

Shopping for Enlightenment

by Rev. Dr. Arvid Straube

November 1, 2009

Just this last October 8th there was a Spiritual Warrior Retreat in Sedona, Arizona that was conceived and hosted by motivational speaker and new-age guru, James Arthur Ray. During a sweat-lodge ceremony, at the end of that 5-day retreat James Shore and Kirby Brown died. Eighteen others were hospitalized after suffering burns, dehydration, breathing problems, kidney failure, or elevated body temperature. Liz Newman, another attendee, died on October 17th after being comatose for a week. Soon after that sweat-lodge ceremony started, people were clambering to get out of that large sweat-lodge, but Ray bullied them into staying. Saying that they would never get what they wanted in life if didn't suck it up and stay in that lodge. American-Indian experts on sweat-lodge ceremonies, where this comes from, say that if he had been trained in how to conduct sweat-lodge ceremonies, none of this would have happened.

Well it turns out that this "Spiritual Warrior Retreat" was just kind of thrown together with a bunch of stuff that Ray had read about, and each of the participants paid \$9,695.00 for this experience. They had just been on a Vision Quest where they had been fasting for days, and then they went and had a huge buffet breakfast before they went into the sweat-lodge. \$9695.00 for a five-day retreat, organized by somebody who doesn't know what they are doing. I can count on my fingers those who pledge more than \$9,695.00 to this church every year. And we have a year-round program of spiritual growth. And I don't think you are going to end up in the hospital if you participate. This is now being investigated and some criminal charges are likely to follow but the question is why? Why would people do this? Why would people spend this much money? It is because of our deep yearnings as human beings. We know that our lives are meant for a grand purpose. Many of us are not nearly living the potential life that we could. We know that we could be happier. We know that we could be wiser. So Ray has promised people that not only can they be materially wealthy, they can be spiritually wealthy, they can have everything they want. Ray is part of a movement, a philosophy called, "The Laws of Attraction." You might have heard about it on Oprah. There is a best-selling book and a movie called "The Secret." He is prominently featured in that movie and that book. So here, basically, are the laws of attraction: You can think yourself rich, you can think yourself happy, you can think yourself thin. If you think negative thoughts then you can bring on negative things. You can think yourself poor or sick, you can think yourself alone. This view is basically that you bring to yourself, whatever happens to you. You are totally responsible. Well then what about the Holocaust, you might ask? Are the victims of the Holocaust totally responsible for their fate? Well Ray stated in a 2007 interview, "I know people of the Jewish faith and heritage who don't necessarily believe the Holocaust was bad. Now that might be shocking to you." He said. "But I have people on record how have said there is a lot of good things that came out of that. A lot of lessons, a lot of opportunities for the world."

Folks, this is dangerous manure. And we can see when Mahatma Gandhi outlined the seven social sins, one of them was “Worship Without Sacrifice,” worship without sacrifice, and I think this was exactly what he was talking about. What hungers these participants had. They are the same ones that we have. We want to matter in this life. We want to be happy. We want to fill our barely recognized destiny as human beings. But the problem was, I think, many of those folks were so thoroughly steeped in our consumer culture that they could not imagine, how anything they wanted couldn’t be had for a price. And so they bought five days. They tried to buy enlightenment. They tried to buy spiritual maturity. Ray is only one of many new-age gurus and churches of the so-called prosperity consciousness of many different traditions who say that you can think your way to both spiritual and material wealth.

That is not what we do here. We are not selling enlightenment. Sorry. Because we can’t buy enlightenment. If enlightenment is spiritual maturity, if enlightenment is meeting our destiny as human beings as maturing to inhabit our wholeness, then enlightenment is free. You can’t buy it. It is free. But the cost is spiritual practice. The cost is choices that we make, and the process of spiritual maturity comes on gradually. They come from friendship. They come from being part of a community where you are known and cared about. They come from living for causes greater than you. They come from cultivating kindness, cultivating wisdom, cultivating compassion, day after ordinary day.

You can’t buy enlightenment. But that’s not to say that you can ignore how you interact with your money. Basically if you want to know what you really care about, I recommend that you look in your credit card statement and your check book and look in your calendar or date book. Those things to which you have invested your time and money are those things you care about. And here we can see how our consumer culture takes us away from what we care about. Our consumer culture challenges us in many ways, but it also actively destroys our efforts towards spiritual maturity. We can’t buy the things that are most important to us. So time and money. There are two ancient practices that can keep us honest. That can keep us grounded in our true spiritual reality. The first of those ancient practices is keeping the Sabbath. It is twenty-four hours out of seven days, twenty-four hours out of every week where you are not doing anything that is on your to-do list. It is a day of the week where you are not getting and spending. It is a day where you are simply enjoying your existence. Enjoying your family, enjoying your friends, worship, love, play. Keeping the Sabbath is one way to keep us grounded in what’s really important.

The other is tithing, is to give away. Give away to organizations and individuals who need it. A dime of every dollar you have. Sonya and I have tithed for more than 20 years. It has been a generous practice. It has been a joyful experience. It has taught us that it is fun to give money away. We give 5 percent to the Church and 5 percent to causes that create the beloved

community of All Souls that we want outside the church. And since we have had a capital campaign, our giving is well over ten percent. Now that seems to people who are just starting with this Generosity business a pretty big deal, but let me tell you, everybody I have talked to who is generous at this level, none regret it. It is not natural at first. One of the first words that a baby learns is mine. Mine, mine, it's cute in a baby. Kind of ugly in a grown up, don't you think? And so good parents, very early, teach their kids to share. It's not natural for them at first, but as they mature as they grow up, they realize by sharing everybody has more. You don't have just your one little toy here; you get to play with all the other kids' toys, too. And you get to interact with them and play games you never even thought of. It's just so much better of everybody shares. And that's what we learn as we grow in spiritual maturity. The teaching of generosity is a pillar of every religious tradition in the world. Last year the membership of this congregation voted to build a new Bard Hall. You were very generous in your gifts and pledges to the capital campaign. And you also exhibited a great deal of confidence in voting to take on a mortgage that would pay for that project. This community has been fortunate, because some of you who may be visiting don't know, but this ACE parking lot that is at the corner here, is our property and when we are not using it, it is a commercial parking lot, and we fund more than a third of our annual budget with the revenue from that parking lot. Like I said we are lucky to have it. Somebody had a lot of foresight in our past. Lucky mostly, but one thing that has happened is that everybody knows we have this income from that parking lot and so our giving to our church, relative to other Unitarian Universalist Congregations is quite low, because we have always had the money. The parking lot has subsidized our Ministry. When we voted to take on that mortgage, we took on a big challenge, because when that mortgage begins to be serviced, a lot of that parking lot income will need to go to pay that mortgage.

Consumer culture says that the more we spend on others, the less we will have for ourselves. It's a zero-sum game. We need to get what we can for ourselves and we need to keep what we can for ourselves. Mine! Mine.

Most spiritual traditions teach us the opposite. They say, what you want to get, you should give away. You can test this out in your own lives. Think about it. If you give impatience to others, what comes back to you is impatience, or worse. If you treat other to your anger, you will get anger back. It might damage your relationship. It might damage your relationship to the point where it is irretrievable. If you give kindness to others, haven't you noticed, you get kindness back. If you are generous with others, aren't others generous with you? Think of someone you know who is generous. How does it make you feel to think about them? Light, happy, lovely. If you care for others, you will find that they will care for you when you need it. I'm proud to say that last fiscal year, the last fiscal year that ended on June 30, 2009, this church gave away just over one hundred and forty thousand dollars to causes outside of our congregation. I'm happy to say that we did that. I'm proud of that. It came from various sources, and was from various efforts. Some of it was used to our larger movement. But much of it came from our generosity

offerings. One Sunday a month we give away our loose offering, that isn't marked for pledges, or donations to the Church, to an outside organization that is also working with us to bring about the beloved community. We don't keep all of it. We give some of it away once a month; we have a cause of the month. So now we have this big challenge. We are going to have a mortgage we are going to have to pay, which we weren't before. There's really only one thing to do. We have to give away more money. This has been urged upon us by some of our more generous members for years. That we should give away all of our loose offerings to the cause of the month. We should give away all the money that isn't ear-marked as donations or as pledges to this church. Every Sunday. So Kathleen and I, and the Generosity Ministry Team decided that because we have this challenge that we need to give more money away, we will be giving all of our offering away starting in January 2010. We don't think this is going to hurt giving to the Church. In fact we think it will increase giving to the Church. That has been true with other Unitarian Universalist congregations, and congregations of other traditions that have tried this. If it doesn't work we can revisit our decision. But I'm confident that it will. As far as the Church goes, here's what we would like to challenge you to do. If you are a Member or Friend of this congregation, we would like to challenge you to give five to ten percent of your income to the Church, in addition to your other benevolence. We understand that most people can't do that right away so; we are asking you to seriously consider a plan to get to five percent in five years. If we do that, then it's a synch that we will be able to keep our current programs going at a high level, and pay the mortgage, and even, and this is a vision of mine, that all of our parking lot income will be used to benefit the larger world and will be used to innovate new programs and ideas; that is will not be part of our operating budget. We can do that. The business of First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Diego is to create whole human beings through religious community, and our product is to heal lives, that help heal the world.

You know we are a refuge. We talk about that all the time. That is so important to us; that we are a refuge in this world. We are a refuge from meaninglessness, we are a refuge from loneliness, we are a refuge from oppressive religion, and for some we are a refuge from a lack of spiritual grounding. We are a refuge for those people we welcome into our community who have been rejected for who they are, by the spiritual communities they came from. But you know we are not just a refuge, we are also a beacon. We send out the light of our free faith, far out into the community and to the world. We speak out for equality. We speak out for peace and justice. We join with others, who are working to create the beloved community of All Souls; and we have been doing that for more than one-hundred and thirty years. And the times call for us to do that even more now. You don't need to buy spiritual maturity. You don't need to buy enlightenment. So look within yourself, but most of all look beyond yourself. Your wealth is in your friendships and in your relationships. Your wealth is in knowing that your life is making a difference for others and for our children's futures. So be it.