

Cult busting

Last October there were spirits in the Supreme Court of New South Wales. They were nine feet tall but with no feet, had pointy eyes and a little cleft where the nose should be. The problem was that the only person who could see them was the plaintiff in a defamation case, Serge Benhayon, and he wouldn't say how many were floating around in there. It was around the time the spirits came into his cross-examination that Benhayon's case began to backfire spectacularly against him. As he explained his beliefs, teachings and practices to the incredulous barrister for the defence, Tom Molomby QC, it became increasingly apparent that this was one of the stranger cases to have ever come before the court. Yes, he admitted, among his 2300 reincarnations he had been both Leonardo Da Vinci and Pythagoras.

Yes, he said, people who had abused authority in past lives would be reincarnated as autistic and disabled children, and yes, people who had been sexually abused had been abusers in past lives. No, he had no medical or scientific training but he knew the root causes of cancer (rejection, lack of self-love), and was a healer ("On an energetic level I know what is going on in a body – endometriosis, fibroids, cysts, irregular periods – from an energetic point of view, there is no scientific way of measuring what you call energy.") He also admitted he had said, "you need 30 years of science to tell you what I can get in one minute".

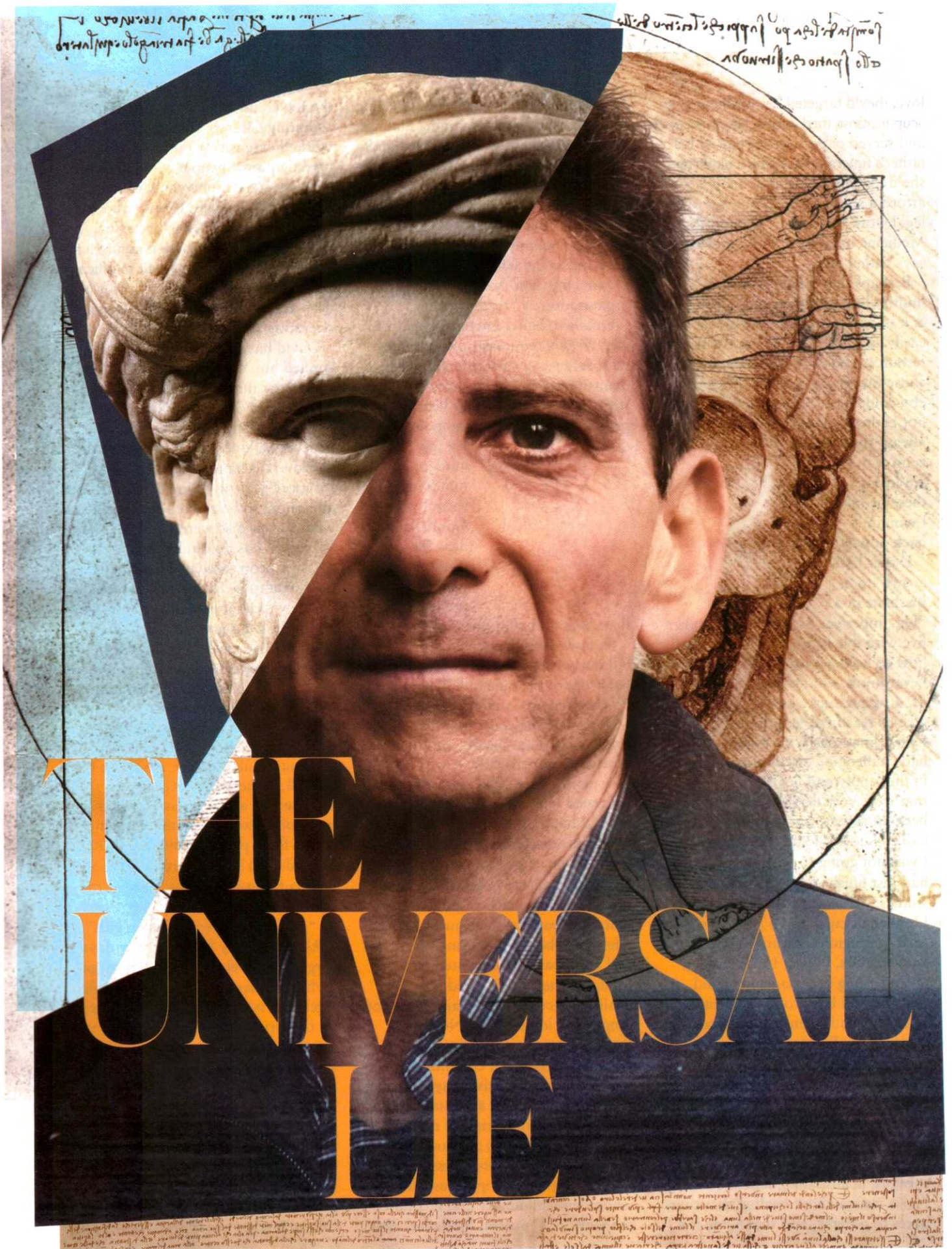
What the people in the court just weren't getting, apart from his devoted followers whose peculiar behaviour was not going unnoticed by the jury, was that they were all in the presence of a messiah who should be revered. You wouldn't think it to

look at him but according to the nothing if not ambitious Serge Benhayon of Goonellabah, NSW, he is the incarnation of a supernatural Ascended Master of the hierarchy – in the company of Jesus, Saint Germain, Saint Peter and Pythagoras, and the only human being to have achieved the "highest level of initiation" on earth. "I know everything about the universe and how it works," he has said. "I can answer any question about any mystery in the world, any mystery in the universe."

But if the path to such a steep ascension is compassion and kindness, he certainly hadn't shown either of these things to the defendant Esther Rockett, a blogger he was suing for defamation. For daring to criticise Serge and his cult organisation Universal Medicine, Esther had been followed, bullied, intimidated, abused and harassed. In attacks which could not be described as full of light or →

HEALER? VISIONARY? MONSTER?

Self-styled spiritual guru and Universal Medicine leader Serge Benhayon has recruited thousands of devoted followers to his cult, where he claims to be able to heal and likens himself to Jesus. But as **Susan Chenery** reports, a new court case may finally bring an end to his web of deceit and the string of victims in his wake.



THE UNIVERSAL LIE

love, they'd targeted her business as an acupuncturist, tried to have her prosecuted and served papers on the day of her father's funeral. Forced into bankruptcy, she'd lost her home and, unable to afford a solicitor, had done her own legal work for a year. "Universal Medicine has a weaponised law firm," says Esther now.

Perhaps they thought that a multimillion-dollar organisation with at least seven lawyers as members could easily squash a lone woman with few resources and shut her down. But they chose the wrong woman. Anybody else could have been destroyed but not Esther Rockett. "My attitude was always there

is no way I am losing to these people. I wouldn't back down."

Esther had grown up in Brisbane in a

"big, imperfect family, I was number five with five brothers, I had learned how to hold my own." Most of us will never know what we are really made of, if we are lucky and life does not give us reason to learn how to fight. Esther knew she was resilient. "I have had challenging circumstances, deaths in the family and health circumstances that were very testing." She had never been an activist but she believed she had right on her side. "I never thought I was not going to win," she says. She had just finished a degree in religious studies. "This was part of my study; I looked at cults in the New Age and eastern religions. Because I had studied cults, I knew I was looking at something very dangerous and that I would have to see it through."

If Serge had intended to silence a critic, to use Esther as an example and somehow legitimise himself, the outcome was the exact opposite. While his followers might believe he is God, the jury certainly did not. It was a long and stunning judgement that found he was leading a, "socially harmful cult", engaging in misleading conduct, making "false claims about healing that cause harm to others", and that Serge is a

"charlatan" who makes "bogus healing claims" among other damning findings.

Esther Rockett was vindicated and "relieved"; Serge Benhayon's supposedly impeccable karma was seriously dented, not to mention his credibility.

Not that this is likely to affect his followers, mainly women, up to 2000 here and in the UK, who are described by someone who has been inside the organisation as "rusted on".

Emails to Universal Medicine from *The Weekly* requesting an interview with Serge or a spokesperson went unanswered. But he has continually stated that it is not a cult because people don't live on a compound and

are free to come and go. But hundreds of them live in Goonellabah, near the headquarters, where Serge orchestrates

their lives and relationships.

So how did someone who had famously been a tennis coach, and bankrupt to the tune of half a million dollars, become, well, God?

Serge told the court that his awakening came shortly after his 35th birthday in April 1999. It was a "very very gentle, very still experience that deepened into the incredible amount of joy I had in my body". From there, "I was given access to modalities, about seven or eight modalities given to me in an instant knowing, sacred esoteric healing, chakra-puncture, esoteric breast massage, just to name a few." He began practising on friends and family and it "escalated by word of mouth" until he started his own healing practice. "The waiting list got longer and longer." The Northern Rivers where he is based, not too far from Byron Bay, is a community that is steeped in alternative ways of being, people looking for a spiritual life, searching for some kind of ecstasy. Among his followers are doctors, lawyers, psychologists, nurses and local government employees, all of whom lend credibility and facilitate the work of Universal Medicine. Says

"There is a deep sense of personal satisfaction operating inside a cult."

the Reverend Doctor David Millikan, a Uniting Church Theologian who has worked extensively in the field of cult investigation, "people who join these cults are strong, university educated, always middle-class. People who have a higher than normal expectation of what life is about. There is something extremely exhilarating about sacrificing yourself to a great cause. There is a deep sense of personal satisfaction operating inside a cult."

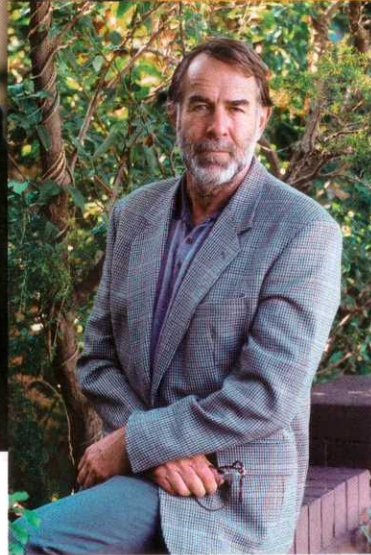
David has spent time with Serge, studied him closely and knows him. "The only thing he gets a rush from now is when he is standing up in front of people doing two-hour riffs. He believes he holds the salvation of the world in his hands. What he hungers for more than anything is respect and adulation, so he can tell the world what he has discovered and who he is." David has no doubt Serge believes his own propaganda. "He actually does believe he has divine qualities. The key to understanding him is what he thinks is his greatest attribute, stillness. The mechanical stare, slightly feminised voice, he never fumbles, never falters. That is stillness." Adulation, says Esther, is his "oxygen."

Serge's entire family, including his first wife, Deborah, second wife, Miranda, and four adult children are all on the payroll. Esther says his daughter Natalie was as young as 15 when she was doing exorcisms and removing spirits from people during workshops. Miranda had been a tennis pupil of Serge and had moved into his home at the age of 14. The jury found Serge had an "indecent interest in young girls".

Along the way in those early days Serge was developing his own religion, "which comes from a tradition called Ageless Wisdom". In fact, it is based on the writings of Alice A. Bailey, who wrote books on theosophical subjects and was one of the first writers to use the term New Age. Serge has taken her belief system and put his own spin on it in a kind of pastiche of religion, occult and science fiction. Taking bits, he told the court, from Jesus, Krishna, Buddha and others. "He has made the good and evil much stronger," says Esther. It relies heavily on a belief in



From top: Blogger Esther Rockett, who was sued unsuccessfully by Serge for defamation; Reverend Doctor David Millikan; Serge (centre) leaving court.



Universal Medicine has been the cause of dozens of relationship breakdowns, often with young children involved. *The Weekly* has spoken to a number of people whose partners have joined Universal Medicine and changed beyond recognition. “What was truly frightening,” says one man, “was to see a once rational and intelligent person change so much and so quickly.

reincarnation, and that “everything is energy”. In his esoteric teachings the world is divided into prana (negative energy) and fire (positive energy), “which comes from the Atomic womb of God”. Prana has to be cleared and replaced with fiery energy and being in your “gentleness” at all times. But since most of us exist in a state of prana, along with most forms of established wisdom and knowledge, certain foods, most music, and all books except his, his students become increasingly isolated trying to avoid it.

As well as dividing a community with a “them and us” mentality,

Our relationship, and that with family and friends, became secondary to Universal Medicine and the words of Serge Benhayon.”

This was echoed over and over again. “Seeing my ex turned from a wonderful, caring and rational person into a UM zombie illustrates how clearly anyone can be ensnared by this cult,” said another. “It soon became apparent everything in my partner’s life hinged on Serge’s often bizarre, unfounded ideas,” said one woman. “The most mundane activities were fraught with anxiety over pranic energies, astral entities and the

influence of so-called ‘Lords of Form.’” One man spoke of people coming back from workshops or retreats, “as if they were on drugs, in a strange state, spaced out, they were uncommunicative, not there, totally disengaged from family life.”

Matt Sutherland, whose relationship broke up when his wife Sarah went deep into Universal Medicine, as did her parents and her sister, says: “They think they are really amazing and they don’t want anyone else to bring them down. They think their husband and children have got negative energy.”

As one grieving husband said, “too much self-love becomes narcissism”.

Heartbroken partners, clinging on to what had been good relationships, have gone along with Universal Medicine to try to save their families, until, says Matt, “it becomes impossible. I thought it was all pretty harmless in the beginning, I just thought it was some fluffy New Age stuff. They were all claiming it was really helping them. I went to the Level 2 course and he was just speaking absolute crap, he wouldn’t answer people’s questions if he knew you were going to ask something controversial, and he was saying a lot of crazy stuff and trying to put entities into people. I started realising it was complete bullsh*t.”

Music collections get thrown out because his followers only listen to music made by Serge’s wife Miranda, son Michael, or the official musician Chris James.

They have his lectures on repeat on iPods and read only material that is related to Universal Medicine teachings. In a 2012 article for Fairfax, journalist David Leser wrote of a book burning in the garden of Universal Medicine lawyer Cameron Bell where people threw their books on other alternative healing onto the pyre because Serge had decreed them to be “prana”.

They are also thin, probably hungry, tired and not very well. His students follow Serge’s strict diet regime which eliminates caffeine, gluten, dairy, carbs and sugar, and is now down to one meal a day. Alcohol is strictly →



Left: Esther and Matt Sutherland celebrate after her win against Serge. Below: Matt with his former wife, Sarah.



“It is darkly delicious to have that ... power.”

forbidden, evil energy. Universal Medicine followers will not visit a house if there is a bottle of wine in the fridge. Serge only sleeps three or four hours a night between 9pm and 3am and so too do his followers.

Says Matt, “You would cook a meal and she [his wife, Sarah] wouldn’t eat it because there was a stock cube that contained yeast in it. Every aspect of our life was controlled by Serge, it is all she spoke about. You weren’t allowed to socialise with anyone who drank beer so we had no friends.”

After his relationship broke up, Matt was called to his children’s school. One of his children was exhausted and hungry; the principal had been feeding them out of her own pocket. “The children were getting up at 4am and they weren’t taking enough food to school because they were on the esoteric diet.”

Among the Supreme Court jury findings where that Serge Benhayon “preys on cancer patients” and “exploits cancer patients by targeting them to leave him bequests in their wills.”

Judith McIntyre, 66, met Serge in 2014 when he gave a talk at the

Byron Writers Festival. Recently divorced after a 40-year marriage, she had little confidence in dealing with finances, had moved from the city to a rural property, and had stage four breast cancer. Always a spiritual seeker, she was alone, vulnerable and very frightened. Serge told her she needed “deep self nurturing”. After a chakra-puncture session with Serge she felt the fear levels drop, and found stillness. Judith was cared for by Universal Medicine followers for the last months of her life, including being instructed by cult followers. She came to believe that she had caused her own cancer by self-neglect, but said – in a video filmed by Universal Medicine – that she had gone from terror to “a beautiful acceptance”.

Serge was teaching his followers that their “kidney energy” could be harmed in their next life if their children misspent their inheritance. But not, presumably, if they left it to him. He told Judith her children were “trying to destabilise you, trying to evoke your sympathy” which was, “an attack on the funds that will help The Hierarchy’s work on Earth.”

A chain of emails show him coaching her on how to draw up a new will that would withstand a legal challenge, and advising her not to talk about it publicly because evil spirits could cause “serious harm to donors.” Her adult children, Sarah and Seth, challenged the will when Judith died leaving \$1.4 million to Serge, and \$250,000 to each of them, but lost the case.

Universal Medicine followers are still out in the community running workshops in the women’s health market, facilitating cancer and women’s wellness retreats without declaring who they are to distressed and desperate people.

Serge Benhayon was the architect of his own downfall in the Supreme Court of NSW. At any time he could have stopped persecuting Esther. Now the outside world is turning against him, closing in. Where is all this going? Says Esther, “As time goes on and the cult gets bigger and the cult leader gets older, they often become more paranoid, more power obsessed. That is when things start to go really bad.”

Says David Millikan, “It is darkly delicious to have that sort of power over people, but the minute you do it they despise you. But the further you go in with an extreme character like Serge, the more he will ask.”

David believes the cult will “painfully peter out. Within the next six months, Serge’s capacity to recruit will be diminished, he will become more extreme, he will demand more of his people, with prophecies, testing them. He will be testing them to see if they still want to be with him. This is the beginning of a gradual decline. For him, the greatest catastrophe of the last several months is that he has lost the ability to maintain the spectacle.”

Esther’s concern is about the welfare of people still in the cult. And children who have no choice. Says Matt, “They are getting brought up with crazy stuff and just indoctrinated every day. There are going to be a lot of unhappy kids around.” **AWW**