not be understood as the God of the Bible. Instead, this view of God is that of an impersonal force that is capable of manifesting itself in all. Jesus is not viewed as God made flesh but merely an example of a person who fully realized His divine nature and the divinity in all things. Thus, Jesus becomes little more than an example to follow. There is also no sin – only *karma*, or cause and effect. Evil is explained as mistakes people make because of their ignorance of their own divine nature. Since there is no sin there is no judgment or reward meaning there is no literal heaven or hell. New Thought teaches reincarnation²⁷ and that continual rebirth is a gift from God. The idea is that after enough rebirths one can reach perfection with God. Others in New Thought believe that the souls of the departed merge with the universe for all eternity.²⁸

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

Believers in the Law of Attraction often attempt to validate their theory by appealing to scientific evidence. The problem is that this idea of thinking things into existence or that “thoughts become things” has nothing to do with reality; but it has everything to do with one’s worldview. Ray proposes through his “Spiritual Warrior” retreats and other seminars, books and audio teachings a pantheistic worldview. Pantheism is the worldview that holds that God is an impersonal force and that everything is God. His teaching, however, is sometimes subtle and may not always be communicated clearly or consistently to those in his audience who are atheistic or monotheistic.

The Law of Attraction and New Thought are in direct opposition to what God’s word clearly teaches. Furthermore, any claims made by the scientist and non-scientists from *The Secret*, that the Law of Attraction has been proven scientifically through Quantum Physics or any other discipline has been thoroughly debunked. For example, an independent panel of respected scientists and researchers has discredited most of the major scientific and medical claims in *The Secret*.²⁹

Ray attempts to represent his teachings as congruent with the Bible. In *The Science of Success*, he takes Matthew 21:22 out of context to make it read as if the verse was teaching the Law of Attraction. A closer examination of this verse in context shows that Jesus’ followers were to ask Him in prayer according to the will and glory of the Father not some impersonal universe. Thoughts do not become things. Furthermore, humans in their natural state are turned against God’s will and will always have evil thoughts that do not conform to the will or glory of a personal God (Gen. 6:5).

Both the Law of Attraction and New Thought wish to portray God as an impersonal force or an entity to which all may eventually attain. The Bible, however, disagrees. Isaiah 43:10 says; “Before me there was no God formed, Neither shall there be after me.” Isaiah 44:6 continues; “I *am* the first, and I *am* the last; And beside me *there is no God.*” The Bible does not describe God as an impersonal spirit or force; instead He has attributes; He thinks, speaks, loves and has a will. God is revealed in the Bible as three eternal, distinct, coequal Persons that are the one true God. This is referred to as the Trinity: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. God is said to be the creator who spoke creation into existence, ex-nihilo (out of nothing) Gen. 1:1; Heb. 11:3. Humans are not God and they are not capable of creating anything out of nothing, as *The Secret* and Law of Attraction would suggest.³⁰

The Law of Attraction and New Thought also teach that there is no such thing as sin or judgment. The Bible teaches that to disobey God is to sin (James 4:17). Romans 3:23 teaches that “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” The Bible also teaches that there is a penalty or wages for man’s sin and that “is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23). According to the Bible, this gift was made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and is received by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9; Rom. 5:8, 10:9-13). God is infinite and unique. Humans are finite, fallen creatures. They may become forgiven and redeemed but they can never become God or equal with God (Matt. 5:48). In fact, man’s righteousness is described as “filthy rags” in Isaiah (64:6).

Notes

- ¹ “About James Ray,” accessed January 21, 2014, www.jamesray.com/index.php/about-james-arthur-ray
- ² James Ray, *Harmonic Wealth: The Secret of Attracting the Life You Want* (New York, Hyperion, 2008)
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Bob Ortega, “Sweat-lodge trial: James Arthur Ray often misused teachings, critics say,” *The Arizona Republic*, April 10, 2011, accessed January 21, 2014, www.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/news/articles/2011/04/10/20110410james-arthur-ray-sweat-lodge-profile.html
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ A separate 4-page Profile has been published on this subject: James K. Walker, “The Secret,” *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2014). A complete collection of Profiles (over 400 pages) is available at www.watchman.org/notebook. This Profile is available at: www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/secretprofile.pdf.
- ⁸ “James Ray’s escalating patterns of abuse leading to Sweat Lodge deaths: interview with Lorena Bathey,” November 24, 2009, accessed January 22, 2014, www.examiner.com/article/james-ray-s-escalating-patterns-of-abuse-leading-to-sweat-lodge-deaths-interview-with-lorena-bathey
- ⁹ Jeance MacIntosh, “Mystic’s Past is Guru-some,” *New York Post*, October 19, 2009, accessed January 27, 2014, <http://nypost.com/2009/10/19/mystics-past-is-guru-some/>
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Christopher Fox Graham, “Judge Releases Sweat Lodge Documents,” *Sedona Red Rock News*, January 8, 2010 accessed January 27, 2014, <http://srr.stparchive.com/Archive/SRR/SRR01082010p01.php>
- ¹² Lindsay Hocker, “Sweat Lodge Incident ‘Not our Indian way,’” October 14, 2009, last updated October 15, 2009, accessed January 21, 2014, <http://qconline.com/archives/qco/display.php?id=462433>
- ¹³ Brian Sheets “Papers or Plastic: The Difficulty in Protecting Native Spiritual Identity,” *Lewis and Clark Law*, accessed January 21, 2014, <http://www.law.lclark.edu/live/files/14090-lcb172art8sheetspdf>
- ¹⁴ “Self-Help Shamster Behind Sweat-Lodge Homicides Released From Prison,” July 13, 2013, accessed January 23, 2014, <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2013/07/13/james-arthur-ray-released-prison-no-not-guy-who-killed-mlk-150407>
- ¹⁵ Lateef Mungin, “James Arthur Ray: I wish I could trade places with 3 that died at my sweat lodge,” November 26, 2013, accessed January 28, 2014, www.cnn.com/2013/11/26/us/james-ray-piers-morgan-interview/
- ¹⁶ *The Science of Success: How to Attract Prosperity and Create Life Balance Through Proven Principles* (California, Sunark Press, 2003), 121
- ¹⁷ Christine McMorris, “Death in the Sweat Lodge,” *Religion in the News*, vol. 13 no 1 (Sum 2010): 25 ALTA Religion Database, Dallas Baptist University, Dallas, Texas; accessed January 21, 2014, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0001848006&site=ehost-live>
- ¹⁸ *The Science of Success*, 114
- ¹⁹ Rhonda Byrne, *The Secret*, (New York: Atria Books/Beyond Words, 2006), 45-46
- ²⁰ Ibid, 39
- ²¹ Chi is “the invisible energy or force that is alleged to make up the universe and flow through all living things via meridians or chakras.” From James K. Walker, *The Concise Guide to Today’s Religions and Spirituality*, (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2007), 91.
- ²² *The Secret*, 15
- ²³ “In 1838, Phineas Parkhurst Quimby began to study Mesmerism. This study, combined with viewing the beneficial effects of placebos on some patients, convinced Quimby that the mind has the ability to heal the body.” Warren Felt Evan, Julius and Annetta Seabury Dresser founded the New Thought movement. First Church of Christian Science, the Mind Science and Religious Science all developed from New Thought. *The Concise Guide to Today’s Religions and Spirituality*, 237
- ²⁴ A separate 4-page Profile has been published on this subject: James K. Walker, “Hypnosis,” *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2014). A complete collection of Profiles (over 400 pages) is available at www.watchman.org/notebook. This Profile is available at www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/hypnosisprofile.pdf
- ²⁵ “New Thought,” accessed January 28, 2014, www.religionfacts.com/a-z-religion-index/new_thought.htm
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ A separate 4-page Profile has been published on this subject: Eric Pement, “Reincarnation,” *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2014). A complete collection of Profiles (over 400 pages) is available at www.watchman.org/notebook. This Profile is available at www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/reincarnationprofile.pdf
- ²⁸ “What New Thought Practitioners Believe,” accessed January 28, 2014, www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/2001/06/What-New-Thought-Practitioners-Believe.aspx
- ²⁹ *The Truth Behind The Secret*, 53-85
- ³⁰ *The Secret*, 160



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