
An Encounter with Pastor David Epley

Kate Ware Ankenbrandt

Several weeks before Pastor David Epley's scheduled healing service in Detroit—at 2:30 P.M., August 3, 1986, in the Henry and Edsel Ford Auditorium—Professor Philip Singer sent me a photocopy of a telegram he had received from Pastor Epley inviting him to the meeting and promising a “miracle.” After brief explanations to my World Religions class and my Introductory Cultural Anthropology class about the research reported in *FREE INQUIRY* (Spring and Summer issues, 1986) on similar alleged faith-healers, I announced the meeting and suggested that students attend and pretend to have a disease to see whether the Holy Spirit would detect the pretense. Although no one agreed to participate in this way, two of the anthropology students were present at the meeting, which was professionally videotaped by Pastor Epley's crew for national television.

Entering the auditorium about an hour early, I was warmly greeted by a young black man on Epley's staff, who asked if I had come for a healing. I said yes, and when he asked what my problem was I said, “Heart trouble.” (Nothing has ever been wrong with my heart.) He then asked my name and I said, “Kate,” the name I ordinarily go by. He told me to sit in the side section (stage left) if I wanted healing. I did so, sitting in the fourth row next to a nicely dressed black woman in the aisle seat, who identified herself as a Catholic. My students were two rows behind, each with a tape recorder.

The program began with five or six “healings,” including one of a woman with a long-unresolved court case against General Motors, which Pastor Epley promised would be settled within thirty days, and another of

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a woman with a “growth” in her “lower stomach,” which the pastor later diagnosed as a hernia. During this time the pastor used several men's handkerchiefs as healing devices, often first using the handkerchief to mop his face and thus become imbued with “spiritual sweat.”

(The biblical reference for using handkerchiefs to cure illness was given as Acts 19:11–12, on Pastor Epley's television program, broadcast in Detroit on Channel 62 on August 10, 1986: “And God wrought special miracles by the hands of Paul: So that from his body were brought unto the sick handkerchiefs or aprons, and the diseases departed from them, and the evil spirits went out of them.”)

Pastor Epley then called me out. Like many other faith-healers, he claims to have God-given “word of knowledge” about patients' names, diseases, and other personal data. When I had come to the front of the center stage just below where he stood, he gestured for me to stop and said I'd had an “enlarged heart” for about ten years.

I nodded in affirmation (an untruth).

He said he wanted to call me “Katherine,” and added “but that's not quite right.” After I said I'd been baptized Katherine but was not usually called that, he called me, correctly, “Kate,” the name I had told his staffer. He then asked whether I was under a doctor's care for my heart condition. When I said no, he said that I'd taken various medications for it in the past.

I said I had (another untruth).

He added that I had thought the condition was cured, but it kept coming back.

Again I lied.

How many doctors, he asked, had I consulted about it in the past ten years?

I said three (an untruth).

He then asked whether I was willing to go to a fourth. People nearby murmured,

“Dr. Jesus.”

I said I would and admitted to believing that Jesus could heal me.

He then said that Jesus would do so. He gave me another of the white cotton handkerchiefs, told me to put it over my heart when I slept, and promised that “you'll sleep better than you have for years.” He placed his hand on my head, but I decided not to fall back as if “slain by the Holy Spirit,” because no one was positioned to catch me.

During the service, Pastor Epley announced the gift of a handkerchief to one healee and then, holding it up by one edge (after wiping it in his “spiritual sweat”), said that he wished “the magician Randi” had been here to see that no trickery was involved but “just the power of Jesus.” “You can see,” he added, “I'm not wearing a hearing aid or anything like that.” It was apparently clear to the audience that Epley was referring to James Randi's exposure of Peter Popoff (see *FI*, Summer 1986); my students said that several people near them talked with one another about Popoff's trickery.

The reaction of my students who were reluctant to help expose Epley points to what I privately call “the Holy Ghost'll gitcha” phenomenon, the superstitious core of fear present in many individuals that allows television evangelists like Epley to gather in millions of dollars from a credulous public. Several students said that I should be afraid because “God might punish you by *really* giving you the disease you claim to have.” Although I pointed out to them that God's alleged justice might more appropriately give such a disease to Pastor Epley if, as I suspected, he turned out to be a fraud, they were not convinced.

The financial aspect of Pastor Epley's operation is worth mentioning. Before his Detroit appearance on August 3, many pieces of mail came from him to Professor Singer, each asking with great urgency for a contribution of money. Two letters that came immediately before the service included envelopes for offerings to be brought and given in person. One of these letters suggests an offering of twenty-five dollars be put in the envelope, but adds:

The cost of the rent at the [Henry and] Edsel Ford Auditorium in Detroit is thousands of dollars, and I have asked God to speak to my closest friends and partners about a gift of \$100.00. Just write the amount of your gift on the outside of the envelope so I will be able to see your love.

The cost of the Ford Auditorium for a Sunday afternoon religious service is actually

eighteen hundred dollars. This letter—on four-color stationery with a picture of Pastor Epley in the center of the letterhead—ended with a promise:

Brother Philip, one dear, sweet lady who made a real sacrifice to bring \$25.00 to the meeting received a \$250,000 (A QUARTER OF A MILLION DOLLARS) miracle within seven days. I want to pray that God will return your gift ONE HUNDRED TIMES. Don't deny yourself this opportunity to be blessed in person by your loving Pastor.

The most urgent communication was printed on legal-size yellow-lined paper with a rubber band taped onto the front. It features a powerful demand for money, using the image of the rubber band:

HURRY AND DO THIS RIGHT NOW!
I had to write this letter before I let myself be talked out of it. NO MATTER HOW FOOLISH THIS MAY SEEM . . . DON'T LET THE DEVIL STOP YOU FROM BEING BLESSED FINANCIALLY! SPIRITUALLY! AND IN YOUR BODY!

HERE IS WHAT I SAW . . .
. . . IN THE SPIRIT I SAW A TIGHT BAND AROUND YOUR WALLET!
IT WAS ACTUALLY BOUND BY THE DEVIL . . . AND YOU COULDN'T DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT!!!
. . . I SAW A BAND AROUND YOUR WRISTS . . . HINDERING YOU . . . BINDING YOU . . . KEEPING YOU FROM DOING WHAT YOU WANT TO DO . . . AND BEING WHAT YOU WANT TO BE!

Thus, it seems that because of these mailings many in Pastor Epley's Detroit congregation came prepared to contribute as much as they could afford. There were many requests for offerings during the service.

In the part of the auditorium where my students and I sat were a woman with an obvious humpback, a woman with a walker (who made her way laboriously to the front of the auditorium when Epley called for donations), a man in a wheelchair, and a blind woman with a group of other people who had obvious physical problems. None of these was called out for healing, unless Pastor Epley somehow dealt with them during the crowded and confused final lineup. The blind woman's group had started to leave after a couple of hours, because their driver wouldn't wait. Epley told the group leader that they should stay, promising to take the money out of his own pocket for a taxi if their ride left without them. I don't know whether he had to come through, but no healings were offered to anyone in this group. •

Books

Lesbianism in the Convent

Bonnie Bullough

Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), \$14.95.

Based upon a document found in the State Archives in Florence, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy*, by Judith C. Brown, is the story of a seventeenth-century nun, Sister Benedetta Carlini, who served as Abbess of the Theatine Convent of Pescia. It is a remarkable narrative, because Sister Benedetta was accused of lesbianism in an era when the only acknowledged female sexual activity was heterosexual.

Sister Benedetta was sent to the convent by her well-to-do parents at the age of nine. She was a dedicated young nun, who followed in the path of the great mystics of the past as she accepted deprivations and self-inflicted pain and was rewarded with visions. She became Abbess at the age of thirty, which was considered young for that time. Her visions became more dramatic and personal. She enacted a special marriage ceremony in the convent uniting her with Jesus, and following that ceremony her finger became discolored as if a ring were there. Angels spoke to the sisters through her body.

Sister Benedetta was investigated by church authorities twice. During the first investigation, her companion, Sister Bartolomea Crivelli, who was at her side during her visions, testified to their authenticity. It was claimed in one episode that Sister Benedetta's body "opened up" and that her heart was replaced by the heart of Jesus. At other times she allegedly was visited by an angel by the name of Splenditello, who gave her special instructions. Although the ecclesiastical authorities were somewhat dubious about these miracles, they finally concluded they were of divine origin and did not stem from the devil.

However, at a later date, when the authorities returned for a second investiga-

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tion, the climate of opinion about Sister Benedetta had deteriorated. Her leadership was questioned by the nuns, and Sister Bartolomea testified that the visions had actually included erotic acts. Sister Benedetta said that sometimes the angel Splenditello had suggested these acts. Although the documents became more sparse after the investigation, Brown concludes that Sister Benedetta was found guilty of immodest acts and was imprisoned in the convent for the last thirty-five years of her life.

This record of a seventeenth-century event is remarkable, not so much as documentation of one nun's possible fall by the wayside, but for its clear and thorough description of lesbian activity in earlier times. •

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