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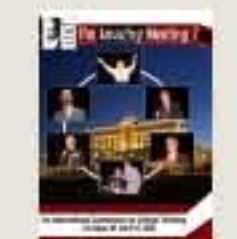
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### Touched!

Swift

Written by Penn Bullock

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In the 1980s, Jean Baudrillard, an obtuse but occasionally lucid postmodernist, wrote a book called *America* in which he noted some eerie goings-on. "This is a culture," he wrote with alarm, "which sets up specialized institutes so that people's bodies can come together and touch." I remembered Baudrillard's remark as I toured the Touch Research Institute in Miami, with its goal of eradicating strife and sickness globally.

For an organization that intends to save the world through massage, its facilities are small. Headquartered in a building on the University of Miami's School of Medicine campus, the Institute occupies a single tiny office crammed with mazy grey cubicles. I went there for a tour. Tiffany Field, the head of the Institute, greeted me at the door wearing a lab coat and a warm smile. She looked to be in her 50s, but wouldn't disclose her age. She had long brown hair down her back, deeply tanned skin, and thick racetracks of eyeliner around her eyes.

The Touch Research Institute was founded in 1992 on the whimsy of the CEO of Johnson & Johnson, Jim Burke. At the time, he sat on the board of 30 other corporations, a feat worthy of titans like JP Morgan and John Rockefeller. But he was no heartless, top-hatted capitalist. In fact, he had a bizarre and heartwarming utopian vision: to "cure the world of war and disease" through touch.

Jim Burke approached Field while she was working at the University of Miami. With a Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology from the University of Massachusetts, Field had pioneered early research into the potentially vital effect of a mother's touch on the growth of infants. Burke was impressed by those studies and decided to entrust his utopian project with Field. He gave her a grant of \$250,000. In collaboration with faculty at the University of Miami and Duke's School of Medicine, Field turned the money into the Touch Research Institute. Further funding came through the National Institute of Health, which donates hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars to the Institute annually.

The Touch Research Institute claims that massage therapy is a palliative for almost all bodily ailments. To demonstrate this healing power, Field handed me over to her assistant for a free massage. Soft-spoken and gentle, the assistant had just returned from a wedding in Mexico at the height of swine flu. She led me through a hall, past "Cytogenetic" laboratories unrelated to the Institute, into a darkened, disused boardroom. She directed me to undress to my boxers and lay down on a massage table.

Swine flu carrier or not, she was an effective masseuse. In the last few minutes I drifted into a magical, half-awake, nirvana-like state. I left the Touch Research Institute with looser muscles and a bounce in my step. I felt like I was prancing on the moon. But I had been underwhelmed by the Institute's office, and learnt little about their underlying research. It appeared to me that two doctors were running a massage parlor out of a shady boardroom. And the effect of the massage wore off in no time, as the stresses of the day reclaimed me. Could these fleeting, pleasant feelings substantially boost the immune system in HIV patients or prevent premature birth in pregnant woman? The Touch Research Institute says so.

Undermining its credibility, the Institute has embraced the whole dubious gamut of alternative medicine. On its website, it has compiled studies — conducted both by the Institute and other researchers — on massage therapy, music therapy, aromatherapy, acupuncture, Tai Chi, and Yoga. They invariably point to the same conclusion: that these methods are medicine. One study conducted by Tiffany Field claims that the brain chemistry of teenage girls is improved by rock music.

Another study concluded, in a blizzard of scientific jargon, that listening to Mozart can reduce skin allergies to latex. Asked about that study, James Randi flatly called it "bullshit." "Unless it was done double-blind," he said, "we have nothing to work with." The Mozart experiment wasn't done double-blind, but it did include a control group that listened to Beethoven. Quirkily, in the world of music therapy, Mozart's music is presumed to have healing power, whereas Beethoven's music (and the music of all the Romantic composers after him) is considered a placebo.

Field is particularly interested in the smell of lavender, which her studies in aromatherapy show has a certain *je-ne-sais-quoi*. "I don't know what it is about lavender, but it relaxes you, it lowers your heart rate, it brings your brain waves in a direction of higher alertness," she says. Stephen Macknik, a neuroscientist at the Barrow Institute in Phoenix, Arizona, one of the largest neuroscience hospitals in the world, is skeptical. "I study olfaction and I'm not aware of any credible evidence to suggest aromatherapy improves cognitive function whatsoever." When pressed, Field concurs. "It has no proven health benefits," she admits, a little sadly, on the phone.

For all their work in alternative medicine, Field and her team have focused mainly on massage therapy. Since 1992, the Institute has corralled groups of patients at hospitals on the UM campus and experimented on them with massage. Often enough, the studies come to the banal conclusion that massage lowers stress. That's a statement of the obvious, but it's nothing to sniff at: Stress is caused primarily by a hormone called cortisol, which is known to fetter the immune system and "do damage to the body and brain," as Macknik confirms. So relieving stress could strengthen the immune system and the body as a whole.

If all of Field's studies are to be believed, however, massage therapy helps with just about anything and everything, starting alphabetically with aggression, Alzheimer's, anorexia, anxiety, arthritis, asthma, ADHD, autism, behavioral problems in preschoolers, blood pressure, breast cancer, bulimia, burn victims, cancer, carpal tunnel syndrome, cerebral palsy, chronic fatigue symptom, cocaine exposure in infants, cognition (learning), cystic fibrosis, depression, diabetes, down syndrome, fibromyalgia, headache, HIV, hypertension, job stress, labor pain, leukemia, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's, preterm birth, posttraumatic stress, premenstrual syndrome, sexual abuse coping, sleep, spinal cord injuries, organ transplants, and even voice disorders.

That litany could well be a bill of goods, but Field emphasizes that massage is a complementary treatment and not a cure. Macknik, the neuroscientist at the Barrow Institute, reviewed some of their studies and said, "It looks like these are real — the only problem is that a lot of them aren't double blind, which is what I want to see if I'm to redirect my research in their direction. These are what we call preliminary studies, which need to be redone double-blind."

Field protests that double-blind studies are impossible in massage therapy. "We can only approximate double-blindness by having two different pressure massages — light pressure, which we know to be ineffective, and moderate pressure massage. The groups don't know which one is effective or which treatment they're getting. Light pressure massage is as close to a placebo as you get in any kind of live therapy." It's a reasonable argument. She further contends, "The only possible studies you can do with double-blind are drug studies, where the pills are the same color and you don't know that one's a placebo and one's not."

A skeptical, licensed massage therapist in Miami, who asked not to be quoted by name, cast doubt on the distinction between moderate and light pressure massage — a distinction that is the crux of most of the Institute's research. "You can't standardize a massage," he said. He points out that there are numberless varieties of the practice. The standard Western model was promulgated in the 1800s by a Swedish gymnastics instructor and physiologist, Pehr Henrik Ling, who derived what we know as the Swedish Massage from ancient Chinese texts. Adding to that, there are dozens or hundreds of permutations of massage in Asia and across the world. Massages vary individually too. The outcome of a massage depends on the particular strokes employed, the skill of the massage therapist, and the psychology of the patient. The variables pile up. If massage therapy can't be standardized, then is it viable as an across-the-board medical treatment? Maybe not.

But Tiffany Field and her colleagues at the Touch Research Institute would insist otherwise. The fact is, they purport, that massage therapy can prevent premature birth in pregnant women — and not just reduce it, but eliminate it altogether. "We found that the pregnancy massage lowers cortisol levels and thereby prevents prematurity completely," Field states matter-of-factly. (Conversely, in ancient China a specialized form of massage was used to induce abortions.) Massage therapy, she says, can also stimulate growth and activity in babies born prematurely: "With moderate pressure massage, we increased premature babies weight gain by 47% and lowered their hospital stay by 6 days and the hospital costs by 10,000 dollars." TRI has gotten plenty of press attention for those claims.

In 2006, the Touch Research Institute showed up in a *Today Show* segment on handholding. A couple was interviewed about their paw clutching habits and Field was brought on camera to intone that hand-holding is both romantic and good for your health. Touching, she said in a familiar refrain, applies pressure to the skin, which slows down the heart rate and relieves stress.

It was a strange segment. Why did *America* need reminding that holding hands is nice? Perhaps it's that the country has lost touch with itself, so to speak. An American can go months or years without touching another person. Accidental touches in public are avoided strenuously; there seem to be few things more awkward than inadvertently brushing a person's leg or foot under a restaurant table, for fear it will be interpreted sexually. Litigation, sexual harassment codes, and paranoia about pedophilia have cut down on touch. As Tiffany Field mentions in her book, *Touch*, in some preschools teachers are banned from giving hugs to students. Technology has also dried up intimacy. So much communication nowadays takes place on networks, leading Baudrillard, the Frenchman, to write: "Interface or interaction... has replaced face-to-face contact and action in America."

America is neurotic about and deprived of touch. So, in a perverse twist, touch ends up being administered to the population by utopian institutes, bankrolled by the government and the world's largest pharmaceutical companies. The Touch Research Institute in Miami is by far the least ridiculous of these outfits: At Harvard, touch researchers have investigated chakras and "energy fields" and touted the power of Reiki, a Japanese alternative medicine that clinical studies and trials have debunked again and again.

Is massage therapy a legitimate medical science, though? The idea shouldn't be dismissed out of hand. Hippocrates mandated, "The physician must be experienced in many things, but assuredly in rubbing." But that was 493 BC. Medical science has come a long way since then. The Touch Research Institute has floated some interesting ideas worthy of further investigation, but their findings are much too mixed up with hogwash about the magic of Mozart and lavender odor. As for war and disease, those banes aren't going away with more backrubs.