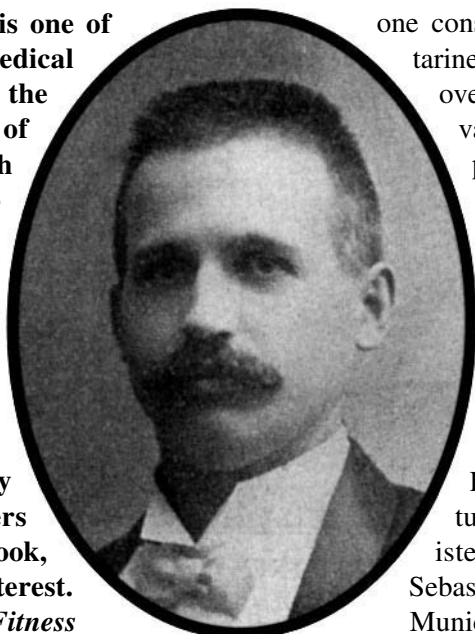


Benedict Lust, Naturopathy, and the Theory of Therapeutic Universalism

James C. Whorton

Ed Note: Dr. James C. Whorton is one of America's most distinguished medical historians. As a faculty member in the medical school at the University of Washington in Seattle, his research over the past two decades has primarily focussed on the often antagonistic relations between the worlds of alternative medicine, physical culture, and traditional medicine. In addition to his latest book—*Nature Cures: The History of Alternative Medicine in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002)—many *IGH* readers would find Dr. Whorton's earlier book, *Crusaders for Fitness*, of great interest. Published in 1982, *Crusaders for Fitness* details the history of the pioneers of fitness and includes discussions of such major figures as Bernarr Macfadden, Sylvester Graham, William Alcott and others. Much of the research for *Nature Cures* was done here at the Physical Culture Collection at the University of Texas, Austin; we were delighted to be able to assist Dr. Whorton.



Benedict Lust in 1911.

one considers that the notion of complementarity that has blossomed so profusely over the last decade is one that has pervaded naturopathic thought from the profession's beginnings. It was, in fact, an essential element of the guiding philosophy formulated by founder Benedict Lust, a philosophy that he described as "Therapeutic Universalism."

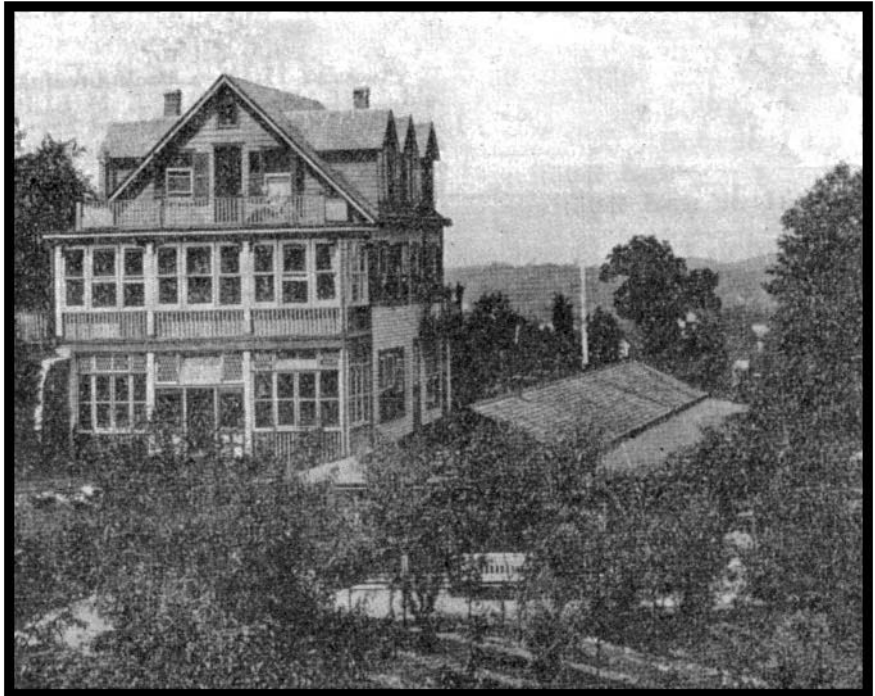
Naturopathy, as the practice was originally known, developed in the late 1890s under the direction of Lust, a German youth saved from tuberculosis through treatments administered by the renowned water-curer Sebastian Kneipp at his institution near Munich. Determined to honor his rescuer by serving as his emissary to the New World, Lust journeyed to New York City in 1896 to preach and practice the Kneipp system in America. Almost immediately, however, he began enlarging on Kneipp's methods with the addition of dietetics, herbs, massage, electrotherapy, sun baths, and other elements of the German nature cure tradition. Soon, the musculoskeletal manipulations of early osteopaths and chiropractors were adopted as well, and by 1901 Lust had decided upon a name for his broad amalgam of therapies—naturopathy. That year he opened The American School of Naturopathy in New York, and the following year launched the Naturopathic Society of America; he would serve as the organization's only president until his death in 1945.¹

Among the most influential forces nurturing the concept of complementary or integrative medicine in America in recent years has been the system of naturopathic medicine. Yet of all the major unconventional approaches to health care now flourishing in the United States, naturopathic medicine stands apart as the only system not to have been accorded serious attention by historians. This neglect seems all the more curious when

The name naturopathy was intended to convey the principle that the cure of any case of illness is ulti-

mately accomplished by the healing power of nature that resides in every individual, a power that should be supported and stimulated by the agencies of the natural world. Strictly speaking, of course, naturopathy means "natural disease," not "natural healing," and from the beginning the term was criticized, even by naturopaths, as misleading. Nevertheless, the bedrock of naturopathic etiology was that indeed "natural disease" is the root of all illness, because bodily dysfunction can invariably be traced to violations of nature's rules of right living. This view was graphically presented in a "tree of disease" drawn by naturopath Henry Lindlahr in the 1910s. There one was shown the full range of human infirmities, from colds to cancer, growing out of a trunk impaired by what was labeled "Accumulation of Morbid Matter in The System." The soil from which the trunk of physical impurity rises is that of "Violation of Nature's Laws" of diet, exercise, and other components of hygiene, violations occurring because of humanity's ignorance, indifference, lack of self-control, and self-indulgence. Where allopathic doctors blamed disease on insults to the body from outside, particularly infection with microbes, early naturopaths saw all sickness originating within the body ("Germs" appear among the tree's branches, but they are labeled as a disease, not a cause). Rather than being the innocent victim of some alien pathologic entity, each person was responsible for attacking his own body with unnatural habits of life; illness was nature's punishment for the self-abuse. From that perspective, "natural disease" was an apt interpretation of naturopathy.²

Still, the preferred translation was "natural healing." Naturopathy, as Lust defined it, was an approach to healing that utilized "the beneficent agency of Nature's forces." Those forces could be administered in every form from water and herbs to electricity and sunlight, but in every case operated the same way, by assisting nature to remove the "Accumulation of Morbid Matter" in the body. As Lust defined it in 1903, naturopathy was a system of "Pathological Monism and Therapeutic Universalism"; it recognized only one disease—inhibi-



Benedict Lust began the Yungborn Nature Cure in 1896 on 60 acres in the Ramapo Mountains near Butler, New Jersey. In 1911, when this photo of the main recreation building was taken, Yungborn reportedly had more than 100 guests taking the nature cure.

tion of the body's "natural power"—but a virtual infinity of healing agents—all of nature's benevolent forces.³ Grand as it already sounds, Therapeutic Universalism nevertheless extended far beyond the utilization of all the natural modalities in the universe. Indeed, the final goal of natural treatments, as Lust saw it, was not the elimination of physical disease, but the restoration of human beings' appreciation of their proper place in the natural order of the cosmos. The "principal object" of naturopathy, he asserted, was "to re-establish the union of man's body, brain, heart and all bodily functions—with nature." Advocating what a later generation would call holistic healing and ecological medicine, Lust required matriculants at his American School of Naturopathy to study not only herbalism and hydrotherapy, but also such subjects as Self-Culture, Mental Regeneration, Pure Love, Soul-Marriage, Mental and Divine Healing, Spirit-Unfoldment, and God-Consciousness.⁴

As the course on God-Consciousness suggests, early naturopathy was energized nearly as much by religious currents as medical ones. Prerequisite for the ideal of union of body, brain, and heart with nature was the awareness that people are beings within a universe created and governed by a beneficent God, and that the laws

of health are divine commandments whose honoring earns favor from the Creator and whose violation brings deserved punishment. Lust looked all the way back to the Garden of Eden to frame his physical theology. There, he sermonized, "man did not suffer from sickness," but lived in perfect health on "what mother Earth produced." Then came the Fall, an act of disobedience which involved, after all, "a forbidden meal," an act of unnatural hygiene. Adam and Eve were expelled, and "man no more remained in direct connection with the earth....In the same measure as man grew more unnatural and sinful, sickness and all misery arose."⁵

The unnatural and the sinful were linked in the naturopathic worldview by practitioners' commitment to vitalism, the belief that life derives from and is sustained by some power or spirit that transcends the chemical and physical forces that govern the phenomena of the inorganic world. Natural methods worked because they acted upon the vital force resident within every human being, stimulating it to restore the body to wholeness. But that force, naturopaths proclaimed, was not merely vital; it was in fact divine spirit, every living thing's own parcel of "the Omnipotent Power, which created the universe." It was Therapeutic Universalism indeed!⁶

If the vital force were the same as omnipotent power, it followed that the misery generated by unnatural living could as readily be spiritual as physical. In one naturopath's telling, "transgression of natural law" was responsible not just for all bodily infirmity, but "all...poverty, misery, worry, vice and crime" as well. And by the same token, the perfection attainable through living in accord with nature was spiritual and not just physical. With adoption of the naturopathic lifestyle, Edward Purinton promised, "there must grow within every human [not only] Massive Muscle, Surging Blood, Tingling Nerve, Zestful Digestion, Superb Sex, Beautiful Body, [and] Pulsating Power," but also "Sublime Thought,...Glorious Freedom, Perpetual Peace, Limitless Unfoldment, and Conscious Godhood. May These Things Be!"⁷

Nature cure, in short, was, as Lust put it, "a great sociological movement," a movement that "falls in line with Christ's petition, Thy kingdom come!" In the kingdom to be created by nature cure, one would find "the new man, the new woman, the new citizen of the coming era, the era of peace and good will to all mankind." The naturopath, another practitioner testi-

fied, "believes in his system not only as a science and an art, but as a religion that will, if followed, lead humanity to the heaven of health and happiness."

In that context, it was possible for naturopaths to propose in complete seriousness that the first and still the greatest adherent of the art was none other than Christ; Jesus, one asserted, was "a most proficient Naturopath." Imagining that sort of pedigree, it made sense for Lust to set forth the revolutionary import of his system by observing that a great spiritual upheaval had occurred in Western civilization approximately every 500 years, beginning with Christ and followed by Muhammad, the Crusades, the Reformation—and now naturopathy.⁸

Naturopathy expected to achieve what earlier religious movements had vainly attempted to do by recruiting errant humanity to what Lust called the "Regeneration Cure," a regimen of right living that restored physical strength and energy while also bringing about a state of "spiritual...rejuvenation." Toward that end of regeneration of body and soul, naturopathy's founder established in rural New Jersey a nature camp of sorts that he called the Yungborn, or fountain of youth. There clients spent their days hiking, sunbathing, mud-bathing, frolicking nude in mountain streams, and subsisting on vegetable foods and herb teas. As one satisfied patron summarized the regeneration experience,

*Mister Lust can make you well,
if you will let him lay*

*The plans for what you eat and
wear, and his commands obey.*

*He's got an Eden out of town,
where you will get no meat,*

*And walk 'mid trees as Adam
did, in birthday suit complete;....*

*Roast beef, cigars, and lager-
beer you'll never want again,*

*When you've been healed at
[Yungborn], by fruit, fresh air and rain.*

*Its very cheap as well as good—
this wondrous Nature Cure,*

*And if you take it home with
you, its blessings will endure;*

*For all the ills of all mankind,
the cheapest and the best*

*Is Mister Lust's great Nature
Cure--just put it to the test!⁹*

Yungborn exemplifies the curious mix of wis-

dom and folly that ran through early naturopathy. There can be no doubt that people improved in health during a stay at Yungborn (aside from the risk of melanoma from all that sunbathing, a danger not understood at the time). Early to bed, early to rise, eat no meat, and exercise is a prescription for physical well-being in any location. Nor is there any doubt as to Lust's good intentions; all that he wrote and all that was written about him attest to his sincerity in wanting people to achieve the highest vitality and in believing that his nature cure was the surest path to that end. Yet sincerity and common sense were countered in naturopathy by an unquestioning faith that every agency of the natural world—be it water, pure air, or ultraviolet rays—was necessarily productive of benefit because it was "natural." "Nature is perfect in every way and everywhere," Lust proclaimed as early as 1900; "the new art of natural healing expects everything from nature and is convinced that the simple natural remedies employed can only assist nature to overcome the disease." Such unwavering trust in Mother Nature's kindness resonates throughout naturopathic literature, from a "Naturopath's Creed" that professed belief in nature's "eternal goodness" and "her perpetual efforts toward ever higher construction," to the quatrains of a naturopathic poet:

*I am getting back to nature, I
have strayed from mother earth,
Have followed many barren
paths, since my time of birth,
I am living close to nature, with
the sun, the air, the bath,
And experience has taught me
this, to take 'The Natur-path.'*¹⁰

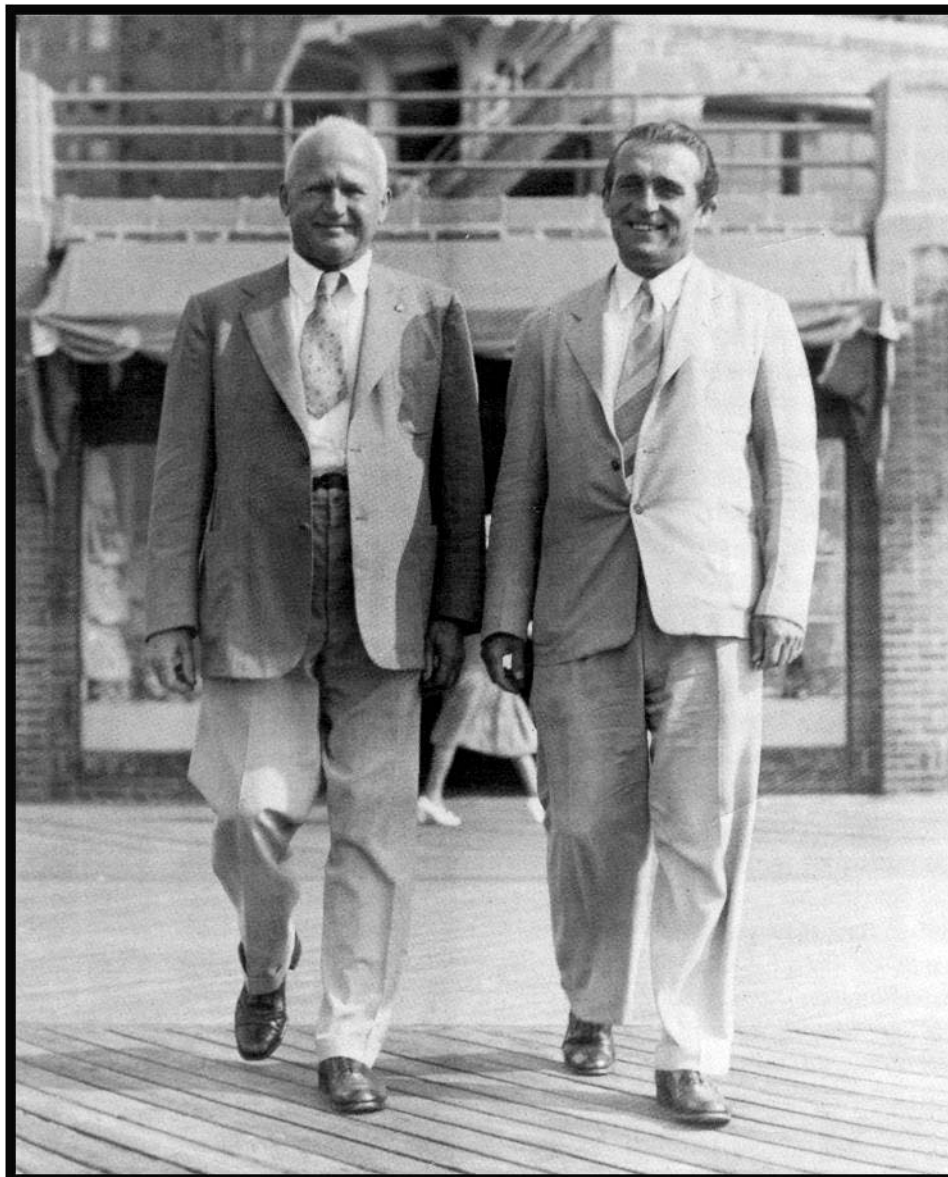
Naturopaths' reverential absorption in the benevolent mysteries of nature loosened their minds to jump to intuitive suppositions that had no basis in objective science, such as the power of the "healing magnetism" of mud. Children had so much fun making mud pies, Lust explained, because "the child...feels within itself the need of the magnetic surge that sweeps from Nature through man, meets the electric wave that quivers from Ether through man, and forms the complete circuit comprised in humanity—from Animal to God."¹¹

Groundless conjecturing was an unfortunate enough weakness. Worse was the willingness to accept into the naturopathic fold any therapeutic modality presented as "natural," no matter how outlandish the



In the summer, many of Yungborn's guests stayed in 'air cabins' which were specially constructed to maximize circulation. Note the special roof construction to allow "healing" fresh air to constantly circulate though the building.

method or questionable the motivation of its proponent. A quick thumbing-through of any volume of *The Naturopath and Herald of Health*, the field's chief journal, corroborates the opinion of D. D. Palmer, the founder of chiropractic, that the naturopathy of his day was "a pick up of anything and everything that their authors find lying around loose." For a period, for example, the journal had a "Phrenological Section." The pseudo-science of reading character by the shape of the skull had been popular for a period during the nineteenth century, but had been discredited and largely abandoned by the beginning of the twentieth. Its claim to take in "man's whole organization and mode of life, and how to control and guide it" struck a responsive chord with Lust the holistic philosopher, however, so phrenology was taken in by naturopathy. There was an Astroscopy Department for a while too, providing guidance on diagnosis through



Two giants of the American naturopathic movement—Benedict Lust (left) and Dr. Jesse Mercer Gehman—posed for a hotel photographer at Atlantic City in approximately 1935. Gehman, who worked for a time as an editor for Macfadden, later founded his own naturopathic health resort near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. In 1943 Gehman published *Smoke Over America*, a detailed examination of the dangers to humans posed by tobacco smoke.

astrology. To illustrate with one case, the mysterious illness of the son of Tsar Nicholas was correctly determined to be hemophilia—but only because the boy had been born when the sun was in Leo and the moon in Virgo. In the realm of therapy and prevention, there was a comparable richness of embarrassments, ranging from sand eating to cure indigestion and constipation, to rectal manipulation, "an absolute cure for chronic headaches and many other diseases supposed to be

incurable."¹²

The advertisements accepted by naturopathic publications demonstrate the same open-mindedness toward all things purporting to be natural. The good, such as whole wheat bread sticks and strength-building exercise programs, ran side by side with the ludicrous. To select but two from among the latter group, there was the Toxo-Absorbent Pack, a container of certain potent minerals that "applied externally searches out the poisons from every organ of the body, draws them to the surface," and neutralizes them, thereby curing pneumonia, tuberculosis, cancer, appendicitis, and typhoid fever; and the Golden Sunlight Radiator, which relieves "pains of every description almost instantly"; it also made pimples "fade away like flakes of snow under the hot sun." An assortment of bizarre literary productions also found their way into the advertising pages of naturopathic journals, among them the booklet that offered vital information about "the inhabitants of the different Planets of this solar system."¹³

While embracing virtually anything that identified itself as natural, early naturopathy reflexively dismissed any theory, therapy, or activity associated with allopathic medicine. The germ theory, for example, was in Lust's opinion "the most gigantic hoax of modern times." The naturopathic position on bacteria was that they were effect rather than cause, agents that established themselves in the body only after it had already begun to deteriorate "because of our unnatural mode of living. The healthy body does not allow undue multiplication of germs. But in the unhealthy body there is so much corruption and waste that the germs start to multi-

ply and flourish." It followed for naturopaths that attempts to control germ proliferation with vaccines—an activity enjoying great favor among MDs—were misguided in theory, as well as a violation in practice of the sanctity of nature. Smallpox vaccination in particular offended naturopaths' intuitive sense of inner purity as the sine qua non of health, involving as it did the introduction of purulent foreign material to the body. Surely it was "beyond the compass of all sane comprehension how corrupted matter—rotted blood—fostered in purposely infected animals...can possibly prevent disease, or restore an afflicted person to a normal state!" Vaccination was "such horrible profanation, such disgusting pollution, such absolute insanity [that one has] to ask in amaze, Can these things be possible in the twentieth century?" To Lust, as late as 1927 compulsory vaccination was "that most heinous of all crimes."¹⁴

But it was not just its effects on humans that made vaccination so heinous in naturopaths' eyes. Equally reprehensible were the sufferings imposed on the animals used to produce and test vaccines. To be sure, most alternative schools of practice in the early twentieth century aligned themselves with the anti-vivisection movement. But none equaled the fervor of naturopathy's attacks on animal experimentation. More than any system, naturopathy respected the kinship of humankind with the animal kingdom: Lust, it will be recalled, praised "the complete circuit comprised in humanity—from Animal to God." Naturopaths' ecological understanding of health—people are whole only when they are integrated into nature's great web of life—made them more susceptible to outrage when so-called healers disrupted that unity and misused other members of the natural community: "Think," one enjoined readers, "of the unparalleled atrocities of these medical perverts who are inflicting untold sufferings on their innocent, helpless victims, to satisfy their devilish mania for experimenting! And worse is sure to come, for it is a fact that animal vivisection is but a stepping-stone to human vivisection." The whole sorry mess of orthodox medicine was summed up in a naturopathic song about "Allopathic Drug Doctors":

*Sing a song of doctors, A
satchel full of dope,
Four-and-twenty patients, A
hundred miles of hope.
When the satchel opens, the*

doctors start to guess;

*The patients are about to get
some nauseating mess.*

*Dosem's in the parlor, Analyz-
ing frogs;*

*Cuttem's in the kitchen, Vivi-
secting dogs;*

*Prickem's found another Serum
for disease.*

*But there's no disagreement
When they figure up their fees.¹⁵*

There was a final way in which early naturopathy strove for therapeutic universalism. Alternative medicine in the early 1900s was disordered by internecine conflict. Chiropractors and osteopaths, for example, despised one another as much as they did allopaths, and each of those systems was also riven by factions within. But naturopathy, governed by a philosophical inclination to presume healing power in every realm of nature, was more disposed toward cooperation than competition. As early as 1907, Lust professed himself "liberal enough to believe that in all of the various systems of healing, even medical science [!], the vaguest and most contradictory of all, we can find some central principle of truth operating if we are only fair-minded enough to seek it." Fellow practitioners professed similar beliefs, and together "cherished a fond dream—the union of all drugless factions into one great profession." Lust in fact described his profession's national society, the American Naturopathic Association, as "a union for the mutual advancement of all healers who rely on nature, an organization under whose wings all schools that use no drugs can find shelter."¹⁶

That ecumenical orientation meant, by Lust's interpretation, that, "The Naturopathic physician is the physician of the future. Bye and bye, we may be able to evolve a humane system of healing that will be as near perfect as it is possible for man to make it." It was even imagined that the drug-dosing allopaths might be brought into the fold bye and bye. In 1918, a naturopath indulged a fantasy in which he proposed "that the American Medical Association and the American Naturopathic Association each appoint a committee whose sole duty will be to ascertain the points of greater wisdom and excellence in the other association. The A. M. A. could say to the A. N. A.—'We are doubtless making serious mistakes, which your superior knowledge would enable us to correct. Please inform and reform us.' Then the A.

N. A. would reply to the A. M. A.—'Not so, brothers. We, verily, are the bunglers—will you not graciously condescend to show us the better way?' Each would thus become a regular Alphonse of courtesy to the other's Gaston of humility." At that point, the doctor came to his senses, realizing how unlikely a vision he had conjured. "I have to stop here," he sighed; "such a spectacle takes my breath entirely away, and I must needs recover from the shock."¹⁷

As it turned out, even cooperation with other alternative systems proved a fantasy, as they refused to acknowledge any merit in naturopathy. By the 1920s, Lust had abandoned the campaign for unification, now urging colleagues to let "the one-track systems go their own separate, independent ways." The man who had once dreamed of uniting all alternative healers into a single profession announced that "the time has come when we must attend to our own knitting," and turned to bitter denunciation of the "uncongenial elements" that constituted the other systems; chiropractors, for example, he characterized as "a treacherous, slimy crew."¹⁸

There were uncongenial elements aplenty even within naturopathy, however, and after Lust's death in 1945 the system broke down into several disputatious factions; at one point in the 1950s, there were no fewer than six different national organizations claiming to represent the profession. Not until the organization of the American Association of Naturopathic Physicians in 1980 would naturopathic practitioners be reunified. Since then, naturopathic practice has been distinguished by the determination of the profession's leaders to distance themselves from the therapeutic naïvete of early practitioners. The profession's leading educational institution, Bastyr University, near Seattle, boasts that instruction at the school "has concentrated more on the scientifically verifiable aspects of natural medicine and less on the relatively anecdotal nature cure aspects." So successful has naturopathy's scientific reform been that of the ten centers for research into alternative medicine established by the National Institutes of Health Office of Alternative Medicine in 1994-95, Bastyr University was the only non-allopathic institution to be selected.¹⁹

Modern naturopaths' scientific self-image is nicely expressed in one practitioner's declaration that, "We must define ourselves as a practice of medicine. Let's not go back to the nuts and berries days of naturopathy." Yet in one respect, the nuts and berries days continue on. As Seattle naturopath John Bastyr

approached the end of his career, he implored colleagues to "keep on with the scientific research, but don't forget the philosophy." Bastyr's injunction has been heeded, for although the religious content of Lust's philosophy has been largely removed from naturopathic discussion, much of the rest of his Therapeutic Universalism remains, if in more sophisticated form. In 1989, the American Association of Naturopathic Physicians formally recognized that naturopathic medicine is ultimately defined "not by the therapies it uses but by the philosophical principles that guide the practitioner." Contemporary naturopathic literature still abounds with professions of faith in vitalism, respect for the healing power of the vital force, and the superiority of natural therapeutic agents to artificial ones.²⁰

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