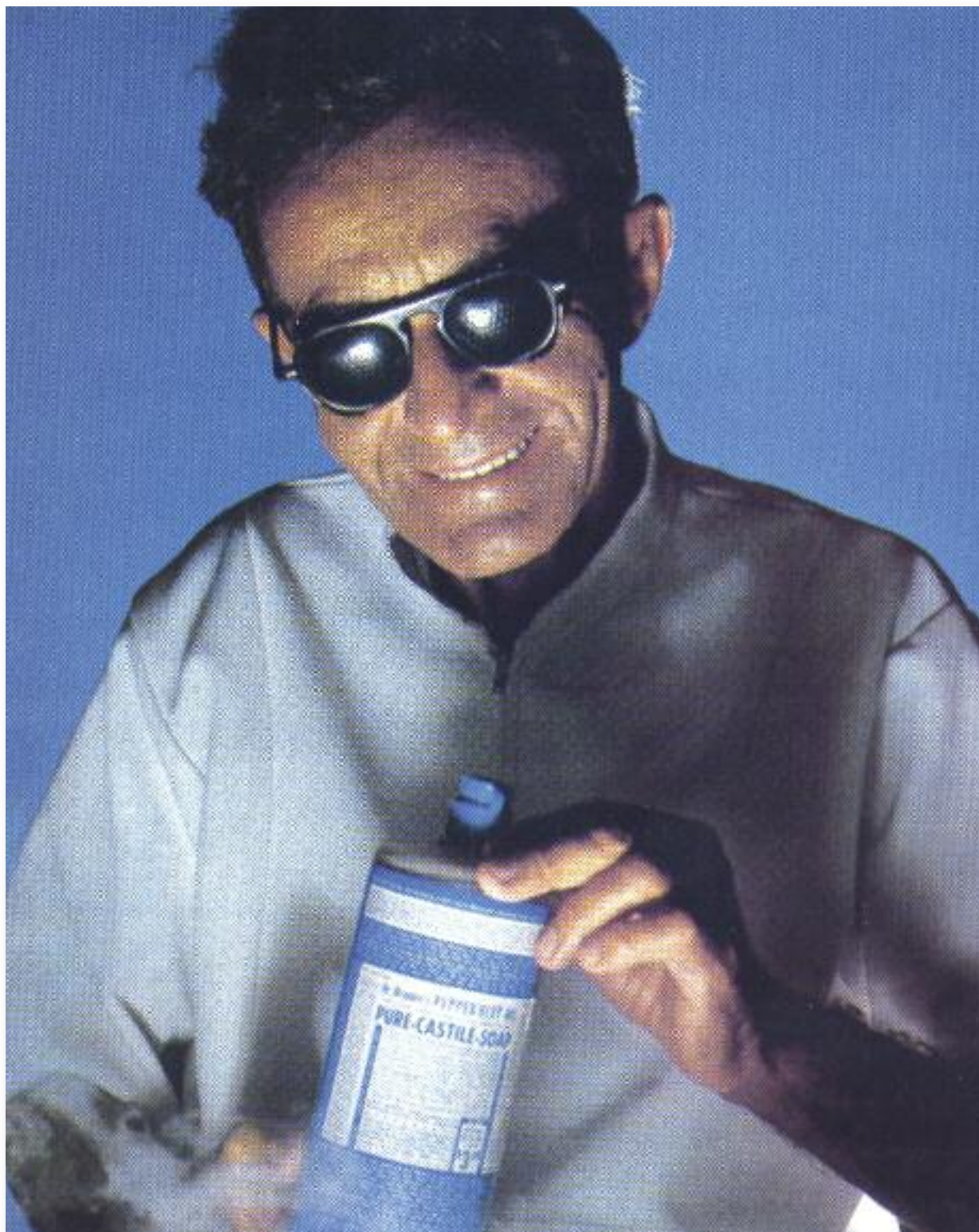


LATHER AND LOVE



THE LEGACY OF DR. BRONNER

by Barbara Stahura

By any stretch of the imagination, Dr. Emanuel Bronner was wildly eccentric. But he made his indelible mark on the world with two things: Some of the purest soap around and his ever-evolving philosophy of peace and love he called the Moral ABC of All-One-God-Faith. It's not hard to find a copy of his beliefs: Go into nearly any health food store in the United States and read a bottle of all-natural Dr. Bronner's Magic Soap. There on the label are thousands and thousands of his words, in eye-squinting type, still faithfully reproduced by his family-run company more than a decade after his death.

Here are some short examples, complete with his idiosyncratic punctuation and hyphenation:

- "Do one thing at a time, work hard. Get done! Then teach friend and enemy the Moral ABC that unites all mankind free! Uniting One! All-One! Face the world with a smile, life is always worthwhile!"
- "Cleopatra's Art of Love, evolved Egypt's civilization 10,000 years back, based on the God-inspired ABC of Mama Cat: Automatically, instinctively, each Mama Cat teaches her young ones from the moment of Birth: 1st: Absolute cleanliness is Godliness! 2nd: Constructive-selfish, build, protect and raise food, home, young! 3rd: Absolute teamwork fertilizes God's Earth!"
- "Small minds decay! Average minds delay! Great minds teach all-One today! So unite & all stand by you! Divided, all deny you!"

You won't find anything like *that* on any other bottle of soap.

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Born Emanuel Heilbronner in 1908 in Germany to an Orthodox Jewish family of respected master soapmakers, this young man, who would later help millions to lather up, emigrated to the United States in 1929 to escape a domineering father, as well as Hitler's rise. His parents ignored his urgings to leave, and they and other family members later died in the camps, although one sister also fled to the U.S. and another to Israel. He dropped the "Heil" from his last name because of his distaste for Hitler and eventually began calling himself "Doctor." He had no university degree, but believed that his knowledge of chemistry and soapmaking, accumulated by earlier generations of the family and passed down to him, more than qualified him for the title. "Dr." Bronner also later proclaimed himself an "Essene Rabbi."

Settling in Milwaukee, he married Paula, and they had three children, Ralph, James, and Ellen. Sadly, Paula died in 1943, when they were still very young. Traveling for his work as a soap consultant and usually poor, Dr. Bronner left his children in a dizzying series of foster homes—Ralph recalls being in fifteen homes before the age of seven—although they finally were settled with a Milwaukee family who raised them.

About 1945, Dr. Bronner began speaking publicly about his plan for world peace, undoubtedly affected by the deaths of his family at the hands of the Nazis and the terrible carnage of World War II. He created some kind of disturbance at the University of Chicago in 1947 and was jailed, after which he was committed to Elgin State Mental Hospital and subjected to shock therapy. At the end of six months, he successfully escaped (on his third try) and fled to California with

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only \$20 in his pocket, ending up in Los Angeles. Since no one there had heard of him, he had the opportunity to make a fresh start. Putting his vast knowledge to work, he made and sold mineral salts and began experimenting with a liquid Castile soap, lushly fragranced with peppermint—all from his room in a seedy LA apartment building, packed with drums of the salts, upon which were piled thousands of copies of his Moral ABC.

OLDEST SON, RALPH BRONNER, GETS INVOLVED

In 1956, Dr. Bronner called on his oldest son, Ralph, to come to California from Milwaukee and help with some billings. Despite not having seen his father since his escape to the West Coast, Ralph went during summer vacation from college, thinking he could finish up the few bills in a short time. Instead, the numerous billings totaled thousands of dollars. Even worse, Dr. Bronner made Ralph type out his Moral ABC messages for printing—equaling in their entirety 30,000 words (now distributed among the various labels for peppermint, almond, lavender, tea tree, and eucalyptus soaps).

In addition to his own words, Dr. Bronner appropriated quotes from “the Bible, the Torah, Buddha, Thomas Paine, Thomas Edison, Abraham Lincoln, and Chief Seattle,” recalls Ralph about that first summer (later came quotes from people like Mother Teresa, Carl Sagan, and Oprah). He told his father, “Nobody’s going to read this junk,” as he was endlessly typing those 30,000 words.

This being before the time of personal computers, Ralph had to use a manual typewriter, and because Dr. Bronner was constantly tinkering with his message and insistent that there be no mistakes, this meant retyping many, many times. The visit did not go well, to say the least. Ralph stormed back to Milwaukee, convinced that his father had plunged off the deep end (and not only because of the Moral ABC)—Dr. Bronner often attended business meetings at his apartment in leopard-print bathing trunks and even sometimes wore nothing at all.

Then came the social revolution of the 1960s and millions of young counterculture hippies, who began discovering Dr. Bronner’s Pure Castile 18-in-1 peppermint soap. They found they could use it for everything from bathing (themselves and their pets) to toothbrushing to housecleaning and laundry to washing their VW vans. Many of them idolized the soapmaker with the philosophy of world peace and flocked to him when he traveled to venues like health food conventions or gave public talks.

Seeing the way his eccentric, difficult father could inspire such devotion made a huge impact on Ralph. Slowly, the “prodigal son,” as Ralph calls himself, began to come around in the early 1970s.

RALPH SEES THE GOOD IN HIS FATHER’S WORK

“I started seeing the effect of Dad’s words,” says Ralph. “Until then I would fly out from my comfortable middle-class life as a teacher to a downtown Los Angeles hotel with winos and beggars around; and here’s a

man, my father, bent over a typewriter endlessly going over the message that would unite all mankind! I'm thinking, this is crazy...but grew to love anyone who has a dream to help the earth, whether it's obtainable or not. It certainly beats the majority, especially in business, whose dream is really greed—to make as much money as you can.”

Adding to Ralph's change of heart over the years are many letters and phone calls he or representatives of the company have received about the power of not only their products but also the label messages. He quotes one such letter now hanging on his wall, saying he doesn't have to read it, since “it's burnt into my brain: ‘Dear Dr. Bronner, I'm 72 years old. I was planning my demise in the bathroom, because the mirror showed a black hole of depression. I started reading your label, and it instantly brought purpose to my life. For this, I cannot thank you enough. Do you have any more that will help me be a better child of God?’ Isn't that unbelievable?” he asks.

Not until the early 1990s did Ralph and his now-deceased brother, Jim, “take the risk of quitting” their jobs and going to work with their father. “I had to teach 32 years first though, because how long could you work with a man with that kind of propensity?” he asks, referring to the volatile, demanding nature of his father. In any case, Ralph had been teaching in inner-city schools and was burned out. “I remember telling friends when I was quitting teaching, either this will work or I'll be saying, ‘Do you want fries with that?’” he explains.

A FOCUS ON GIVING

Today, Ralph is Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps spokesman, but not at all in the stereotypical suit-and-tie, slick manner we've come to think of corporate spokespersons. He's retired from teaching in Milwaukee, and now travels the country in his old van (he's already worn out several) to spread the word

and deliver soap, often giving it away along with hugs, songs, and cheerful words. He sent forty cases to the workers at Ground Zero after 9/11, figuring “the smell of peppermint had to beat the stench I heard was there.” After the flooding along the Mississippi River in the early '90s, he and his wife, Gisela, filled the van and headed south. “We bypassed the Red Cross and the bureaucracy of ‘sign here,’ etc., and went right to the homes,” he recalls. “I would tell them this soap smells better than dead fish and mud. It was a human, simple way of helping the earth, like all our projects are. They are not the normal bureaucratic route.”

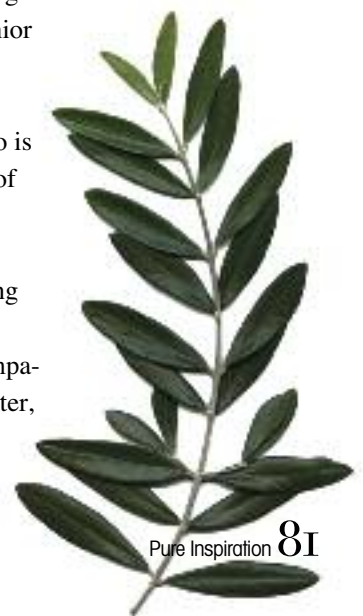
He will talk endlessly to anyone he meets—even total strangers who at first seem put off—about the soaps and his father's philosophy of “All-One-God-Faith,” often throwing in a few jokes. Before too long, he has his new friends smiling and then asks if he can hug them. Few people decline. He'll even engage telemarketers who call his home with his stories and expansive personality. Sometimes, they hang up on him, and other times, some even call him back when they're off the clock.

He relates one such call: “You probably don't remember me, Mr. Bronner, but I was a telemarketer trying to sell you *The Wall Street Journal* a month ago, and I want you to know I'm a high school senior. In my last class in English, we had to write about a person that inspired us the most, and I want you to know it was you.”

Here's a note he received after speaking to students: “Dear Mr. Bronner, I'm a senior in a business class. Thanks for coming to our class. I'm in this class because our father's in business, but all he wants to do is make money. You changed the direction of my life.”

Ralph Bronner is akin to a benevolent force of nature, sweetly and gently altering the world around him as he goes.

When Dr. Bronner began his soap company in the late 1940s, he worked alone. Later,



according to Ralph, he added a couple of secretaries. In the 1960s, he went blind, which he believed was caused by the insulin and electroshock “therapy” he received in the mental hospital. Late in life, he began to show signs of Parkinson’s, which Ralph says softened him and made him much easier to be around. In the early 1990s before his sons stepped in, the company was in bankruptcy, due to Dr. Bronner’s very generous nature and his obsession with the Moral ABC. Fortunately, Jim was able to turn the situation around, says Ralph, and their father “died operating a \$4 million corporation from a bedroom of a house surrounded by avocados.”

A CORPORATE PARADIGM OF HUMAN DECENCY

Eleven years after its founder died, the company, located in Escondido, California, is still on an upsurge of popularity, with annual revenues of \$25 million from an expanded line of products that now includes moisturizers, lip balms, and energy bars, along with the sale of more than three million bottles of

soap each year. This profile makes it extremely attractive to large corporations who smell a cash cow amid all the peppermint. But the family members who inherited the company have vowed never to sell out.

“Out of the woodwork, as Dad was dying and later when my brother, Jim, had passed away, I was the one that corporate America (with their briefcases, suits, ties, and shiny shoes) came to,” says Ralph. “In my talks a lot of times, I tongue-in-cheek warn people to be leery of anyone who rings their doorbell dressed like that, because they’ll want something. And sure enough, I think maybe out of the ten offers of fortunes, half of them used this line: ‘We love your father’s words, and we want more people to read them.’ (But we) told them that we will never sell the business, because we can control what we do. There is no corporation alive that will leave the 30,000 words and give away 40% to 75% of their profit and start their workers at \$30,000.”

Factory workers *starting* today at \$30,000? True. It’s part of Dr. Bronner’s philosophy of constructive capitalism, which means sharing the profit with the workers



and the earth from which you made it. The executives—all family members—take a salary no larger than five times the wages of the lowest-paid warehouse position (it used to be six times, but they recently lowered it to have more to donate to charitable causes). By comparison, many top executives in other corporations can be compensated up to 400 or 500 times more than their workers. Employees of All-One-God-Faith Inc. (the official corporate name of Dr. Bronner’s Magic Soaps) also receive excellent health benefits, profit-sharing, and unheard-of annual bonuses. In one recent year, full-time workers received bonus checks for amounts from \$3,000 to \$21,000—yes, that’s the right number of zeros. Understandably, turnover is virtually nonexistent.

And what about giving away such a huge percentage of profits and even personal income? That’s another part of constructive capitalism that benefits deserving people and organizations outside the company. As Ralph said, he long ago “grew to love anyone who has a dream to help the earth,” and the rest of the family is right there with him. The groups and individuals who receive funds from Dr. Bronner’s Magic Soaps and from Ralph himself cover a wide spectrum. Ralph and Gisela have their favorites, including what he calls “human charities—someone who becomes part of your family that you can hug.”

One such “family” member is Rosemary Landry. A former actress, she lives in Chico, California, and has adopted more than forty children over the years. That alone would be incredible enough. But the kids all have had some special need or serious disability,

including fetal alcohol syndrome, Down’s syndrome, elephantiasis, autism, and Goldenhar syndrome, which involves congenital deformities of the face. They came from many countries besides the U.S., including Russia, China, Korea, Peru, the Philippines, and Mexico. Ralph considers Landry and her kids part of his family and travels often to see them. He plays his guitar and sings with the kids, who call him “Dr. Soapy.”

Bison Ridge Ranch in Marquette County, Wisconsin, is very close to Ralph’s heart, and he assists with personal donations (the ranch has begun the process of obtaining their not-for-profit status). The ranch is owned by Georgia Derrick and her husband, Jim Atten. They transformed 1,100 acres of farmland polluted with pesticides and herbicides into a healthy natural prairie and organic bison ranch with a restored farmhouse that is now a retreat center. The ranch (www.bisonridgeranch.com) also offers “vocation vacations” and educational programs for children and adults.

Other individuals and organizations receive charitable donations from Dr. Bronner’s Magic Soaps. One is David Dunker, who drills wells all over rural Ghana so villagers don’t have to drink directly from rivers. So far, according to Ralph, he’s dug more than ninety. Dr. Bronner’s also assists three orphanages in Haiti, as well as a program in Nigeria that has helped more than 2,000 former prostitutes to receive an education as nursing assistants. In Philadelphia, a recipient is the acclaimed Mural Arts Program (MAP), which reaches out to youth who are “tag-

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“WE ARE ALL BROTHERS AND SISTERS, AND WE SHOULD
TAKE CARE OF EACH OTHER AND SPACESHIP EARTH!”

gers,” or graffiti writers, and helps them develop their artistic skills to paint sanctioned murals around the city. MAP also includes a nonprofit organization that has a mission of youth development and neighborhood revitalization through the arts.

Another Wisconsin organization receiving company donations is Wellspring in West Bend. Founded in 1982 by Mary Ann Ihm, this is a not-for-profit center dedicated to teaching the next generation how to raise their own food, respect the earth, and live healthy lives. It offers Garden Schools and a Community Supported Agriculture farm. Open year-round, Wellspring (www.wellspringinc.org) has 32 acres of nature trails, woods, meadows, and gardens, a retreat and conference center, bed-and-breakfast, and an International Hostel.

Ralph has celebrated his last five birthdays with a giant party at Wellspring, with donations going to the organization. This year, he'll celebrate his 172nd birthday there. Yes, 172. Explains Ralph: “My father was not just a genius. He was also sly as a fox. When he was in his sixties, he started lying to reporters in those endless articles, claiming he was born in 1898 instead of 1908. I caught this one article, and I said, ‘Dad, there’s a mistake. They’ve got you born in 1898.’ He said, ‘That’s okay.’ And I asked him, ‘Why would you want to be ten years older?’ And his answer is beautiful for us as we get older: ‘Because I look healthier!’ So in his honor, instead of ten years,

I’ve added 100 years. On my 167th birthday, I did get compliments. People said I didn’t look a day over 150.”

Dr. Bronner’s Magic Soaps is also deeply involved in causes directly related to the business itself and to the environment. In addition to constructive capitalism, the company also follows its founder’s belief that “we are all brothers and sisters, and we should take care of each other and spaceship Earth!”

The first winner of the Green Business Leaders Award in 2003, the company has always been dedicated to producing only the purest products. To that end, they and the Organic Consumers Association sued the U.S. Agriculture Department in 2005 for ordering the removal of the official “USDA Organic” seal from cosmetics and personal care products.

Dr. Bronner’s Magic Soaps is the largest user of organic peppermint oil and first or second largest user of organic lavender oil, which are not inexpensive. Their soaps also contain organic olive, hemp, palm, and coconut oils. Understandably, they were troubled that their efforts and \$100,000 spent in ensuring that their products meet the standards for bearing the seal would come to naught. The lawsuit was designed to protect the integrity of the term “organic,” so that consumers would continue to have proof that their personal care items were indeed made from certified organic products free of synthetics and grown without pesti-

THE OLIVE BRANCH IS AN ANCIENT SYMBOL OF PEACE, AND THIS PROJECT SYMBOLIZES A VISION OF COEXISTENCE IN THE HOLY LAND BASED ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY AND COOPERATION.



cides. We may not eat these personal care products, but they go into our bodies nonetheless and often include the same products, such as olive or nut oils. Why shouldn't there be an official government seal to certify their organic nature?

At first the USDA balked at reversing its decision, but one day before the deadline to respond to the lawsuit, they issued a reversal, so the organic seal remains in place.

Another company cause, headed by its president, David Bronner, who is Jim's son, is support of industrial hemp. According to the company's website, industrial hemp is more sustainable and cleaner than many of the products it can replace: "Hemp's excellent fiber can replace virgin timber pulp in paper, glass fibers in construction and automotive composites, and pesticide-intensive cotton in textiles. Because of its huge market potential and high biomass/cellulose content, hemp is an ideal future crop for producing bioethanol and bioplastics." Industrial hemp is also an excellent source of oil, which is used in Dr. Bronner's soaps to make them milder and less drying. In addition, the company's bar soap paper labels and official letterhead are now a blend of 10% hempflax with 90% postconsumer recycled paper (the bottles of 100% post-consumer recycled plastic are now silk-screened, sparing the paper needed for a million-plus labels a year).

Why does industrial hemp cultivation in the U.S. require support? Again, according to the website, "the U.S. government, alone among the major industrialized nations, prohibits hemp cultivation and processing, due primarily to the 'reefer madness' and confusion regarding hemp's psychoactive cousin, 'marijuana.'" Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps handles the legal bills for the entire hemp industry as a business expense.

Finally, the company supports Fair Trade,

a commitment to social justice in agriculture. Under Fair Trade, employees and farmers are paid and treated fairly, they follow sustainable environmental practices, and enter into long-term trade relationships with buyers and other partners. Today, Dr. Bronner's sources more than 95% of its raw material purchases (organic coconut, palm, hemp, olive, and peppermint oils) from certified Fair Trade sources. While the company purchases Fair Trade coconut oil in Sri Lanka, palm oil in Ghana, and mint oils in India, its proudest achievement in this area so far is the purchase of organic olive oil from both Palestine and Israel—80 metric tons annually. Ninety percent comes from the Palestinian Canaan Fair Trade Organization that supports peaceful coexistence with Israel; 5% from Sindyanna, a Jewish and Arab women-run Israeli source; and the remaining 5% from the Strauss family farm in Israel.

The olive branch is an ancient symbol of peace, and this project symbolizes a vision of coexistence in the Holy Land based on economic opportunity and cooperation. The purchase of this oil from these sources will help to improve economic conditions in a poor region and also provide additional funds for public services, such as healthcare and education.

As with everything his family and his company have done since his passing, Dr. Bronner would be pleased and proud. All-One!

For more information, see www.drbronnerson.com. For an award-winning look at Dr. Bronner and Ralph Bronner, as well as some of the company's projects, watch Dr. Bronner's Magic Soapbox, an offbeat and moving documentary produced by Sara Lamm (www.magicsoapbox.com).

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