**'Gwyneth glows like a radioactive swan' – my day at the Goop festival**

With its kale ice-cream, rose quartz eggs and inhouse shaman, Paltrow’s ‘wellness adventure’ is silly and fun. But is it only for rich, white people who are disproportionately well already?

[Lindy West](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/west-lindy)

Wednesday 14 June 2017 17.19 BST Last modified on Wednesday 14 June 2017 22.00 BST

Culver City, Los Angeles, is socked in by haze, and a line of women in black athleisure – more blondes than one is accustomed to seeing in one place at one time – stretches down the block. Each has paid between $500 and $1500 (£390 and £1,175) to stand in this line and attend [In Goop Health](http://goop.com/ingoophealth/): Presented by Goop, the inaugural “health and wellness expo” of Gwyneth Paltrow’s lifestyle brand, Goop.

People are excited, a little nervous and giddy. It feels as if we are waiting for the bus to summer camp, if your summer camp gives out free lube and Nicole Richie is there. At 9am the beefy security team parts and we pour into a courtyard where employees sort us into more lines based on how much we have paid to be here. Colour-coded bracelets indicate whether you are a Lapis ($500), Amethyst ($1,000) or Clear Quartz ($1,500) Gooper. More money means more activities: a foam roller workout, a “sound bath”, even lunch with “GP” herself in the “Collagen Garden”. Apparently, a prohibitively expensive, celebrity-studded self-help salon isn’t exclusive enough: the very rich can’t have fun without a little class hierarchy.

We pass into a second courtyard, which offers clusters of tasteful white furniture ringed by a variety of “wellness adventures”. In one corner, you can sit cross-legged on a cushion and the “resident Goop shaman” will tell you which crystal you “need”. In the opposite corner is a woman who will photograph your aura in a little tent. There is an oxygen bar and an IV drip station. And there is food, of course, just in very small pieces: tiny vegan doughnuts, quinoa and lox swaddled in seaweed, ladles of unsalted bone broth, fruit.

Inside, interspersed among the Goop-approved matcha and coconut-water stalls, is the Goop Marketplace, where attendees can buy face potions, rolling pins and Tory Burch’s new line of active wear. For $55, you can buy one of the jade eggs that Goop famously [suggested women carry around in their vaginas](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/to-your-health/wp/2017/01/22/no-gwyneth-paltrow-women-should-not-put-jade-eggs-in-their-vaginas-gynecologist-says/). Or, a rose quartz egg, if you have “seen results with the jade egg and want to take your practice a step further”. I head back outside and get in line for the shaman.

Turns out, the shaman is a little backed up, so they are scheduling appointments instead. A friendly employee writes my name on a clipboard and tells me to come back at 4.05pm. The line for aura photography is even longer. I wait about 10 minutes before a staffer announces that the schedule is full and we are all fired from the line, but we can check back later. That’s fine. Everyone is feeling good. Employees weave through the crowd with trays of probiotic juice. I decide I like the Goop expo. It is silly, but most of us seem to be in on the joke – like Dungeons and Dragons for your vaginal flora. Why not?

I don’t believe that my proximity to crystals (or lack thereof) has any effect on my wellbeing, but I don’t think it is interesting or sophisticated to mock people who do. These women are having fun. They are sitting on pillows and connecting with each other. It is the kind of spontaneously intimate conversation that happens among women all the time, dressed up in the language of magic and, sure, monetised.

[…]

I wander back inside and there she is, gliding through the Bulletproof Coffee line like our priestess. Here is just a true fact: Gwyneth glows like a radioactive swan. She emits light. She would be great in a power outage. Though the FAQ specifically directed attendees to wear athleisure (with a link to the Goop store’s athleisure page – just to be helpful!), Gwyneth appears to be wearing a sirocco of flower petals. She leads us, her flock, into the auditorium and the real show begins.

After a brief history of Goop, Paltrow introduces her personal physician, [Dr Habib Sadeghi, DO.](http://behiveofhealing.com/team-view/dr-habib-sadeghi-d-o/) He talks for an hour about “cosmic flow”; his left testicle; the “magnificence” of Gwyneth (“I’ve been down and I’ve touched her feet … and I’ll do it again”); and his belief that “consciousness precedes phenotypic expression”, which means, basically, that all ailments are on some level psychosomatic and your ovarian cysts are really just little nodules of emotion – or something.

The next panel, on gut health, counters Sadeghi’s consciousness theory with the assertion that all human illnesses are caused by antibiotics, ibuprofen, caesarean sections and legumes. The human gut is a rich rainforest, they say. Antibiotics are “napalm”, and taking one ibuprofen is “like swallowing a hand grenade”. Someone relates an anecdote about a marathon runner who had to get a faecal transplant from her fat niece, and it made the marathon runner fat. In mice, faecal transplants have been found to make fat mice thin, and anxious mice calm. Oh, my God, I realise. Paltrow is going to start selling her own poop.

[…]

Next to each of our chairs is a complementary bottle of hot-pink, watermelon-flavoured water, sickly-sweet with Stevia. You know, just like the cavemen used to drink.

Gundry argues that human beings aren’t meant to eat any plants native to North America, because we are native to “Africa, Europe and Asia”. At one point, Dr Amy Myers casually distinguishes between the gut bacteria Asian people need (because “they” eat a lot of seaweed) and the gut bacteria that “we” need. You don’t have to glance around the room to know who “we” are.

[…]

However, an event supposedly focused “on being and achieving the optimal versions of ourselves”, as Paltrow put it during her welcome address, cannot truly be depoliticised. You can’t honestly address “wellness” – the things people need to be well – without addressing poverty and systemic racism, disability access and affordable healthcare, paid family leave and food insecurity, contraception and abortion, sex work and the war against drugs and mass incarceration. Unless, of course, you are only talking about the wellness of people whose lives are untouched by all of those forces. That is, the wellness of people who are disproportionately well already.

[…]

I hear that idea repeated over and over again at the Goop conference – take care of yourself so you can take care of others. Put your mask on first. Hold space for yourself. Be entitled. Take. At a certain point, it begins to feel less like self-care and more like rationalisation. I don’t know anything about the personal lives of the women at In Goop Health – who they give money to, what hardships they have endured, why they were drawn to this event – and every person I interact with is funny and smart and kind and self-aware. But it is self-evident and measurable that white people in the US, in general, are assiduous about the first part of that equation (caring for ourselves) and less than attentive to the second (caring for others).

It is OK to love skin cream and crystals. It is normal and forgivable to be afraid of dying, afraid of cancer, afraid of losing your youth and beauty and the currency they confer. We have no other currency for women. I understand why people spend their lives searching for that one magic supplement, that one bit of lore that will turn their “lifestyle” around and make them small and perfect and valuable for ever. I also understand, especially at this moment in history, why people long to step outside of politics for a day and eat kale-flavoured ice cream (real, not satire, actually good) in a warehouse full of [Galadriels](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galadriel). But the idea that anything is apolitical is an illusion accessible only to a very few. And the absolute least the Galadriel-in-chief ought to do is acknowledge that.

At 4.05pm I dash outside for my shaman appointment, only to be told they are running about an hour behind. “Should I come back in an hour,” I ask. “I mean, you could try,” the woman says in a way that means, “No”, or maybe, “Not with that bracelet”.

For her keynote to close the day, Paltrow purports to dissect the complexities and woes of being a working mother with a panel of famous gal pals: [Cameron Diaz](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/nov/05/theres-something-about-you-cameron-diaz-heres-how-to-recapture-it), Tory Burch, [Nicole Richie](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2010/apr/18/five-things-i-know-about-style-nicole-richie) and [Miranda Kerr](https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/shortcuts/2017/mar/05/sweaters-to-suits-evolution-silicon-valley-ceo-style-evan-spiegel-snapchat). How do they do it? How do they have it all? The women deliver a bounty of platitudes about ambition, female friendship, self-care, their mothers and sticking to one’s “practice”. They are charming and humble. Richie is funny. But at no point do any of them say the words: “I HAVE LOTS AND LOTS OF MONEY AND A STAFF.” In the context of a conversation about the challenges facing working mothers, the omission is, frankly, bizarre. It is a basic responsibility of the privileged to refrain from taking credit for our own good fortune. They might as well have been reading from [Ivanka Trump’s book proposal](http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/ivanka-trump-wrote-a-painfully-oblivious-book-for-basically-no-one). As with all the other panels, they do not take questions.

There is one moment I can’t stop thinking about. Near the end, Kerr casually mentions that she once tried leech therapy as part of her wellness practice: “One was on my coccyx because it’s really good to, like, detox the body, rejuvenate the body … I had a leech facial as well. And I kept the leeches. They’re in my koi pond.”

I am fat. I was the fattest person at the Goop expo. Strangers regularly contact me to tell me that I’m unhealthy and I’m going to die. Kerr’s body is almost certainly what those people mean when they say “a natural healthy shape”, because our society conflates conventional beauty with health. But, I don’t know – I might be fat, but I’ve never felt like I needed to get an IV drip on a patio in Culver City or put leeches on my butt to suck out toxins, and I’m grateful for that.

I guess Goop did make me feel well after all.