



AAAAH, SPAS

HANDLE WITH CARE

What's with all the New Age sermonizing? All I want is a massage!

BY KRIS FRIESWICK

ABOUT HALFWAY THROUGH MY MOST RECENT massage, the therapist announced that she could tell that I store all my negative energy in my belly. Her diagnosis, aside from explaining the spare tire I developed over the winter, did nothing but create more negative energy, all of it directed at her. That's because I get massages to relax and for neck pain, not to have my emotional failings diagnosed by a 22-year-old with a pint of lavender-scented oil and a smelly candle.

A few weeks later, during the guided meditation at the end of a yoga class, the instructor went straight from deep breathing into an impromptu sermon about the universal energy that flows through all creatures and which is connected to and draws power from "The One." As an atheist, my first instinct was to use my universal energy to gag her with one of my yoga straps.

So much for inner peace. I've been a spa devotee for years, averaging at least three visits a month, including facials, massages, body wraps, cellulite treatments (hope springs eternal), manicures, and pedicures. But I go to the spa to be rejuvenated, not converted. And now it seems that proselytizing is the new frontier for spas – spiritual counseling and enlightenment along with the traditional physical services. A quick scan of the menus at some top spas shows the ubiquity of the spirit biz. Luxurious Canyon Ranch in Lenox offers a menu of "Spirituality" services that go way beyond your standard Swedish-massage-and-spa-lunch, or even meditation. There's the "Inner Journey" treatment, guided hypnosis offered to help clients figure out where they're going in life based on where they've been. And "Soul Coaching," performed by a behavioral therapist, is available to clients searching for a more meaningful life. The Tranquility Day Spa in Watertown offers manis, pedis, massage, and "intuitive readings" from an in-house spiritualist, who sometimes uses tarot cards and other times just her intuition. She will also perform a ritual involving Tibetan "singing bowls" that, when struck, supposedly create white light

that refracts into a rainbow and acts on your chakras. The service is a type of "sound healing." Awesome.

Let's be clear on the definitions. The new spirituality-for-sale that I am talking about is not the same as services like reflexology that aim to achieve physical benefits by, practitioners claim, manipulating the flow of energy through a person's body. There's no preaching, no judgments by the therapist, no talks about "the One," no setting a person on a sacred path, just, hopefully, relief from ailments. But talky services that claim to banish bad thoughts, realign negative memories, give me a better life – that's an entirely different jar of unguent.

ASHRAMS AND OTHER TYPES OF SPIRITUAL AND YOGIC retreats have long offered their special brands of guidance for those willing to pay. The difference today is that now you can find a shamanic spirit guide down at the local Cut 'n' Curl. Some say this increasing use of spas as a depot for spiritual coaching is due to the failure of the institutions that have traditionally provided such guidance – religions, hospitals, psychiatrists and other kinds of doctors – and that the spas are just filling a void.

"People aren't happy with conventional medicine anymore," says Nina McIntosh, a writer, teacher, and former psychiatric social worker and Rolfer – that's a specialized type of massage – who lives in Asheville, North Carolina. She is the author of *The Educated Heart*, a textbook dealing with professional boundaries and ethics for massage therapists. "There's unhappiness with the amount of time [people] spend with their doctor. They may be unhappy with conventional churches, and they're seeking other things."

Dianne Polseno, president of Cortiva Institute Boston, a massage therapy school located in Watertown, agrees with the diagnosis. "I think people are seeking spiritual growth, and I don't think of it as a → PAGE 50

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negative thing,” she says, “but I think people need to be careful who they listen to.”

For some, the promise of a spit-polished spirit in one hour for \$150 (plus tip) is too good to pass up. So these services spring up at places once considered retreats for physical and cosmetic rejuvenation. It's the law of supply and demand at work, and as long as the client knows and wants what he or she is getting into, bring on the singing bowls and crystals. While it's a little depressing that Americans are so spiritually depleted that we seek guidance from anyone claiming knowledge of “the way,” that doesn't mean there should be a ban on Rent-a-Gurus at spas. I'm sure there are many people who feel their lives have been improved by consulting with them. However, the slow encroachment of spirituality into traditional spa services is a concern, both for clients like me and for industry insiders.

McIntosh recalls one massage at which her therapist – fresh off a weekend workshop, no doubt – handed her a spirituality pamphlet. “There's a sense of superiority about it,” she says. “An ‘I know what's best for you’ attitude. I didn't ask her for help or think of her as a spiritual authority.” Although the young woman was likely just trying to help, she lost a client in the process.

The increase in this sort of interaction seems almost inevitable to insiders. “There are many people who go into massage because they feel they have a sort of calling,” McIntosh says. Polseno sees a similar thing happening. “Massage therapists tend to have a more holistic perspective, which honors the connection between mind, body, and spirit,” she says.

Spa directors see all of this happening, and the smart ones are realizing the importance of preserving the boundaries between client and therapist. At Canyon Ranch, clients sign up for the Spirituality menu; there's no pushing that type of treatment at Tranquility, either. And at Exhale in downtown Boston, prospective hires are screened carefully, and anyone who feels a calling to share the spiritual good word is weeded out early in the process.

“We haven't had the need to say ‘Don't preach in the massage,’” says Rhea van Lingen, a therapist at Exhale. “We never want someone preaching within therapy. It's not our place.” However, Courtney Kolff, Exhale's spa director, sees the potential for it to happen as spas add more spiritual practices in response to client wishes. “Because we have yoga and other types of classes, we bring in a different type of guest” who might be more open to that kind of conversation, she says. “But we always take our cues from what the guest wants.”

But as I learned during my own recent massage, if a therapist decides the time is right to preach, he or she doesn't always ask first, and plenty of clients don't feel they're in the position to do much about it, what with being greased, prone, and naked under only a thin sheet. “There are all kinds of unconscious dynamics that make it difficult for clients to confront a therapist,” says McIntosh. “Even normally assertive people will acquiesce.”

These spa professionals say that if you find yourself unwillingly in the clutches of a massage-table messiah and lack the nerve to speak up, let a manager know about it afterward, since most spas actively discourage this behavior. But the best medicine may be preventative. If you don't want a lecture or a commentary on your spiritual life, let the therapist know that you prefer silence before your service begins. That's what I do now – well, after I ask the therapist if she knows how I can get rid of this big roll of negative energy around my belly before bikini season. ■