



Jach Pursel, a onetime insurance man turned channeler (left and below), as he metamorphoses into the discarnate, upscale entity Lazaris

ARTICLE

Tired of gurus who are alive and well? Try one who's been dead for 35,000 years

CHANNELERS

BY KATHARINE LOWRY

It's dreary and drizzling in Fife, a modern hamlet near Seattle, but the spirits of the 120 souls meeting at the Best Western Inn here can't be dampened. Settling into folding chairs, some are taking deep breaths, trying to contain their excitement; others recognize faces from previous "intensives" and greet them like long-lost friends. Many of the faithful gathered here have seen J.Z. Knight channel Ramtha before, and it's hard to say whom they idolize more: J.Z.—the pretty, blond forty-one-year-old former cable

TV executive turned superstar trance channeler—or Ramtha, the thirty-five-thousand-year-old warrior spirit (also called a "god" or an "entity") who commandeers her petite body with scheduled regularity. Ramtha has become so famous, in fact, that his name is now a trademark.

A few people file in together, but the majority make this pilgrimage alone. Most are middle-aged women, but there are also solitary men, many of them with a bearded, Sixties look. The upscale types said to constitute channeling's

biggest audience are barely in evidence today, but everyone must at least be reasonably solvent, given the \$150 fee for this daylong intensive.

Finally J.Z. Knight appears, resplendent in a snow-white designer warm-up outfit, to the sound of many hands clapping. With her violet eyes cast Shy Di downward, blond hair cascading to her shoulders, she graciously accepts their applause with an Ultra Brite smile, her creamy complexion radiant. Even to a nonbeliever, she could pass for a goddess. Informally perched on the



PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRIAN R. WOLFF

● J.Z. Knight, superchanneler,
lets her body and voice be taken over by Ramtha,
a thirty-five-thousand-year-old
warrior spirit. The price of admission: \$150.●

edge of the stage, a jungle of tropical flowers her backdrop, she teases, "I know what some of you are thinking: If I'm sitting here, Ramtha must be coming today!" When the laughter and applause that greet this assurance die down, J.Z. introduces her seventy-eight-year-old mother, who occupies a front-row seat. This will be the first time her mother has seen her "change," J.Z. confides. She praises her progenitor as a "strong, allowing kind of lady—a great god in her own right," although J.Z.'s forthcoming autobiography depicts her far less favorably.

Before Ramtha makes his appearance, though, J.Z. confesses to this sympathetic audience how anguished she has been by the "slings and arrows" of the press. First she was taken to task for selling overvalued Thoroughbreds from her horse ranch to wealthy Ramtha clients who were told that they were "designed" by the god himself. Then she caught endless grief for building a \$1.5 million mansion near Yelm, Washington—even though, as she points out this morning, "it isn't nearly as nice as the Pope's house." But the worst attacks were provoked by her contention on ABC's *20/20* that there is no right and wrong, including murder. Dubbing the show *30/30*, J.Z. puts an imaginary gun to her head and triggers booming applause from her followers.

Briefly taking questions from the audience, J.Z. blushes as several "masters" (veterans of previous intensives) sing her praises. Many have heeded Ramtha's warnings about economic depression, earthquakes, floods, and other calamities; reportedly somewhere between 500 and 2,000 people have pulled up stakes, often leaving spouses and families behind, to move to the rural Northwest. There, Ramtha claims, they'll be safe if they store up a two-year supply of provisions and stick to high ground. "I just love you so much!" exudes one wide-eyed, prematurely gray woman. "And now I just love *myself* so much, it's incredible."

What on earth is going on here? Why are thousands of supposedly normal, functioning adults actually buying all this hocus-pocus about higher beings, when the only evidence offered is the testimony of the very people who "channel" them—always for a sizable fee? Is it the charismatic mediums or their narcissistic message of self-love that is behind the channeling phenomenon?

In fact, for many people the experience of being with a channeler is so powerful and addictive that several concerned researchers, including cult expert Carl Raschke, a professor of humanities at the University of Denver, consider it a form of mass hypnosis. "There's obviously a process of collective suggestion and a transfer of unconscious content that goes on during a channeling session," Raschke explains. Which might be why Ramtha devotees commonly talk of having been "hooked" the very first time they laid eyes on J.Z./Ramtha or heard his message, even on



videotape. The depth of his wisdom and the power of his love, they say, shook them to the core of their being. And while detractors may be right in maintaining that many of these cultists are people in crisis, lonely "cultural vagabonds," or altered states junkies continually seeking exotic new highs, such labels can't apply to all 32,000 on Ramtha's mailing list, nor can it explain the ardent support of celebrities like Shirley MacLaine and Linda Evans. For MacLaine it was a case of brotherly love at first sight: She just "knew," she says, that Ramtha had been her sibling in a previous existence in Atlantis. And Evans, who recently bought a house near

Knight's place, describes her Ramtha experience as "profound."

In J.Z.'s case, it's easy to see why a cult of personality has built up around her. Along with her sensuous beauty, she has a magnetic, self-possessed presence that lends her an aura of authority and credibility. When she matter-of-factly tells how she had an out-of-body experience in Yelm and traveled to New York, this unusual claim *sounds* almost plausible.

Though routinely described as a simple housewife, this poor girl turned highly successful saleswoman is clearly no such thing. And despite her chronically mangled and misused English (*heathern* instead of "heathen," *mediacracy* instead of "mediocrity," *in lieu* of when she means "in light of"), she's a spellbinding speaker, quick-witted and droll. As for her malapropisms, no one seems to mind; and if the lapsed Catholic convert sitting behind me, who asked what *Omni* was before confessing she didn't "read much," is any indication, perhaps they simply don't know any better.

What Ramtha followers do know is that "The Ram," as he's fondly called, represents the second coming of Christ. I've been assured by disciples and staffers alike that seeing Ramtha is believing. "The love that emanates from him is just incredible," affirms expatriate Texan Kitty Farmer, who is here with her fiancé, Douglas Mahr, one of Ramtha's "scribes," or recorders. Steven Weinberg, Ramtha's other scribe and author of the white, bound Ramtha "Bible," says this otherworldly love literally "saved" him. A loner who once flunked a military mental exam, Weinberg claims he was suicidal until Ramtha gave him a purpose in life.

Trance channeler (*channel*, for short) is the New Age term for medium or spiritualist. These séance givers have, of course, been around for centuries, acting as intermediaries between the worlds of the living and the dead. Today's channels, however, don't contact spirits; ostensibly, they are contacted by them. And Knight is the first to become a media star and gain an audience outside the lunatic fringe. She's bigger already, she maintains, than Edgar Cayce was in his day or Jane Roberts in hers. After Roberts, a popular channeler with a hyperintellectual entity named Seth, died in 1984, Knight virtually had the channeling field to herself, but

many of her followers say they grew disenchanted with Ramtha's doom-and-gloom talk and his dislike of gays. Others were turned off during a desert retreat in which J.Z. neglected to enter a trance before slipping into her Ramtha role and by rumors that one assistant quit when she accidentally overheard J.Z. practicing her Ramtha voice. But in the last year or so, perhaps inspired by the popularity and profitability of this New Age practice, dozens of competitors have cropped up, causing something of a ratings war among the channels. One of them, Penny Torres—married to an L.A. cop who never let her have company—sounds and acts suspiciously like Ramtha, though her entity's name is Mafu. But by far J.Z.'s biggest rival is Jach Pursel, who channels a friendly, disembodied spirit called Lazaris and is now the guru of choice among the hip California New Age set.

With tens of thousands of Americans paying \$10 to \$200 an hour to seek comfort and counsel from these higher beings (and at least one dolphin), channeling has become very big business; profits from seminars, tapes, and books range from \$100 million to \$400 million a year. Stephan Schwartz, a channeling sympathizer and the director of MOBIUS—a research foundation for the study of consciousness—feels channeling will someday be bigger than Fundamentalism.

He may be right. A recent survey con-

ducted by Father Andrew Greeley (the well-known Jesuit priest, sociologist, and novelist) of the University of Chicago National Opinion Research Center and based on a sample of 1,470 people has shown that a huge potential market is out there: Sixty-seven percent of Americans now profess a belief in the supernatural (up from 58 percent in 1973); 29 percent believe in reincarnation or have had a psychic experience; and 42 percent believe they've been in contact with someone who died.

J.Z. is returning from her backstage retreat, during which she tied her hair back and entered a three-minute trance that ended with the warrior god ramming into her body with a guttural roar. "Come forward into truth and knowingness and wisdom!" J.Z./Ramtha commands in a husky, scratchy baritone as she (he?) stomps around like a sumo wrestler and makes jerky break-dancing gestures. The constant "indeeds" and "so be its" that punctuate his speech are echoed by the audience, a happily enthralled Greek chorus to this cross-dressing Circe.

Before long he springs off the stage and works the room with a mike. Kitty grips her fiancé's hand as The Ram says a few kind words to his "scribe" Doug before looking Kitty right in the eye. Her lip quivers uncontrollably and tears pour down her cheeks as she clutches Doug to calm her violent trembling. And then, before I can brace

myself, J.Z.'s eyes (the eyes of a god?) are tunneling into my own. Pointing to my notepad, she croaks, "Ah, you write words to describe what you learn?" After listening to me stammer that there are no words to describe this, the god calls me a "very perceptive entity" before continuing.

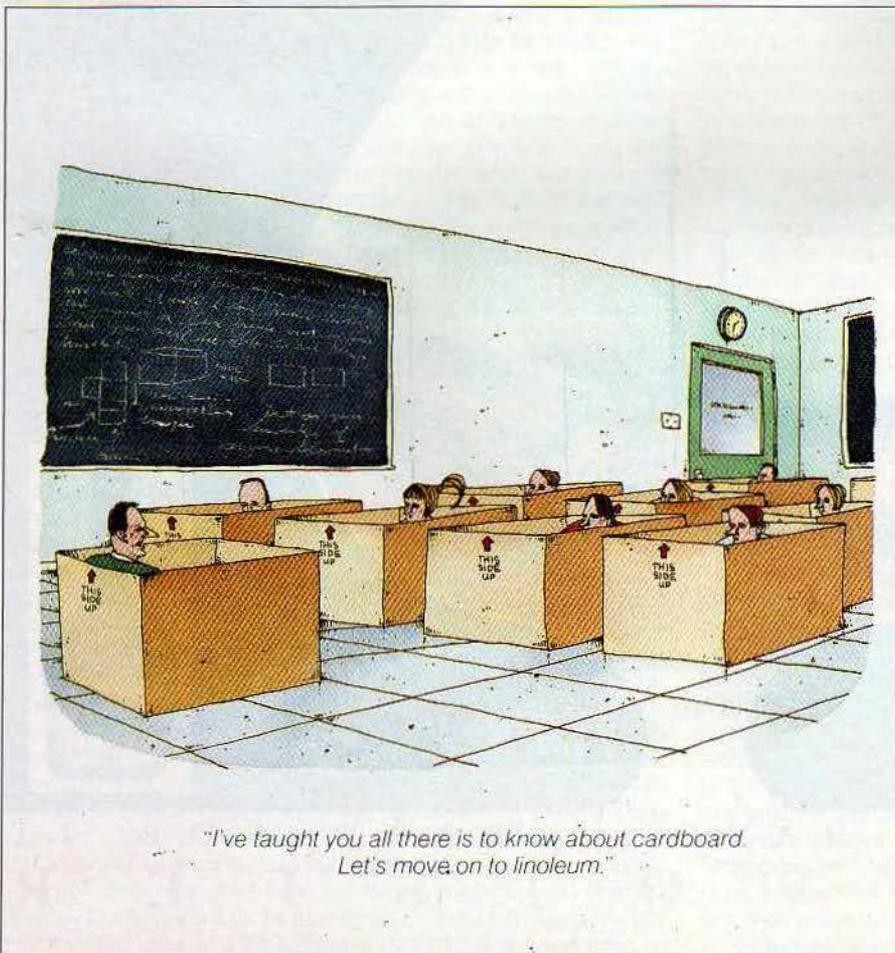
One fat lady is told to "love her tissue" and rejoice in her voluptuousness; an arty-looking guy learns he'll create great things in his lifetime. A matron is advised not to listen to so much gossip; and one pretty girl melts with joy, as does a chubby white-haired fellow, when Ramtha sensuously strokes their faces, crooning endearments. (In this androgynous half-Rambo, half-Evita form, she's a conveniently complete seductress.) Hugging a fiftyish woman whose tears aren't happy ones, Ramtha promises to send a "runner" who will bring her laughter. (A runner is a person or experience Ramtha sends into your life to bring you some lesson or gift.)

The Ram then takes questions from the audience. "Why do vitamins upset my stomach?" asks one. "How can I learn to become a tree?" asks another. (In this instance, J.Z./Ramtha quite sensibly suggests it might be better to concentrate more on observing nature than becoming a plant.) When one man seeks investment advice, he is told to invest in Taiwanese dollars. Often, though, Ramtha's answers are embarrassingly vacuous: When asked what it's like where he's from, The Ram replies that words can't describe it because "words themselves are a limitation." And when a desperate-sounding woman asks what to do about the awful debts she has incurred by uprooting her family to move here, The Ram snaps, "Quit worrying! Just let it be!" In fact, his platitudes are sometimes painful to hear, as when a sobbing woman asks why her autistic child doesn't want to speak. His only explanation is "Because he doesn't want to!"

Meanwhile, J.Z.'s young husband Jeff (her third), a onetime cowboy whom she literally picked out of a quarter-horse magazine, trails behind handing out Kleenexes to weeping supplicants. With his square jaw and overhanging brow, he'd be stereotypically handsome if it weren't for the blank, lobotomized look in his eyes.

Finally J.Z./Ramtha positions himself before the aged mother. "You have a grand daughter—and you are a grand dame!" he declares, but the mother just sits there, coolly regarding the fruit of her womb with implacable silence. Applause fills up the awkward pause, but as Ramtha stands before his maker, he momentarily seems less a god than a troubled little girl wanting mommy dearest's attention.

The simplest definition of channeling is that it involves the communication of information not consciously known to the communicant. Stephan Schwartz of MOBIUS concedes that "no reputable scientist has any handle whatever on what is going on. Channelers could be making all this up, or



CHANNELERS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 50

they could be self-deluded or confusing a telepathic experience with contact with a spirit guide." Schwartz, who believes in the reality of phenomena like telepathy and spirits, also leaves open the possibility that channeling "could be exactly what they [the channelers] say it is." He contends that the old Jungian construct, the collective unconscious, "is reaching out, in this age of incredible stress, to individuals sensitive to hearing it. They may unconsciously anthropomorphize or personify what they're hearing," he postulates, "so that they can present their material from an authoritative position." And avoid being locked in a rubber room with a lot of other people who hear voices, too.

On the other hand, cult watchers like Philip Haldeman of Northwest Skeptics are convinced that channelers are power-tripping frauds seeking fame and fortune. If thousands of people are suspending disbelief enough to buy this, he says, it's "because they have a deep need to *feel* better—and all this pseudoscientific nonsense about creating your own reality and loving yourself above all and never really dying is a lot more pleasant to deal with than reality." Many channeling clients at some point rejected organized religion but have found nothing to fill the spiritual void

created by their agnosticism. Now they are searching for a viable substitute, says Schwartz. "People want to think that we are more than animated meat!"

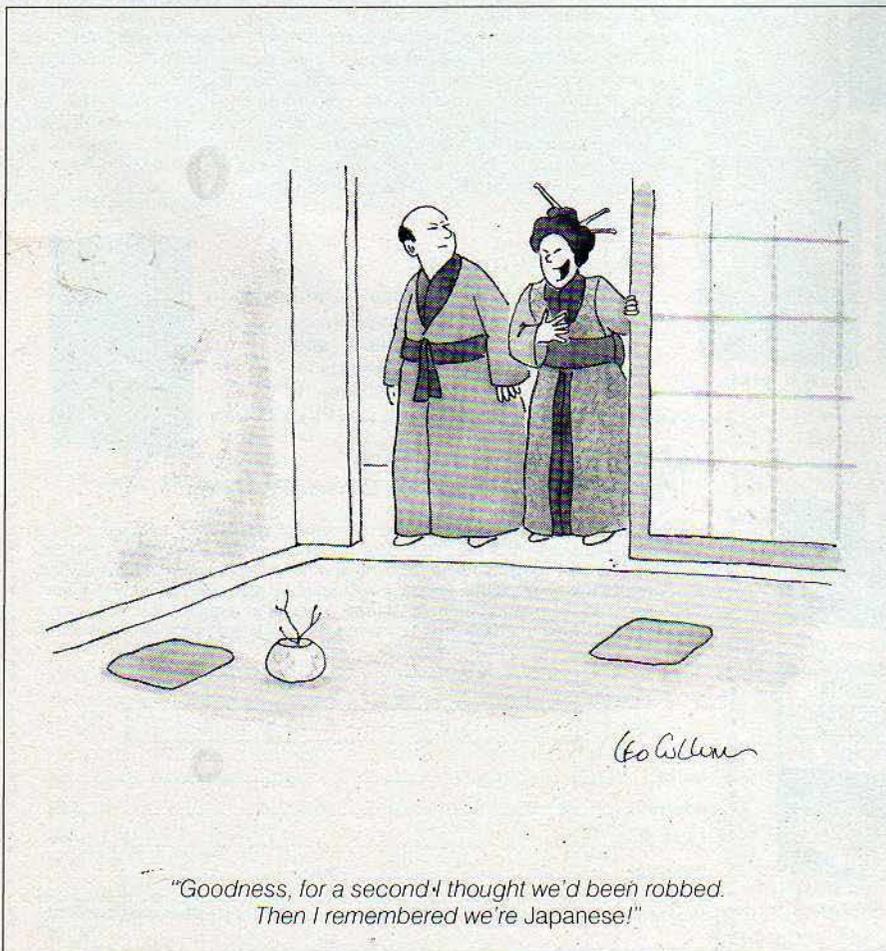
Predictably, the channeling phenomenon doesn't please the leaders of organized religion, who are generally outraged by its amoral, self-centered, and pagan message: that we are gods; that there is neither right nor wrong, heaven nor hell, and certainly no need for priest, preacher, or church. Father James LeBarr, a New York Catholic priest, has been studying cults since 1976 and has counseled numerous former cult members and their families. He says, "I have yet to meet an ordinary person who has benefited in any way from channeling. People are put through a series of mind-manipulation and mind-control experiences, which cause them to lose the ability to make free choices and free decisions." Fundamentalists, on the other hand, tend to believe that spirits such as those invoked in channeling do exist but that they are satanic in nature.

Then there's the psychological establishment, which Raschke readily admits has been caught with its pants down by this craze. Are they psychotic, with an unstable sense of reality? Raschke feels that most of them truly believe their own claims but are either disturbed or self-deluded. According to Raschke's power-of-suggestion theory—which applies equally well to channels and their followers—most channels,

after considerable study in metaphysical speculation and meditation techniques, attain a heightened sensitivity to their own unconscious minds. This hard-won internal receptiveness, this new voice, may then simply be interpreted as the voice of a god or spirit or ancestor or alien being by those emotionally predisposed to do so.

As for the subjective experience of channelers, most say they go into a meditative trance, then feel themselves drifting out of consciousness as they let their "vibrations" speed up to synchronize with the higher "frequencies" of their entities. They are then only dimly aware, if at all, of anything that transpires while their entity speaks through them. When he departs, they awaken feeling as refreshed as if they'd had a short nap or died and been reborn. J.Z. claims she actually gains 10 to 15 pounds when Ramtha is having his way with her but declined my offer of a weigh-in. She mentioned this the day her public relations assistant, Les Sinclair, drove me to her two-story stucco mansion, a graceful structure J.Z. claims to have designed herself. To one side of her still-unlandscaped estate, are the giant stables that house the horses she purchased as a ready-made business for her husband. The house itself is decorated in such a flagrant feminine style it seems like one huge boudoir. Like the now famous Jim and Tammy Bakker hotel suite, it is ostentatiously luxurious. The master bathroom contains yards of mirrored walls; the sunken tub, bidet, and toilet all have gold-plated fixtures. The floors are carpeted in pale champagne, and the moldings are hand painted in pastel pink and blue arabesques. In the cavernous living room, with its cathedral ceiling and glass front, a mural takes up one entire wall: It depicts a beautiful, ethereal-looking woman emerging from a cloud.

With Sinclair in attendance, we settle into J.Z.'s upstairs office. During the interview, J.Z. sits lotus-style in her desk chair, chain-smoking and drinking a canned Cherry Coke. Like Ramtha, she's a long-winded talker whose pontifications are laced with elaborate biblical references. Those, she explains, are a holdover from her ardently Christian childhood. Her prayers, she says, were long and urgent but failed to deliver her from poverty, a molesting uncle, an abusive stepfather, a remote and uncaring mother, and various other handicaps. She claims she was always psychic and says she was cured of a "fatal disease" by a bolt of lightning that struck her during a tent revival. (When asked for the name of the doctor who treated her before her miraculous faith healing, Knight sadly shakes her pretty head. "Oh—Dr. Williams. I'm afraid, is dead.") J.Z. denies the testimony, shown on ABC's *20/20*, of her childhood friend, Sandy Fallis, who claims J.Z. once, without warning, began talking in a strange male voice at a prayer meeting in her hometown of Artesia, New Mexico. The voice, according to Fallis, identified itself as belong-



ing to a demon named Demias. Presumably J.Z. does not want anyone to be under the impression that she is the victim of demonic possession.

This simple Yelm housewife blithely goes on to tell about being a reincarnation of her sister Bootsie, who drowned before J.Z. was born, and then about a friend who appeared to her in an apparition. She insists an advanced civilization lives inside the earth's core and that murder isn't wrong, as we're all immortal. Somewhat overwhelmed by this flood of fantasy and conjecture, I ask if she truly believes there is no right or wrong; couldn't she be making this whole Ramtha thing up as a cosmic joke?

Taking a deep drag on her cigarette, she replies, "Then you would have to say that as a result of this lark, people have been healed, people have been helped, people have learned to make changes and love themselves more... so if all humanity is going to benefit from it, what would it matter anyway?"

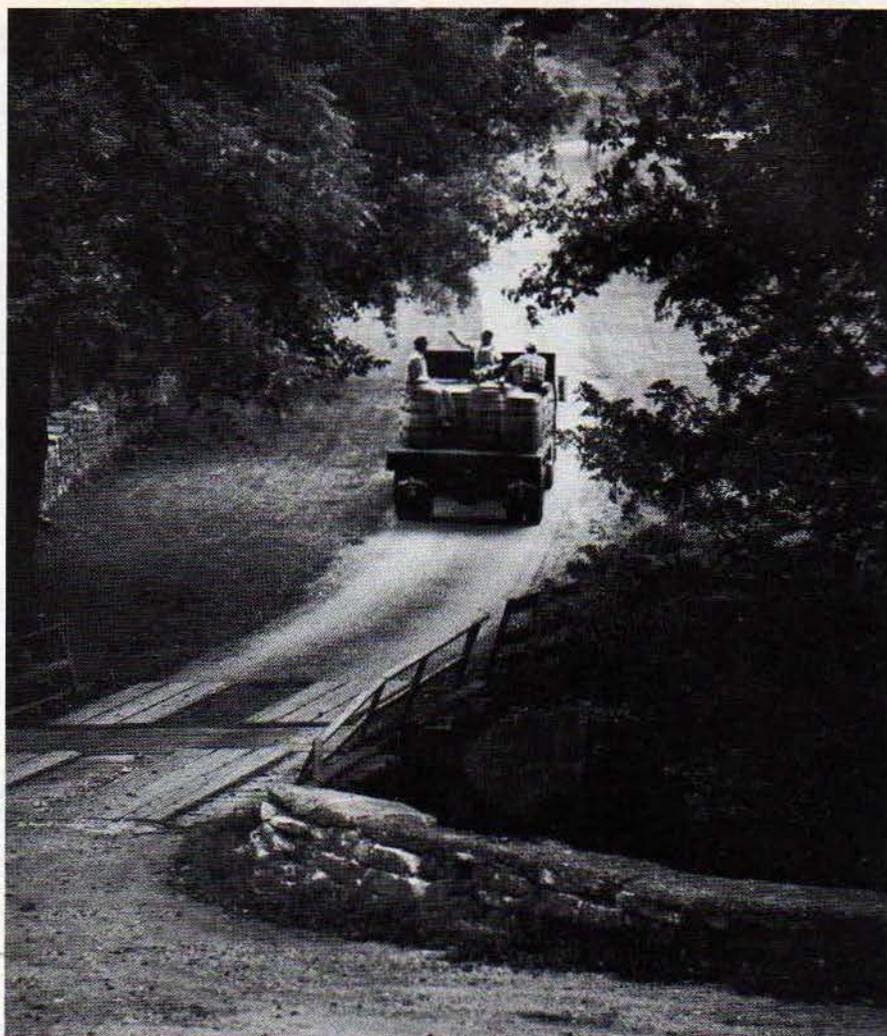
The rain drums against the window-pane, and Knight solemnly goes on with her saga of persecution and stoic martyrdom in Ramtha's great cause. She does not refer to the rumor that one of her two sons by previous marriages had gone into a deep depression as a result of taunts from his schoolmates that his mother was in league with the Devil (an indictment made eerily graphic when someone scrawled 666 across the unpainted cinder-block wall that surrounds her property).

It has all been worthwhile, she says; she likes herself more and realizes that she is, after all, beautiful, talented, and secure. "And brilliant," she adds.

I take my leave on this sodden spring afternoon, asking my personal spirit guide what to do next. Can all channelers be getting by on looks and fast-talking chutzpah alone? There must be other reasons for the enormous appeal of these beings. I decide to go visit Jach Pursel/Lazaris to see if all entities act alike or if you get a different program with a different channel.

Lazaris, a disembodied spirit who calls himself "the consummate friend," speaks gently, with a slight lisp. His stilted English issues from the cuddly, round person of Jach Pursel—a bearded former insurance adjuster who quit climbing the corporate ladder to pursue this higher calling. Pursel is seated on a simple platform adorned by three small ficus trees. His double-knit royal blue pants and apple-green shirt seem hardly befitting a guru, but then Lazaris is merely using Jach's body as an earthly house organ of sorts, disseminating his message to the 400 people in the L.A. Hilton meeting room who've paid \$275 each for this weekend seminar.

This one is focused on healing, and Lazaris, a discarnate entity who has never been physical (and doesn't, like Ramtha, claim to be a god), has an approach to medicine that might be called uncanny. "Back pains [are] simply sublimated hurt!"



If you like our oldtime whiskey drop us a line. We like to hear from our friends.

JACK DANIEL'S COUNTRY is old country where ways of the past are allowed to prevail.

Since 1866 we've made our whiskey the old Tennessee way: mellowing every drop through hard maple charcoal—then aging it for years in charred oak barrels. The result is a rare, rare product folks call "sippin' smooth." True, there are newer ways to make whiskey. Faster ones, too. But after a sip, you'll be glad we've never given in to progress.

SMOOTH SIPPIN'
TENNESSEE WHISKEY



Tennessee Whiskey • 80-90 Proof • Distilled and Bottled by Jack Daniel Distillery
Lem Motlow, Proprietor, Route 1, Lynchburg (Pop. 361), Tennessee 37352

he proclaims. "Release it!" As for the medical establishment, "ninety percent of the drugs doctors give you aren't proven to work," and the same goes for chemotherapy. "You play metaphysics until something really goes wrong, then you go to a *real* doctor," he scolds. Not that he advises against that if you so desire, but he does suggest that getting angry at your illness works wonders, that you *can* heal yourself if you believe you can.

His well-dressed audience is conspicuously more upscale than the Ramtha crowd, though quite a few latter-day hippies are here, too. The women are generally more attractive than the men, many of whom have a hapless, woebegone air. Almost all seem happier, less desperate than their Ramtha counterparts; and most of them busily take notes as Lazaris eloquently holds forth on the use of color, auras, light, and sound as healing devices. Where Ramtha was often trite and pompous, Lazaris is consistently funny, warm, and engaging, even though half of what he says sounds like nonsense to me. Before the afternoon is out, we'll learn to alter the molecular ("neuronal") structure of water with our hands—pouring it from the left palm to the right as we infuse it with thoughts of love, then drink it. "Drink the love," Lazaris exhorts. "It reaches every single cell of your body—and it works!" Also, if you shine a colored light on someone, or even on a photo of someone, the mood that color evokes will alter his or her mood accordingly. "Light consists of the vibrations we see," this enlightened spirit explains, but as light frequencies get faster, beyond the visible rate, they become fragrance; when these vibrations slow below those of the visible spectrum, they become sound. Pseudoscience or not, it all boasts an undeniable charm—a view of the universe devised by Tolkien or Lewis Carroll with its own impish logic.

We take a short break during which a pretty blond realtor from Santa Fe, New Mexico, excitedly prattles on about a vision of a glass of blue water. She's pleased when I admire the crystals hanging on a long gold chain around her neck but politely asks me not to touch the biggest one, because it was specially "charged" for her.

Afterward Lazaris leads us in one of several long meditations. During these, his stilted, liturgical cadences (*ti-yum* instead of "time") seem less pronounced, his voice turning as soft and low as the lights in the room. Some listeners relax by stretching out on the carpet with pillows they have brought from their hotel rooms; others prop their feet on empty chairs. Almost lost in the crowd, with unkempt hair, wearing baggy black warm-up clothes and no makeup, is the actress Sharon Gless, her solemn expression bereft of the trademark Christine Cagney twinkle.

At one point, Lazaris mentions a few special friends, including some tender words for Gless, who had been coming to see him even when he did only private

consultations and had yet to go public on *Merv Griffin*. Quietly Gless sobs in the darkness, her shoulders heaving as a girlfriend squeezes her hand. But plenty of other people are also moved to tears as Lazaris's rich, compelling voice wafts over us, soothing wounded, world-weary psyches with cradle-rocking tenderness. Evoking images of forests and trees and birds and friends and loving hands, he leads us into a Walt Disney World of innocence, free of misery and corruption. In this world, preachers and politicians and Wall Streeters don't lie; more important, nature isn't cruel, hearts aren't broken, dreams don't die, and neither do we. When the music stops and the meditation ends, we open our eyes to fatherly Lazaris telling us, "You are now healed mentally; your old patterns can now be said *no* to."

Lazaris then calls for a dinner break. Heaving a great sigh, Jach seems to fall back into a trance and, about 60 seconds later, smiles as he rubs his eyes before a

● *For Shirley MacLaine, it was brotherly love at first sight: She just "knew" that Ramtha had once been her sibling in a previous existence on the continent of Atlantis.* ●

happy "Where am I?" expression appears on his face.

In the coffee shop, four other seekers ask me to join them. They explain that the age of Aquarius, which dawned in the Sixties, is now in full force, causing a cosmic shift and compelling masses of people to seek enlightenment. Like everyone I've met on this journey, they are friendly, open, kind, and gentle—seemingly too gentle and kind for the real world. It is fitting that Eleanor, a grandmother who once belonged to the metaphysical Unity Church, now works for Disney Studios. Leia, thirty-nine, a long-haired, wilted flower child, is a former psychotherapist who gave that up and moved to L.A., where she wants "to paint and write" and intends to start soon, with a little help from the consummate friend. Christian, a big, hearty guy with a Dutch accent, says his wife thinks Lazaris is a fake. He himself feels that Ramtha, his first guide, was real at first but is now faking it. Not Lazaris, though. "He helped me enlarge my success cube," he proudly reports. "Now I've got more business than I can handle." All say the truths Lazaris speaks are things they've always inwardly known, but they

appear unable or unwilling to recognize that if they know them, so could a mere mortal like Jach Pursel, even without an entity's coaching. TV star Ted Danson, who says he believes implicitly in Pursel/Lazaris, probably got it right when he said, "I don't care if it [the entity] is really Joe Blow in the basement playing some cosmic prank on the universe, so long as he's loving and wise—and so long as he's talking to *me*!" In fact, the common denominator among all these seekers after enlightenment seems to be a narcissism as prevalent in this Hilton hotel as the crystals suspended around their necks.

SUNDAY SERVICE

Today, on a Sunday afternoon, all the Lazarites have quietly lined up on the left and right hand of their master. To each of them Lazaris grants a moment of individual attention—a hug, a whispered word of reassurance or love, a massage at the small of the back. Instead of a Communion wafer, these devotees receive from Lazaris a crystal "personally charged" just for them, nestled in a basket draped with blue velvet. At the head of the two lines one sees expressions of absolute bliss—smiles stretched so wide they seem about to snap, eyes overflowing with tears. All of which makes Lazaris seem, even if a fraud, not half as bad as the society that has left so many in need of the love and affection they pay him to provide.

When Pursel isn't doing these seminars, he channels Lazaris for private consultations, mostly by phone, to hundreds of people around the world, dispensing advice on everything from spiritual questions to how to run a poodle business or how to close a tricky stock deal. According to Pursel, Lazaris can tap into his (Jach's) memory bank, as well as into the minds of those he's counseling. While not omniscient, he's a pretty knowledgeable sort, but even when Pursel is just being Pursel, he's clearly well-read, exceptionally bright, articulate, and funny—a lot like Lazaris. This leads me to suspect that Lazaris is simply a "higher self" or unconscious part of Pursel's mind, which he has learned to tap into. The other possibility, of course, is that he's consciously making this all up, rationalizing that the good he's doing outweighs a harmless white lie. When we talk for an hour alone in his comfortable Beverly Hills hotel room overlooking an acre-size pool, he is friendly, relaxed, helpful, and seems genuinely modest and kind. But whenever I ask about Lazaris or the mechanics of channeling, his eyes—those windows to the soul—slide this way and that, only coming to rest on me when those sensitive questions have been answered.

Pursel is quite candid about his rather offbeat personal life. Peny, his ex-wife, is still his partner in Concept Synergy, the Lazaris organization. And so is Michael, the slight, stoop-shouldered man who took Peny away from him and looks like Jack

Sprat beside his large, rotund, but exquisitely dressed and groomed wife. What's more, they all live together in Los Angeles and in a house on Lake Arrowhead in Southern California. What's more, they remain bosom buddies.

Michael, Pursel amiably explains, was a friend and director of educational films who came to work for them. Pursel was channeling Lazaris at a workshop one night when Michael and Peny began to fall in love, right before Pursel's very eyes—but because he had them closed and was actually Lazaris at the time, he was theoretically away on business. Though they kept their attraction platonic, Pursel admits he was shocked and hurt and jealous at first. "But the love between them was so beautiful to see," he explains, that he eventually stepped aside, deciding it was best for all concerned. After a quickie Bahamian divorce, Michael and Peny got married, and they now share equally in the profits and responsibilities of Concept Synergy.

As for a romantic or sexual life of his own, Pursel says he prefers celibacy, which frees him from the responsibility of an intimate relationship. His emotional needs are met through his work with Lazaris and with the loving friendship he enjoys with Michael and Peny, who is, by all accounts, a dynamic and intelligent woman.

If J.Z.'s mom won't love her, if Penny Torres's husband won't allow her to have company, if Pursel's wife leaves him for another man half his size—well, there are always other ways to find emotional fulfillment. There's nothing like the love of the masses to heal a broken heart and maybe make you rich in the bargain.

It's impossible to disprove the existence of invisible beings and very difficult to prove the existence of fraud in the realm of the paranormal. What is verifiable is that a great many people do believe in channeling and have committed themselves, spiritually and psychologically, to it.

While they are determined to make some sense of life, it is ironic that they have gone to the opposite extreme of embracing what appears to be nonsense. But a heads-and-hearts-in-the-sand attitude isn't likely to create the better world they imagine when they're curled in a fetal position, letting entities tell them fairy tales. It's not so much the advice, much of it cockeyed, that is harmful as it is the fact that most of these seekers are implicitly being encouraged to relinquish control of their lives. Even as these beings purport to be saying we should look inward for answers, they offer false hopes and false visions, solidifying the dependency that brought them followers in the first place.

These beloved entities insist there's no downside to life: that, flawed as we are, be we selfish and slothful, we can still find happiness—not only now but eternally—with a little help from the other side. Unwittingly or not, channelers prey on our credulity and fear, making comfortable ignorance the only prerequisite for bliss. ☐

MIND

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 20

Rome international airport. As it turned out, the judges said that Schlitz had achieved six hits, something that might occur perhaps four times in a million.

Finally, Robert Jahn of the School of Engineering and Applied Science at Princeton University says he has come up with impressive results as well. Working with Brenda Dunne, Jahn recruited five subjects for a total of 300 remote-viewing trials. Each subject was asked to envision the site that an experimenter would visit for 15 minutes sometime in the future. Not only did the subjects describe and sketch their visions, they also answered a series of 30 questions capable of objectively differentiating any target site from any other. According to Princeton's recently published report, the viewers envisioned their targets far more often than would be predicted by mere chance.

To Targ, all this work represented a wealth of positive results. But when he attended the centennial for the Society of Psychical Research, in England, a few years ago, he was shocked to hear a British colleague say no one had ever proven psychic functioning to exist. "I decided then and there," Targ says, "to do an experiment that would be published not in some obscure parapsychology journal but in *The Wall Street Journal* itself."

That's just what Targ did. Working with psychologist Keith Harary and art investor Anthony R. White, he formed Delphi Associates, out of San Mateo, California. Like the Delphic oracle, the company hoped to predict the future and see its fortunes rise. Specifically, Harary was to practice his remote-viewing skills once a week: Each and every Thursday, he was to predict whether the price of silver would go up or down the following Monday. Based on his predictions, the group would buy or sell, hoping that money could be made.

Since the alphanumeric symbols—including the figures associated with silver futures—don't particularly lend themselves to psychic prediction, the group devised a plan. Harary was told he would receive one of four objects, depending on how silver moved—up a little, up a lot, down a little, or down a lot. He was thus to predict not the movement of silver per se but the identity of the object.

Targ explains: "I would interview Harary every Thursday and ask him to describe the object I would show him the following Monday afternoon. On one occasion, for instance, he said, 'I see something crinkly that looks like a party favor. It's red on the top and white on the bottom and has a funny smell.'"

"Then I called our collaborator, Anthony White, and asked him the identity of the four objects for the week. He said, 'I have a toy bear, for down a little; a perfume bottle, for down a lot; a skeleton key, for up a

little; and a chrysanthemum, for up a lot.' Then I described Harary's image, and White said, 'That sounds like the chrysanthemum to me.' So we bought silver."

Using this method, dubbed associative remote viewing, Harary made correct predictions nine times in a row. Targ says, noting the group a profit of \$120,000. "The probability of that happening by chance," he adds, "is one in fifty thousand." But when Delphi Associates did the experiment again—this time with both Harary and psychic Hella Hammid—profits dwindled, and results fell to chance.

It's not surprising that critics remain unconvinced. According to anomalies expert Marcello Truzzi, professor of sociology at Eastern Michigan University, "Most people give low evidentiary value to the silver-market studies," because as the group continued its work, it met with failure.

"Marilyn Schlitz has not been able to replicate all her results," Truzzi adds. "Her one experiment with a skeptic as subject generated results that weren't positive at all. And in remote viewing, anyway, the work of the Princeton group has raised serious questions among fellow parapsychologists. Much of it has never been formally evaluated or published in an accredited, peer-reviewed journal."

Many parapsychologists disagree with this assessment. Former Delphi Associates member Harary, now research director for San Francisco's Institute for Advanced Psychology, notes that the second series of silver experiments was conducted under dramatically different circumstances from the first. "I was disturbed when I saw too much emphasis placed on profit and publicity," he says, "making it impossible to focus or maintain an objective scientific perspective."

And Russell Targ, now working full-time in laser research for Lockheed and running the National ESP Laboratory out of his home in Portola Valley, California, points out that his third psychic venture into the silver market, completed just this summer, has yielded impressive results. "Thirty-five out of fifty-two predictions were correct," he says. "Statistically the chance of that happening is less than one in a hundred."

Schlitz, now a research associate and project director of remote-viewing programs at the Mind Science Foundation in Texas, adds that perhaps psi research should not be subject to the standards of ordinary science. She has, she notes, replicated her work in long-distance remote viewing. But, she adds, sometimes you see results, and sometimes you don't. "Studying psi," she says, "is in some ways like chasing butterflies in the dark. You don't see where they are, and you hope that you're catching them. That's what my experiments are like. There's this amorphous, beautiful thing flying around, and I'm trying to catch it in the lab. I can't always do that, but that doesn't mean it isn't real. When you're chasing butterflies in the dark, you're lucky if you catch anything at all." ☐