

Cow Licks and Colored Lights

Bill Jay

The modern world of miraculous “new” solutions to old problems is suffused with re-adaptations of old wives’ tales, revivals of aborted experiments of the past, and seemingly odd suggestions gleaned from myth and legend.

A pattern seems to exist: a promising idea, early modest success, exaggerated claims, wild enthusiasm by devotees, insupportable miracles - and descent into quackery. Rejection leads to oblivion until, decades later, the original idea thrusts up a new shoot and the process takes place all over again.

Many (many) years ago, as a boy in rural England, I was walking across a field, fingering a box of matches, a prize beyond measure, when I came across a wondrous sight. A farmer had his head poked through a pasture’s fence while a cow was licking his bald head. Such things are memorable, if only to confirm that the world of adults is beyond comprehension.

And there the memory had stayed, and would have remained, one of the grains of sand that constitute the beach of individuality, if not for a news item in a respected weekly (*Independent*, 22 March 1998, front page). It announced a cure for baldness: licking by a cow. The saliva apparently contains hair-growth chemicals. Perhaps city-dwellers could patronize stockyard salons where cow licks could be combined with steak dinners. Anyway, I was browsing through television channels and the same suggestion was featured. Cow spit is in, again. The relevance of cow licks to this story is the notion that old practices, with their tinge of dotty nonsense, have a strange habit of resurfacing at intervals.

Coincidentally, in the same issue of the weekly was a report from the Department of Health, which has issued an official booklet advising hospitals to paint their walls green in order to reduce the risk of violence. Why not take the suggestion to its logical conclusion and paint everything green, every house, every fence, every street sign banning all other colors by governmental decree? Exceptions would be made for interiors such as casualty wards, which, the report continued, should be painted blue and cream to reduce feelings of claustrophobia. Colors to avoid, it warned, are yellow and red which promote anxiety and irritation - and sex.

I added the last two words, with some justification. When photographic emulsions were only orthochromatic, films and plates were manufactured under red illumination. Agfa-Gevaert found that its workers who spent their days under safelights were particularly susceptible to fighting and sexual activity on the job. (That’s an interesting combination of reactions which should give the PC crowd a sick sort of glee). When films became

panchromatic, workers were literally in the dark. A ten-year study at the University of Texas Medical School at San Antonio found that when it is dark the pineal gland unleashes anti-sex hormones. The doctor in charge of the research speculated that lower than average fertility rates may be expected by people who work in the dark “such as . . . darkroom technicians.” (Popular Photography, April 1977, p. 25)

But back to the therapeutic value of colored lights. This was a craze among late Victorians, called phototherapy. The leader of the movement which promoted the physical and psychological benefits of color was a Danish physician, Niels Finsen. Finsen Light Institutes were patronized by royalty and became huge successes in Europe, Russia, Britain and the USA. The first Finsen Light Institute in America was opened in 1899.

Finsen’s idea was that certain diseases could be cured by directing powerful lamps, filtered into specific wavelengths, onto the infected areas. For example, red light was advocated to heal smallpox with no scarring of the body; blue light was for the treatment of lupus (then a dreadful, disfiguring disease) and other bacterial infections; white light was used to treat various nervous diseases and insanity; and so on.

Then Jacob Riis enters the scene. Most photographers are familiar with the story of Riis, a Danish immigrant who arrived in New York in 1870 and became a police reporter and then a socially concerned journalist/cameraman, renowned for his documentation of the plight of new immigrants. His words and images were featured in *The Sun* newspaper and in a dozen books, including the classic *How the Other Half Lives*, 1890. That much you probably know. But what you may not know, because no history has mentioned the fact, is that Riis was an energetic supporter of light therapy.

It was personal. In 1899 Riis was lying ill with a fever in the Commune Hospital in Copenhagen, where Finsen was practicing his light therapy treatments. Riis was soon cured.

He divulged his experiences in a laudatory preface to a long article about Dr. Nils Finsen in *McClure’s Magazine* (Volume 20, February 1903, pp. 360-371) under the heading: “The Surgery of Light: Remarkable Discovery of Healing Rays by Dr. Nils Finsen of Copenhagen: A Word about the Man, by Jacob Riis, His Fellow Countryman.” The piece also included a fine photographic portrait of Riis, who was, by now, a celebrated social crusader. Riis wrote:

When the fever had left me I would sit in his little office down in the corner of the hospital grounds by the lake and watch the patients who had come in pain and gloom, go away, carrying in their faces the sunshine that had given them back their life.

Jacob Riis was now a convert to phototherapy. The practice flourished for a decade or two and then faded away, as such ideas are apt to do.

Nearly 100 years later, the physical and psychological benefits of colored lights are back in favor. A new book, Principles of Color Healing, by Ambika Wauters, has been recently published by Harper Collins.

The modern practice of phototherapy has a few new approaches. Advocates of New Age crystals are shining lights through crystals for enhanced effects. Actually Finsen himself suggested a century ago that his colored lights were more effective when focused through rock crystals. As things change, so they stay the same.

One new idea, pursued by devotees of colored lights for healing has been their advocacy of shining the lights not on the patient directly but on a photograph of the patient, which, they claim, is just as effective and can be carried out when the person is not physically present. This is a bit like sympathetic magic, and spawned a new name: photochromotherapy. As Goethe said: "When the mind is at sea, a new word provides a raft."

Who knows? Perhaps there is something to it. Stranger things have happened. But just you watch - the field will be saturated with over-enthusiastic fanatics, the claims will become increasingly exaggerated and the idea will be marginalized and subside into a fringe sect of fruitcakes, only to be revived again in a few decades.

There is nothing new under the beneficial and colored rays of the sun.

Postscript: the Finsen lights were also used to cure baldness. But without that warm, fuzzy feeling of affection from a sloppy cow lick.

2000