

"It's a very dangerous thing to believe in nonsense."

-- James Randi

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Selling Irrationality at a Holistic Health Fair

by David Bloomberg

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I was at the Holistic Health Fair (April 24, Signature Inn, Springfield) and I can't remember the last time I felt like such a fish out of water, gasping for breath (not so much a breath of oxygen, but one of rationality). I was almost certainly the only skeptic there, but that wasn't why I stuck out (contrary to their claims, I doubt any of them could read my mind and know of my REALL affiliation). I was also almost the only man there (at least during the time I attended). The booths were staffed completely by women, with the exception of one husband-wife team; women made up almost all the attendees as well (I saw one man, who came with his significant other).More

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Even the way the booths were set up seemed to target women: The handouts were different shades of pink, women's jewelry was displayed, etc.

So no matter how much I wanted to just blend in and look around, it was simply impossible.

*Nonetheless, I went about my business of picking up flyers and looking at what the various people said they could do for me. I was somewhat surprised to see four Tarot card readers (out of about 16 booths) at a health fair! Two were combined with other items (a store and a chiropractor), while two were stand-alone (all had customers seated while I was there). One threw in some ufology as well and another, Colleen, said she was recommended by the late Greta Alexander (Colleen's flyer says she is a "Doctor of Metaphysics," among other things). So what were they doing at a health fair? I think Editor Wally hit it on the head when I mentioned this to him. He said, "They know their audience." In other words, the people who come to a holistic health fair are likely to also believe in psychic readings.

In fact, some of the participants didn't seem to make a distinction between health and spirits. One woman's card advertised "Advanced Pranic Healing" (don't ask, I don't know what it is either) alongside "Contact with the Spirit Realm."

Even the most normal-looking booth, for the local vegetarian club, was staffed by a "Certified Reiki Master." I talked to a few people and picked up as many flyers as I could hold. Here is what I found:

A flyer on "radonics" equated "the sub-conscious nervous system" with "our Spiritual 'Being.'" It added, "Every organ in the body has it's (sic) own unique energy frequency field." They use "the vibrational energy of natural herbal oils" to "create a healing." And they use "a psychic body analysis" to find the "frequency disruptions" they need to heal.

The Tarot reader/ufologist's flyers quoted Deepak Chopra, talked about "symbolic dream language," and said "I believe that trying to understand [UFOs and alien abductions] is the single most important aspect of human evolution in our society today" and that she hopes to form an abductee support group soon.

I found four flyers on Reiki. One said that, through a special "attunement process," a Reiki practitioner "becomes an open conduit and minister of the energy of Reiki, the Breath of Spirit. The attunement cannot be explained in physical terms..." This flyer linked Reiki directly with "the hands of Christ" and says the symbol for Reiki was "revealed to a Japanese Christian."

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A second flyer on Reiki never mentioned Christianity at all, but said, "The essence of Reiki is as alive today as it was hundreds of years ago when it was recorded in the Sutras." It talked about the "Universal Life Force" instead of the "hands of Christ." Indeed, this second flyer went out of its way to push Reiki as a "complement" to both real medicine and "all spiritual belief systems."

A third flyer said Reiki is "an ancient healing art that has been revived in this century." Again, it mentioned nothing about any specific religion (just "spiritual"). And even though it is a "healing art," practitioners do not actually heal, but let the body do the work.

A Reiki newsletter had an article claiming that "Science Measures the Human Energy Field." Among the claims in this article were:

"In a few decades scientists have gone from a conviction that there is no such thing as an energy field around the human body, to an absolute certainty that it exists."

"The picture that is emerging has the same scientific foundations that underlie modern clinical medicine."

"[A researcher] discovered that a huge pulsating biomagnetic field emanated from the hands of a TT practitioner... The biomagnetic pulsations from the hands are in the same frequency range as brain waves."

The authors cite supposed scientific articles, and even refer people to their own published articles, but when the reader gets to the end of this essay, they don't find the list to check out, but rather the address of the authors. Hmmm.

A flyer on chiropractic (given away on the table with a Tarot reader) discussed "subluxations" and other unproven claims of what I would call the "bad" chiropractors (the ones who believe all disease stems from the spine – see also "REALLity Check," this issue).

One company was selling a fruit and vegetable rinse that sounded like the miracle tonics that used to be sold out of the back of a wagon. You can use it to get rid of pesticides on vegetables, to heal warts and athletes foot, kill lice, and keep ticks off your pet. Truly an amazing product! And they had other products also – "whole foods" you can eat to "regenerate your body back to better health." Because it's a "whole food," the woman hawking this line said I could even give it to an infant – I shiver to think that somebody might actually follow this advice.

A flyer on RegenesiS started by linking itself to Wilhelm Reich (who "discovered" orgone energy). Then it discussed the "process of mobilizing and directing the flow of cellular energy to stimulate, facilitate and accelerate the natural healing process of the human body... The source of healing energy in RegenesiS is the energy used by the fetus to create itself."

In the "scary" category is the quote from another Regenesys flyer noting, "There are Continuing Education Units for RN's and LVN's from the California Board of Registered Nursing Provider No. 8725" for classes in this particular form of "healing."

A local couple had a booth to present the therapy they discovered, called Chironomy. This technique, which is apparently somehow related to Reiki, helps "flush toxins and fat." They also sold little plastic pieces they created to tell the future; each has a picture representing one aspect of life on one side and is blank on the other, you ask a question and then toss them to get the answer. The woman also indicated, in conversation, that President Clinton uses Neuro-Linguistic Programming to cause the U.S. population to blame Congress instead of him for any problems.

And finally, what would a holistic health fair be without ear coning? Yes, that's right – you stick a paper cone in your ear and light a candle in the cone to "help with a variety of problems related to the ears." How do we know it works? Because when you're done, you open the cone and find wax! Obviously, this came up from your ears, not down from the candle. Anybody who says otherwise must be one of those skeptics.

So what did I learn? Not a whole lot beyond what I already knew. Nowhere was the voice of rationality to be found at this "health fair." Instead, a wide variety of nonsense for up for sale, and the buyers were only too happy to oblige.

[David Bloomberg is the chairman of REALL.]