

Bronner still on soapbox

Philosophically bottled product is cleaning up

"... Astronomy's All-One-God-Faith, that with just 6 words eternally unites the human race! As teaches African-shepherd Astronomer Israel for 6000 years, 'LISTEN CHILDREN ETERNAL FATHER ETERNALLY ONE!' For one God's Spaceship Earth, with Bomb and Gun, we're All-One or none! All-One! All-One! All-One! Exceptions eternally? Absolute none!"

— Dr. Bronner
on quart of Peppermint
18-in-1 Pure Castile Soap

By JIM OKERBLOM
Staff Writer

ESCONDIDO — You may remember Emanuel Bronner preaching his strange sermon — filled with exclamation points and references to everything from Mao to Halley's Comet — while you stood in the shower in college in the '60s or '70s.

Or his beseeching you, from the shelf next to the kitchen sink, to follow "the Moral ABC" and warning: "DON'T DRINK SOAP! KEEP OUT OF EYE! DILUTE! DILUTE! O.K.!"

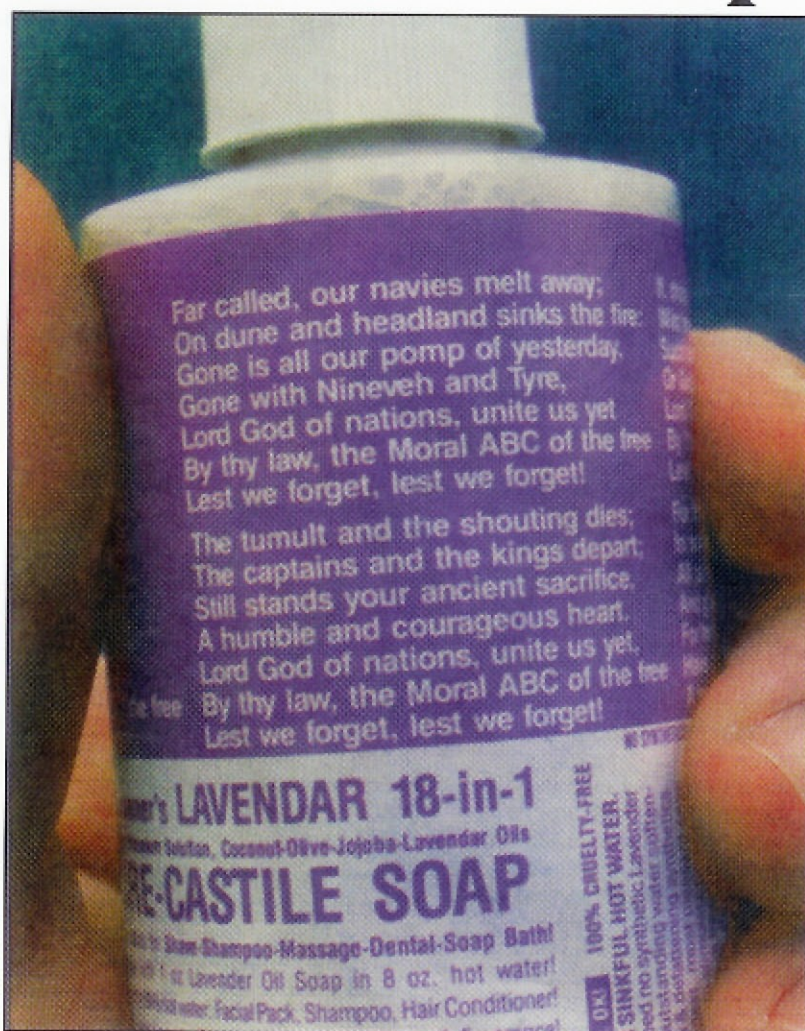
Depending on your frame of mind and what you had recently ingested, it may all have made a lot of sense.

For 50 years Dr. Emanuel Bronner, the pope of soap, has dedicated his life to spreading his unusual and ever-changing fine-print plan for saving the world on bottles of soap. From his bed in a modest home in south Escondido, blind and frail at 87, he's still at it with undiminished passion.

"All-One! All-One! All-One!," he said with a wave of his pale, thin arms, sounding as much as his labels read. "The soap is an excellent vehicle. Nobody, Jew or Gentile, objects to the soap."

For the uninitiated, Dr. Bronner's is a brand of soap, primarily concentrated liquid soap. But calling Dr. Bronner's a soap is like calling French truffles a fungus.

Dr. Bronner's, for its millions of devotees, is a word-of-mouth experience, a lifestyle choice, a trip back to a simpler time. Run-of-the-mill soap isn't profiled in "Esquire" or on the front page of the *The Wall Street Journal*. Dr. Bronner's is.



Life's work: A bottle of Dr. Bronner's lavender soap features Emanuel Bronner's writings in tiny print.

The soap is also one man's personal life philosophy, spewed out in tiny print covering every square inch of the labels. You'll find, for example, references to Thomas Paine, Marx, Einstein, Stalin, Rudyard Kipling, Leonid Brezhnev, diver Mark Spitz, astronomer Carl Sagan and many others sprinkled among the 3,120 words on the quart bottle of peppermint soap, the 3,000-plus different words on the quart of almond and the thousands more on the quarts of lavender and baby-castile.

"And the pint of peppermint is different than the quart of peppermint," adds Ralph Bronner, who now helps run the company with his brother Jim. "And the pint eucalyptus is different than the quart eucalyptus."

What all these thousands of words mean is not entirely obvious, and is



Union-Tribune/CHARLIE NEUMAN
Emanuel Bronner

open to interpretation. The basic message is world unity, emphasizing that all people are God's children whether they speak through Jesus, Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed or whomever. (over)

TO SURVIVE, ON GOD'S SPACESHIP EARTH WITH BOMB & GUN WE MUST UNITE THE WHOLE HUMAN RACE IN ASTRONOMY'S ETERNALLY GREAT ALL-ONE-GOD-FAITH! FOR WE'RE ALL-ONE OR NONE! ALL HUMANS EVOLVE FROM ASTRONOMER'S STUDYING STARS MILLIONS OF YEARS, INSPIRED EACH AND EVERY 76 YEARS, FOR 6,000 YEARS, BY THE MESSENGER OF GOD'S LAW, THE SIGN OF THE MESSIAH, HALLEY'S COMET, INSPIRING ASTRONOMERS ABRAHAM, ISRAEL, MOSES, BAHAUDDIN, BUDDHA, HIL-LEL, JESUS, CONFUCIUS, PAINE, SAGAN & MOHAMMED, TO UNITE THE WHOLE HUMAN RACE IN ASTRONOMY'S ALL-EMBRACING, ETERNALLY TREMENDOUS ALL-ONE-GOD-FAITH! FOR WE'RE ALL-ONE OR NONE! AS TEACHES FOR 6,000 YEARS, SINCE THE YEAR ONE, ASTRONOMER ISRAEL, "LISTEN CHILDREN ETERNAL FATHER, ETERNALLY ONE!" FOR ON GOD'S SPACESHIP EARTH, WITH BOMB & GUN, WE'RE ALL-ONE OR NONE! ALL-ONE! ALL-ONE! ALL-ONE! EXCEPTIONS ETERNALLY? ABSOLUTE NONE!

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Ralph Bronner summarizes his father's message this way: "The basic religions are close to having a world religion, if they would forget their minor differences."

Anyone who has ever spent much time reading Dr. Bronner's label, though, will find these explanations only partly fulfilling. Dr. Bronner may be the only one who really understands it all.

"Only those who united worked hard to survive ice-aged persecution evolved into Humane Beings like Jesus-Mintz-Sills-Spitz-Strauss-Szasz-Zamenho, brave, to help teach all, every slave . . ."

- Dr. Bronner, on the quart of Eucalyptus Pure-Castile Soap

"Some of it *is* strange - Dr. Bronner is a strange guy," said Anita Boen-Henshaw, a worker at Boney's Market in Escondido and a 25-year user of the soap. "But he is *remarkably* strange."

The message is always in flux, too. Ralph Bronner recalls how he found bottles of Dr. Bronner's covered with plain white paper in Fort Wayne, Ind. The store owner, a born-again Christian, objected to one line on the label - "Only hard work can save you" - because it made no mention of God.

The labels were discarded by his father in favor of a new one saying, "Only hard work - God's Law - can save you."

"He is still working on the final, *final* message that will unite mankind," Ralph Bronner said.

An evolutionary process

Dr. Bronner (the title is self-bestowed) was born in 1908 in Germany as Emanuel Heilbronner, the son of a wealthy Jewish soap maker descended from generations of soap makers. He came to America in 1929 at age 21, his son said, and later dropped the first syllable of his last name.

During World War II, while living in Chicago, Emanuel Bronner began developing and distributing early versions of a global peace plan and sending thousands of telegrams to President Roosevelt and

other world leaders.

While working as a firefighter in Los Angeles, his son said, he developed his first product, a balanced mineral salt mixture, which the company still sells. He also began mixing up batches of peppermint soap with a broom handle and refining his spiritual message, which soon began appearing on soap labels.

"The soap was a matter of evolution," said Dr. Bronner, who still barks orders at workers in his home-office.

By the late 1950s, Ralph Bronner said, the company was selling 20 gallons of soap a year.

But in the 1960s, Dr. Bronner's - which is made with pure oils and without fat or synthetics - somehow caught on with the hippy movement. Devotees, some of whom made pilgrimages to Dr. Bronner's Escondido home, each seemed to have a story of having found the strange bottle in a shower or being given some by a roommate or friend.

"I tried some, and it made me tingle, and I said, 'This is cool!'" recalled 40-year-old Brad Cox of Escondido about the first time he picked up an \$8 quart of Dr. Bronner's peppermint. "And it lasts forever."

Ralph Bronner, who lives in Wisconsin, admits that he was not always enthused by his father's unique vision. Both he and his brother were raised near Milwaukee by Catholic foster parents. The brothers were not reunited with their father until they reached high school.

For years, Ralph said, the relationship was strained.

"My father was so intense: 'Ralph, you're not my son unless you memorize this label.' Which one? Each one was 3,000 words, and each one was different."

He recalls his father's getting up at 5 a.m. to write labels and still working on it at 2 the next morning.

Ralph wanted to remake the soap into something more commercial.

"I thought it was crazy to put religion on the label in the 1960s," he said.

"Mint Glow" was his idea for a name for the peppermint, but his father was appalled. So Ralph Bronner, who worked for 32 years as a teacher in Milwaukee, for many years was little involved in his

father's business.

But he eventually began helping during his summer vacations. In 1991, he quit teaching entirely. Ralph, 58, now spends much of his time driving around the country, dropping in unannounced at health food stores "to tell them about Dad, to give out the Moral ABCs."

Many people are surprised and delighted to learn that Dr. Bronner is real, and not a made-up advertising gimmick like Dr. Pepper, and that the label is not a phony front for a corporation, Ralph said.

Jim Bronner, 56, president of his father's company, also handles production at a factory in the Los Angeles area. The soap is shipped by tanker to a plant at Mission and Nordahl roads in Escondido, where it is bottled by hand by four women.

An impossible success?

It is hard to argue with success. After another surge in interest in the back-to-nature '80s and '90s, the company now ships upward of 7 million bottles of soap each year, about half of it peppermint, with almond a close second and lavender catching up fast, Ralph Bronner said.

"We have never run an ad, and we've never had a salesman," he said. "That's supposed to be impossible."

As the 18-in-1 label suggests, fans use the soaps for almost anything that needs cleaning.

Some contend that it cures infections, removes warts or repels mosquitoes.

And it won't be changing any time soon. Although the company has been offered millions for the rights to the secret soap formula and brand name, Ralph Bronner said.

A corporation would no doubt try to change the labels. But a provision of the company's charter requires that the labels stay the same, even after Dr. Bronner's death.

"I've come full circle and realized that he was right," Ralph Bronner mused about his father. "It's a unique story. The labels will be a monument to my father, who spent a lifetime on them."



Spreading the word: Workers at Bronner's bottling and warehouse facility prepare the soap for shipment. The soap, made with pure oils and without fat or synthetics, is so popular that the company ships upwards of 7 million bottles of the product each year.