# Skeptical Briefs

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# Glen Ivy: A Study in Rational Decision Making

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On a visit to a luxurious Southern California spa, my skepticism alert was triggered. That winter, Glen Ivy Hot Springs Spa offered "Two-fer-Tuesday," an incentive to attract visitors when it wasn't sunny. Near the admission desk, I noticed a group of lovely baskets full of spa goodies and a sign that invited guests to fill out a survey for a chance to win one of the gift baskets.

My friend and I each looked at a form; the company was surveying its guests about their beliefs in the paranormal! How often do we get to influence our social environment that way? How often, in fact, do we ever know what goes into such a business decision? This spa has been operating since the Civil War, and its customers were being asked how they felt about the adoption of a spiritual slant on mudding and tubbing.

And the baskets were beautiful. Although I rarely win anything, I figured (rationally) I had a better chance to win a basket than the California lottery.

## Health from Water

The word *spa* is an acronym for the Latin expression *salus per aquam*, which means "health from water" (Kaprocki 2005). During the mid-nineteenth century, across the pond, even Charles Darwin availed himself of a water cure. Darwin was chronically ill, with symptoms that included nausea, palpitations, vomiting, profound exhaustion, and depression. By some accounts, his symptoms began before his voyage aboard the *HMS Beagle*, and he basically spent the last one-third of his life at home at Down House. His symptoms could be attributed to either of a couple of diagnoses. Darwin's abdominal pain may have been psychosomatic, echoing the stomach distress suffered by his mother before her death when he was eight years old. (He was subsequently reared by his older sisters, who forbade him to talk about her, which was, perhaps, understandable in light of their own grief but may have been harmful to their younger brother.) Or, less likely, his symptoms could be attributed to Chagas disease (also known as American trypanosomiasis), an illness caused by a South American parasite that he could have acquired during the five-year excursion on the *Beagle* (Sagan and Druyan 1992, 44). Because Darwin wrote notes and letters about his physical problems as voluminously as he wrote about everything else, twentieth-century doctors have had a lot of evidence on which to base diagnoses. Although it's hard for me to think of Charles Darwin as anything but calm and confident, evidence indicates that he was a workaholic who suffered from panic attacks, skin eruptions, and gastritis (Bowlby 1990).

Darwin's symptoms became acute after the death of his father in November 1848 (Sagan and Druyan 1992). The water cure Darwin endured began in a spa called Malvern, while he was under the care of Dr. James Gully, a very charismatic man, in March 1849 (Bowlby 1990, 284). Darwin, his wife Emma, and their entire household was moved to Malvern for three months. The water-cure treatments included rising at 6:45 A.M. for a scrubbing in cold water, a walk for twenty minutes, cold-water compresses to be worn all day and renewed every two hours, feet in cold water for ten minutes at noon, another twenty-minute walk, dinner, and rest. The diet permitted some meats and eggs, but no sugar, butter, spices, tea, bacon, or "anything good," as Darwin wrote to his sister. Afterward, he said he felt better. He insisted that the water cure at Malvern had helped him when other doctors had not, and said, "I feel certain that the water cure is no quackery . . ." (Bowlby 1990, 285).

Darwin was so impressed with his improved health, he had a *douche* (shower) installed at Down, and continued the

## CONTENTS

regime at home, including "lamp five times per week, a shallow bath for five minutes afterwards; douche daily for five minutes, and dripping sheet daily. . . . The cold water cure, together with three short walks, is curiously exhausting. . . . Dr. Gully thinks he shall quite cure me in six or nine months more," as Darwin wrote in a letter to Joseph Dalton Hooker, one of Darwin's closest friends (Bowlby 1990, 288). It sounds to me like torture, not so different from shock treatment, but who knows?[1]

The spiritual slant on health treatments is insidious and ubiquitous: a magazine I found in my dentist's office about women's fashions casually included spa spirituality. There, in the beauty-know-it-all column, an article about giving oneself a spa-quality pedicure, was detailed information about reflexology, with a Web link, no less (Perez 2005).

The language of spa treatments is rich with the global history of bodywork. The word *massage* is alleged to be derived from the Arabic word *masah*, which means to stroke with the hand. One mysterious-sounding word that is used, that is actually on the packaging of the toothpaste I use, is *Ayurveda* (a combination of the Sanskrit words *ayur*, meaning "life," plus *veda*, meaning "knowledge"). It is reportedly an ancient holistic science of India that aims at maintaining total harmony between mind, life, body, and spirit with nature's rhythms and the world around us (Auromére 2002). Other words that are also frequently used in spa literature are *Reiki*, *reflexology*, *aromatherapy*, etc.

## Nothing New under the Sun

At Glen Ivy, I think I've heard languages from almost every continent spoken; I've seen tourists of every age, shape, size, and skin tone. Glen Ivy seems to attract people from everywhere. This epicurean experience was not a new idea in the Californian lifestyle. The geothermal hot springs had been attracting native Californians before the arrival of Europeans on the continent. Native Americans bathed in mineral springs to enhance their physical and spiritual well-being, and these baths played an important role in the social structures of their communities. Legends that exaggerated the healing properties of these hot springs may have drawn European explorers such as Juan Ponce de Leon and Hernando deSoto to the New World (Kaprocki 2005; Lund 1995).

In commercial use since the mid-nineteenth century, Glen Ivy Hot Springs first adopted that name in 1890. (Photo courtesy of Glen Ivy)

The first commercial use of the springs at Glen Ivy was during the Civil War era (Glen Ivy n.d.). My only other experience with developed natural hot springs happened in the sixties, and that particular spa was not luxurious but funky and creepy. But Glen Ivy is all about comfort, luxury, and relaxation.

The spa industry is global and was considered one of the hot business trends of 2004, according to a business journal from the U.K.—including pet spas (Young 2004). In Hungary, members of the postcommunist generation incorporate the use of day spas into their budgets to de-stress from the pace of a competitive economy. The European history of spas includes the grand spa hotels in such classic locales as Baden-Baden, Bath, and Marienbad, and they consider a spa medicinal as well as a luxury (LaForest n.d.). The International Spa Association (ISPA) includes such old, well-established spas, as well as many others, classifying them in categories such as "medical spas," "day spas," and "cruise-ship spas."

The British locale Bath is named for the baths there, the use of which dates to the Roman occupation of the British Isles. Roman citizens bathed daily. It is not known when the Romans used the first public bath, but during the reign of Caesar Augustus from 27 B.C. to 14 A.D., there were approximately 170 such baths throughout the city of Rome. They were first mainly used by the soldiers as a way of easing the wounds of battle, but, by 43 A.D., the members of the Roman public began to take a different view: it was then that they began to view baths as a way of providing rest, relaxation, and solace to all people, not just those weary of war.

## Club Mud

In the 1980s, when Club Med was revolutionizing the vacation industry with its pop-beads currency and isolated regional vacation meccas, Glen Ivy Hot Springs leaped into the wake of this high-powered media campaign with a new nickname: *Club Mud*.

There were then at least eight pools of water—in 2007, there are nineteen, including: a saltwater pool; a lap pool; a rooftop pool; an indoor, underground grotto for special cosmetic treatments; and a row of outdoor tubs, euphemistically called mineral pools, big enough for about four people each to soak in sulfurous-smelling, bubbling hot water. In addition, there is a pool of warm, reddish, muddy-looking water about knee deep. In its center is an urn of soft, red clay. The object is to wade out to the urn, scoop out a handful of the clay, and smear it on all exposed skin. Glen Ivy is not clothing-optional, so they warn visitors to bring swimsuits that they won't care about staining. The surrounding deck has a lot of "banana lounges," and, on a

hot, sunny day, the mud-covered tourists bake until the mud dries, supposedly pulling the "impurities" out through their skins. Although I didn't think I was having a therapeutic experience, it was fun to talk with the other people while we were all enjoying the warmth and the odd, drawing sensation. Later, visitors washed off the mud in outdoor showers. Everyone seemed to leave with the same reddish tan; I noticed it washing off in my own shower for at least a week after that first day trip.

Several years and many visits later, a clearer picture of Glen Ivy's appeal began to emerge. In the summertime, before the damage to the skin that results from excessive sun exposure was as well understood as it is now, it was a refreshing getaway to zoom out to Corona, a suburb of Los Angeles, next to better-known Pomona, and spend a weekend, staying overnight in nearby motels. Two days of sunning and mudding was as good as any cruise for R. and R., at a fraction of the cost. Did I feel healthier? I think any vacation results in a feeling of refreshment—a new perspective on things. Was it the water? I just soaked in it.

I saw that, except for the pool with the urn of clay, Glen Ivy's pools were crystal clear—some with bubbles, some without—at all different temperatures, from almost uncomfortably hot to refreshingly cool. Some were exposed to the sun; one was under canopies for protection from the sun. All but one had ledges built around it for seating in the water. The unmuddied rows of banana lounges were occupied by tourists, with small tables and, in the early nineties, many Bakelite ashtrays. One could make an appointment for a manicure, facial, or massage; near the entrance, there was a gift shop with swimsuits, tee-shirts, etc. I thought I'd hit the vacation jackpot. All this luxury was about $30 a day per couple then; massages, food, and other offerings were extra.

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### The Spa Industry

For the past twenty years or so, the spa industry has crossed back and forth over the "therapy" divide. The manifestation of that at Glen Ivy is the notion that letting mud dry on one's skin is drawing out "impurities." The suggestion that this is a *spiritual* experience, however, was never made. Other spas have adopted a trend toward associating their services with so-called spiritual experiences. And not all "spas" are the vacation-getaway type. Destination spas are specialty hotels with spa services, often emphasizing a particular spiritual theme, for vacations with overnight accommodations.

A trio of women "mud" themselves at Glen Ivy. (Photo courtesy of Glen Ivy)

At least one spiritual organization has incorporated a spa in its galaxy of offerings. In St. Paul, Minnesota, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet have incorporated a spa experience into their religious rites. The "spiritual spa" is free, but the accompanying luncheon on the third Friday of each month is $5.00. "Look for additional offerings on various forms and styles of prayer, spirituality readings, discussion groups, and tai chi, to name a few" (Sisters of St. Joseph 2003). The notion of taking a tub with Jesus is a little spin on the trend.

### Licensing and Pseudoscience

In California, there is no state license to practice massage; licensing is granted city by city. Most cities require a minimum of 100 to 500 hours of training to qualify for licensing (Institute 2006). While the schools that provide instruction in massage therapy are licensed to teach anatomy and kinesiology, obviously relevant topics, the licensing process for massage therapists, interestingly, can include the requirement to study modalities that border on theology. According to Myriah Daniels, masseuse and skeptic, the licensing requirements constitute a violation of the separation of church and state. "I should be allowed to care for a person's body without having to be forced to parrot and pass tests based on theologies and pseudoscience; that is not what my work is about," she comments (Daniels 2005).

Colleges are credentialed according to what they teach. In addition to being associated with physical therapy, bodywork was given a spiritual aspect because of timing and geography. During the mid to late twentieth century, eastern religion, which had a particular regard for the human body, was attracting the attention of a generation of Americans. Since religion, any religion, was given deference by Americans, when the licensing requirements were being considered, the principles of yoga and other eastern practices were included. So the schools that provided education for licensing were institutionalized at a time when the art of massage was influenced by these practices.

"Because we've been raised in a society that wasn't allowed to touch, we accepted the religious basis of eastern bodywork because it was associated with a theological belief system," Daniels continues. "There is more allowance for theology to be practiced,

than for basic health care for the human body . . . we had to learn how to take care of our bodies through culture/theology that came here from exotic lands, which includes basic bodily care" (Daniels 2005).

### Rational Decision Making

Glen Ivy has been using surveys to make decisions about their business practices for many years. The survey I filled out was a recent attempt to answer specific concerns; it was not conducted because the number of visitors to Glen Ivy was dropping off. In fact, the customer base has held steady, averaging about 150,000 visitors annually.

The survey was conducted by a professional survey service over a period of four months, from December 2004 to mid-April 2005. Glen Ivy's marketing and design manager, Karen Fojas, says there were about 150 responses from the Brea location (a recent branch addition) and 880 from the Corona location—a total of over 1,000 responses, 30 percent from men, 70 percent from women (Fojas 2007).

The people who run Glen Ivy wanted opinions about what the visitors thought the spa is known for, how they heard about it, the reasons they come, and how often they come. The survey asked if the visitors used the additional spa services (presumably instead of using only the pools). The survey was exploring two basic matters: the appropriateness of offering spiritually-oriented services at a spa and the desirability of it.

"Currently we don't offer any of those spiritual treatments," says Fojas. "We don't offer Reiki, or those other treatments. We were trying to see if our customer base would be interested in these services—the appropriateness or desirability for treatments like reflexology, Reiki, *qi gong*, Attunement, or cranial sacral therapy or energy work."

Fojas explained that the two questions are very different. The appropriateness was recognized by the respondents; the desirability, whether they wanted access to them at Glen Ivy, was another story entirely. "What we found in those questions as a result was, yes, the most popular being reflexology, it is appropriate for our facility—but there was not an overwhelming desirability to actually partake in the treatment if we added it. . . . We do surveys quite a bit. It's how we gauge where we're headed, what our guests want and how we can make their experience better, and what we could do differently; what we're doing right and what we're doing wrong" (Fojas 2007).

When fashion and style trends shift, managers must decide whether to follow the trends or stick with what has worked throughout the lives of their businesses. Specifically, in the case of Glen Ivy Hot Springs, the fashionable spas had begun to add so-called spiritual, pseudo-therapeutic treatments to the selection of services offered to consumers. By conducting a survey of their clientele, the spa determined what it was about their existing business plan that attracts visitors and whether it would hurt or help them to make changes in the otherwise straightforward delivery of the pleasures of tubbing and mudding.

By the way, I won a basket; I gave it to my mom for Mothers' Day.

### Note

1. Thanks to Amanda Chesworth, CFI's Director of Education and the founder of its Inquiring Minds program, for suggesting the exploration of Darwin's experience with a water cure.

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Committee for Skeptical Inquiry

## CSI Announces the Winner of the Second Annual Robert P. Balles Prize!

CSI is pleased to announce the winner of the second annual Robert P. Balles Annual Prize in Critical Thinking, sponsored by the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI).

For 2006, the Robert P. Balles prize will be awarded to Ben Goldacre for his weekly column, "Bad Science," which appears in the *Guardian* (UK) newspaper. Goldacre, an award-winning writer, broadcaster, and medical doctor, has written his column in the *Guardian* since 2003. Goldacre's columns can be found at his Web site at: www.badscience.net/

The Robert P. Balles Annual Prize in Critical Thinking is a $1,000 award that is given to the author of the published work that best exemplifies healthy skepticism, logical analysis, or empirical science.

CSI established criteria for the prize, including use of the most parsimonious theory to fit data or to explain apparently preternatural phenomena.

This prize has been established through the generosity of Robert P. Balles, an Associate Member of CSI, and the Robert P. Balles Endowed Memorial Fund, a permanent endowment fund for the benefit of CSI.

Nominations are now being accepted for 2007. Please send submissions to: Barry Karr, Executive Director, CSI, P.O. Box 703, Amherst, NY 14226-0703.