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NEW JERSEY WEEKLY DESK

IN PERSON; Prophet or Profiteer, This Doctor's In Now

By LISA SUHAY (NYT) 1682 words

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PHILADELPHIA - THERE are people with boundless energy. Then there is Dr. Eric Pearl, a healer and metaphysician, who has redefined the concept.

Somewhere along the way from Cherry Hill, the place of his youth, Dr. Pearl developed the notion that his hands were conduits through which energy flowed, bringing about physical and spiritual wellness.

While the tried-and-true spiritual leaders of the 1980's, like Dr. Wayne Dyre of "Your Erroneous Zones" fame, are still drawing the masses on PBS, there is a new breed emerging -- a sort of boy-of-wonders-next-door, and Dr. Pearl is the prototype. He is a seemingly earnest man with a self-deprecating and often biting sense of humor.

Prophet or profiteer, he is an up-and-coming force to be reckoned with in a new age where people are willing to pay lavishly for answers. Indeed, Dr. Pearl's followers -- in their 20's to their 70's -- flocked to the Crowne Plaza Hotel here last weekend to spend \$250 for three days of healing and enlightenment.

"I have felt the energy he uses," said Patricia Ugolev of Maple Shade, a Spanish teacher at the Lindenwold School. "Nobody believes it until they actually sit there with him and feel the pressure or just energy that comes through him. Then nothing anybody says can change your mind."

So what does this 45-year-old doctor of chiropractic medicine do to attract such a devoted following? He stands with his hands bracketing a patient -- who is usually lying on a massage table. He never touches the patient, yet people insist they feel sensations ranging from heat to building waves of intense pressure.

Using this hands-off approach, Dr. Pearl performs energy healings that he and his patients say range from elevating their mood to easing the pain of AIDS, cancer and even curing drug addictions.

He makes no bones about the fact that he does not know where this energy comes from, using the phrase God/love/universe as a moniker for the source. He does not know how it happens or why he is the one having these experiences.

"I think it's because I have a really big mouth, and I would be the one to go out and pass this on and teach others," he said.

Others have a somewhat different take. Dr. James H. Thomas of the genetics department at the University of Washington does not think much of Dr. Pearl's claim to be "reconnecting us to other realities and virtual strands to DNA that are evolving."

"I looked briefly at Dr. Pearl's Web site," Dr. Thomas said in a recent interview. "He is either a charlatan or delusional."

Nonetheless, that did not stop a group of aspiring healers from attending the three-day seminar that he led at the Crowne Plaza. This week, his first book, "The Reconnection" (Hay House, \$23.95), appears in stores, and on April 7 his ascension to the world stage will be complete when he takes his seat beside the medium John Edwards of the television show

"Crossing Over" (he sees dead people) and the psychic Sylvia Browne at Madison Square Garden.

This is not what one would have expected of the eldest of three children who grew up in a middle-class home in Cherry Hill and was expected to become a doctor.

Dr. Pearl proudly points to his career as a miserable student at Cherry Hill High School. "I hated to read, never cracked a book," he said. "You could sell all my school books as new."

This kind of remark sends his mother, Lois Pearl, into fits.

"Never reads? Never reads!" she gasps. "What am I going to do with him? How can he tell a reporter, of all people, that he never reads! O.K, in school he never read. But now he does."

Actually, he prefers his books on tape. "The trunk of my car is loaded with books on tape, and I just go off and drive and listen," he said.

Born in Pennsauken in 1955, Dr. Pearl moved with his family to Cherry Hill at age 5, "when the Cherry Hill Mall had just been built and all that development you see now was just frames going up."

When he was a child, a perfect day was one in which he and his friends bought chocolate at the Cherry Hill Pharmacy and went to the movies at the new mall. After a day of sugar and comedy, the pack of preadolescents would explore the housing developments in progress. Presprawl was Eric Pearl's playground, and he would spend hours climbing the skeletal frames of the emerging cookie-cutter homes.

"I never went in for team sports or sanctioned group activities," Dr. Pearl said. "I liked to bike, eat candy and watch movies. Really, nothing much has changed to this day where that is concerned."

As a teenager, he spent his summers as a lifeguard at an apartment complex's pool. "I wasn't a joiner," he said. "Lifeguarding was probably the most average thing I did."

Reluctantly, he went to the University of Miami after graduating from Cherry Hill High School, where his interests ranged from psychology to modern dance. He left college to spend a year studying in Jerusalem, and when he returned to the United States he took a class in Rolfing, a kind of deep-tissue massage, which ignited his interest in chiropractic care. He enrolled in the Cleveland Chiropractic College in Los Angeles, where he graduated in 1983, and for 10 years maintained a practice out there.

"He was bar mitzvahed!" said Mrs. Pearl, a former model, who lives with her husband, Harold Sonny Pearl, a retired businessman, in the Japanese split-level house in Cherry Hill Estates that they have occupied since 1960. "Who knew this was where his life would take him?"

To hear his mother tell it, he was always a precocious child. "In school he was a terror," she said. "He had a smart mouth. I would pray for him to get interested in something. I would sit in the school director's office and cry."

Mrs. Pearl rolled her eyes and added: "Then he calls from California back about seven years ago to tell us what he was doing and this energy healing. I thought, Oh God, I never should have let him leave Cherry Hill. But then he did it for us, and we saw that it was really real."

She takes relief in the fact that her son still attends temple on the High Holy Days. He does not tell people to walk on hot coals or drink foul-smelling health concoctions. In fact, he spends much of his time debunking such practices.

But now the pace is picking up. "Even though I have been at this since 1993," he said, "with Madison Square Garden looming, now it's all happening fast."

And he finds himself anxious about how his life will change, and how he will suffer the slings and arrows of skeptics.

"Look, you don't have to tell me that what I do is hard to believe," said Dr. Pearl. "I know there are people out there who are going to call me a messiah and those who will call me a false messiah, and they are both wrong. I'm just a regular guy

who has healings come through him."

Back at the hotel, Dr. Pearl -- in a dark green sport jacket, green sweater and slacks and stud earrings in both ears-- gave a dismissive shrug.

"This energy heals both physically and spiritually," he said. "Crazy? Sure sounds that way to me."

To hear Dr. Pearl describe his earlier life, he was running a successful chiropractic office when one day his receptionist asked him to visit a Jewish Gypsy on Venice Beach. After much indecision, Mr. Pearl chose to pay the woman \$333 to perform a ritual that would "reconnect my body's meridian lines to the grid lines on the planet."

In his book he writes, "I can hear the blurb now: Jewish Gypsy on Venice Beach takes \$333 from unsuspecting chiropractor. My picture with the word "Sucker" under it flashes across the screen"

But after only two sessions with the Gypsy, Dr. Pearl claimed he returned to his chiropractic practice to find that he had only to place his hands either above or beside the patient for them to become well, either physically or spiritually.

Over the past eight years Dr. Pearl, has restructured his practice, not by manipulating people's spines, but their connections with forces of energy that he says "flow through us all and connect us with other dimensions and strands of virtual DNA to which we are evolving."

He is quick to emphasize that his method is not Healing Touch or reiki, johrei or jin shin. "It's not qi gong, mah -jongg, or Beijing," he wrote in "The Reconnection."

"It's not any technique you've ever encountered," he said. "It's not a technique at all. It transcends technique."

For now, Dr. Pearl has now sold his practice and is on a 30-city tour signing his books, making public appearances and holding seminars. "I really don't know where this is all leading," he said.

He puts it this way: "Let's just say that I am going to try and pass on what I've been allowed in on. Maybe I just have to go to every person in the world, place my hands near theirs and say 'Feel this.' My philosophy is that when I die and face God/love/ universe, whatever and look back at my life, I would rather say that I made a fool out of myself trying to enlighten people and heal rather than having done nothing out of fear."

Photos: Followers of Dr. Eric Pearl like Dorothy Ganotti, left, and Annette Kroninger flocked to the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Philadelphia last weekend for healing and enlightenment. (Photographs by Tim Shaffer for The New York Times)