



The Spiritual Experience That Wasn't

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*Frequent Traveler writer **Margie Goldsmith** just returned from Arizona, and gave us this perspective on the recent sweat lodge tragedy.*



In some Native American cultures, the sweat lodge is a place where sacred ceremonies take place. Often these rituals--which last about fifteen minutes--include drumming and prayers offered to the spirit world. The lodge is built with great care, respecting both the environment and the materials used. The opening, which always faces East, is covered with a woolen blanket to keep in the heat. The dome-like structure itself is constructed of adobe mud and bark, and the floor is earth. The sweat lodge experience consist of "rounds," after which a "fire keeper" brings more heated rocks inside the lodge. If the heat is too intense, participants can either curl up into a little ball close to the earth (where it is cooler), or leave the lodge until they have cooled off.

Last month, three people died from dehydration and kidney failure after spending

two hours in a sweat lodge near Sedona, Arizona, led by an American facilitator, [James Arthur Ray](#), who most often leads New Age seminars and mentoring services on wealth creation. Ray made his participants remain inside for over two hours and called the ceremony a "rebirthing experience." The participants in his "Spiritual Warrior" four-day retreat had just finished a 36-hour "vision quest" which included an experience in the desert with no food or water. No Native American would ever consider putting a dehydrated person into a sweat lodge, and certainly not 60 people, the number of participants Ray invited to the 24-foot-wide by 4.5-foot tall makeshift structure. The roof of the sweat lodge in which Ray conducted his ceremony was covered in non-breathing plastic.

The Native American sweat lodge experience has nothing to do with money, but Ray charged each participant \$9,695 to attend his 4-day retreat. This was not surprising, because according to his website, Ray has spent the last 20 years "studying the thoughts, actions, and habits of those who create true wealth and mentoring individuals to create wealth in all areas of their lives." Last year, Ray's company made \$9.4 million from seminars, books, and videos.

Ray assured the group that he had much experience in sweat lodges and that he held this Spiritual Warrior event every year. But during the two-hour ordeal inside, many participants were vomiting and wanted to leave. Ray urged them to stay, explaining that throwing up was good for them, and that they were purging what their bodies didn't need. The heat, according to participants who were part of the ceremony, became unbearable. After around 90 minutes, someone yelled that a woman had passed out, to which Ray replied, "We will deal with that after the next round." The woman as well as another person who participated, died that evening from heat exhaustion and kidney failure. A third went into a coma and died nine days later. In all, twenty-one participants were hospitalized, not surprising considering Ray's participants had just undergone 36 hours with no food or water.

After the tragedy, members of all the local Native American tribes were shocked. "What has happened in the news with the makeshift sauna called the sweat lodge is not our ceremonial way of life," said Lakota spiritual leader Arvol Looking Horse, Keeper of the Sacred White Buffalo Calf Pipe Bundle. "I am concerned for the deaths and illnesses of the many people that participated." Arvol Looking Horse explained that the lodge in Sedona does not represent their ceremonial way of life because of the way the rituals were conducted. "The Native American ceremonies are about life and healing," he added. "Never has death been a part of our *inikag'a* (life within) when conducted properly." Said Arvol Looking Horse, "When you do ceremony, you cannot have money on your mind." The Native Americans, he said, deal with energy to create healing which comes from everyone in the circle. He added, "When you involve money, it changes the energy of healing."

"The leader defied the greater powers of nature and spirit; and for that his consequences are eternal," said Donovan Hanley, Director of the [Navajo Interactive Museum](#) in Tuba City. "My deepest sympathies go out to the families who are at a loss. I hope the leader of this 'function' has learned and will go back and find balance."

I too, would like Ray to find balance for the rest of his life--in jail. □

Margie Goldsmith is an award-winning essayist and novelist, who has written for the New York Times and National Geographic Traveler, among other publications. You can follow her on Twitter at [@margiegoldsmith](#).

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