THE NEW YORKER

AMERICAN CHRONICLES OCTOBER 9, 2017 ISSUE

HOW ESSENTIAL OILS BECAME THE CURE FOR OUR AGE OF ANXIETY

Aromatic oils have become big business. But are they medicine or marketing?

By Rachel Monroe

Twenty years ago, Carla Cohen fell mysteriously ill. She couldn't put her finger on what was wrong; it felt as though some conspiracy between her mind and her body were eroding her capacity to work. Cohen, who was an entertainment executive in Los Angeles, woke up every morning feeling weak and foggy-brained, with a low-grade fever. Her doctors couldn't make a diagnosis, and suggested antidepressants. "I said, 'I'm not depressed!' They just told me to go home and rest."

Disillusioned by Western medicine, Cohen began exploring other options. She studied with multiple healers and shamans; she read books with titles like "The Body Toxic" and pursued a massage-therapy license. As part of her training, she took a class on a massage technique called "raindrop therapy," which incorporates essential oils—aromatic compounds made from plant material. At the time, essential oils were not well known, but Cohen was drawn to them right away. "From the very first moment with those oils, I noticed something was firing that hadn't been firing," she said. "I was deeply moved."

Today, Cohen puts frankincense oil on her scalp every morning; when she feels a cold coming on, she downs an immune-system-boosting oil blend that includes clove, eucalyptus, and rosemary. On days when she has to negotiate a contract on behalf of an organization that she volunteers for, she uses nutmeg and spearmint to sharpen her focus. She earns the majority of her income working as a distributor for Young Living, a leading vender of essential oils.

Cohen is middle-aged, with a friendly, open face framed by graying curls. Though her house, in Long Beach, is full of New Age trappings—a statue of Ganesh, huge hunks of crystal—she speaks with the quick clip of someone who once gave a lot of corporate presentations. As we sat at her kitchen table, a glass globe puffed out clouds of tangerine-scented vapor.

Cohen offered me a glass of water enhanced with a few drops of an essential-oil blend called Citrus Fresh. "It helps the body detox," she said. "Not that you're toxic." The water was subtly tangy, like a La Croix without the fizz.

Cohen went into her treatment room and came back with a small vial labelled "Clarity." She put a few drops in my left palm. "This is good for getting your mind clear," she said. "Rub it clockwise three times. That activates the electrical properties in the oil, and aligns your DNA." Following Cohen's instructions, I cupped my hands around my nose and inhaled deeply. The smell was heavier than that of perfume, so minty that it was almost medicinal. Cohen looked at me expectantly. "I feel perkier," I ventured.

At first, Cohen sold oils to friends and family; she also drummed up business at local yoga studios, and taught classes at a vintage-clothing store. Most of the people she met were unfamiliar with the product. "Oils were not on the radar," she said. But, around seven years ago, when she signed up for a booth at a holistic health fair, she arrived to find someone else selling oils, too. She started seeing them mentioned in mainstream women's magazines. *Marie Claire* advised rubbing a lavender-oil blend on your pulse

points for sounder sleep; *Elle* suggested slathering your face with a frankincense-oil blend to keep your skin young.

More people seemed open to hearing about the medicinal applications of oils as well. "My parents were very much believers in the idea that the doctors were God and the government protects you," Cohen said. Now, it seemed, people were realizing that typical sources of care weren't infallible. "We have amazing answers here," Cohen told me. "Why not try it? What do you have to lose?"

Essential oils have long been used to scent products and to flavor foods; Coca-Cola and Pepsi are among their major consumers. But these days, when people talk about essential oils, they're likely referring to the little vials of liquid essence of lemon or tea tree that you can buy at grocery stores or yoga studios, or from a distributor like Carla Cohen.

Oils are touted as something between a perfume and a potion, a substance that can keep you smelling nice while also providing physical and psychological benefits. They are often stocked on the same shelves as herbal remedies such as echinacea and St.-John's-wort; big-box stores sell aromatherapy diffusers as an alternative to synthetic-smelling products like Febreze. The model Miranda Kerr used oils to help her get over her breakup with Orlando Bloom. The pop star Kesha tweeted that she starts off every day by sniffing essential oils: "They make me feel so peaceful." Gwyneth Paltrow is a fan, unsurprisingly, but so are RuPaul, Alanis Morissette, and a trainer for the New York Knicks.

Oils' rising popularity is part of the contemporary appetite for wellness, an embrace of holistic healthy-living practices ranging from the low key (meditation) to the wacky (Brain Dust, a forty-dollar jar of adaptogenic herbs and mushrooms that promises to "align you with the cosmic flow for great achievement"). Wellness is often dismissed as frivolity, another way for wealthy white women to spend money and obsess about their bodies. But you're just as likely to find essential oils in a small-town drugstore in the Midwest as in an organic market in L.A., and their appeal is often less about indulgence than about anxiety. "I am concerned about antibiotic resistance, emerging viruses, and the risks posed by chronic disease," the herbalist Cat Ellis writes in her book "Prepper's Natural Medicine: Life-Saving Herbs, Essential Oils and Natural Remedies for When There Is No Doctor." For many consumers, essential oils represent

a purer and more ancient form of medicine, one with Biblical overtones—all those scriptural references to anointing—and none of the baggage of the contemporary health-care system. (Wellness-focussed Web sites are more likely to cite oils' centuries of use in Ayurvedic medicine.) Like homeschooling, beekeeping, and canning, the use of essential oils crosses the political spectrum and speaks to a common desire for increased self-sufficiency—or, more darkly, a fear of imminent institutional collapse. Many of the products available from Goop, Paltrow's posh wellness emporium, are also for sale on Infowars, Alex Jones's alt-right conspiracy-theory Web site.

Much of the oil sold in the United States comes from two companies based in Utah, Young Living and doTerra, both of which have claimed to be the largest seller of essential oils in the world. The two companies have more than three million customers apiece, and a billion dollars in annual sales. While there are cheaper oils—Walmart sells a kit of sixteen "therapeutic grade" essential oils for thirty dollars—Young Living and doTerra have built their brands on claims that they sell completely pure, naturally derived oils. "They have Skittles," Kirk Jowers, a vice-president at doTerra, said. "We have the real fruit."

In June, I attended Young Living's "Fulfill Your Destiny" convention for distributors, held at Salt Lake City's Salt Palace event center. The company, which was founded in 1994, has grown tenfold in the past decade, and the hallways were packed with good-natured, heavily fragrant people heading to workshops with names such as "Yoga: A Business Tool" and "Essential Care for Animals." They wore T-shirts that said "Essential Oils. Heck yeah" and "There's an oil for that" and "I'm silently assessing your oil needs." Never have I sneezed so much; never have I been blessed so enthusiastically when I sneezed.

Young Living sells more than a hundred and fifty oils, and a section of the convention center featured samples of them. Some were familiar—oregano, eucalyptus—while others were proprietary blends meant to evoke different physical or spiritual states. Christmas Spirit "taps into the happiness, joy, and comfort associated with the holiday season"; Dragon Time promotes "feelings of stability and calm during cycles of moodiness." It was early in the day, so I dabbed on a drop of Acceptance, and then some Highest Potential, for good measure.

In between sessions, Laura Warford, a stay-at-home mom with a drawl and a shimmer of silver eyeshadow, told me that she had become involved in oils after her daughter, Emmy Grace, died from a heart defect when she was three days old. Warford came home from the hospital, her breasts still leaking milk, and tried to manage her grief while also taking care of her toddler son. Nights were the worst—she had a hard time falling asleep, and when she did she would wake up again minutes later with her mind racing. A friend recommended diffusing lavender oil. The effect was immediate: she felt calmer and was able to sleep through the night. Soon Warford began selling oils. She found a community of supportive friends through Young Living Facebook groups and shared her story with them. She got up every day by reminding herself that she was helping other people. "You can lose yourself outside of being Mommy," she said. "I can be creative now. I can use my gifts that I didn't even know I had before this. I can have adult conversations with people. I went from making zero dollars a month to over zero dollars a month. I got to come here because of Young Living's paycheck. I bought my plane ticket and my convention pass with *my* money. That's empowering. That feels good."

Both Young Living and doTerra follow a multilevel-marketing model. Distributors often buy products at wholesale prices and sell them at a retail markup, but the real money comes from recruiting other distributors into your "downline," and getting a commission on their sales. Young Living divides its sales force into a complex hierarchy stratified partly by sales volume, ranging from Distributor (the lowest level, comprising ninety-four per cent of members) to Royal Crown Diamond (less than one-tenth of one per cent).

"Young Living is freedom—spiritual freedom, relationship freedom, incredible financial freedom," a Diamond-level distributor said at a Young Living panel. (Diamond-level distributors earn a median monthly income of thirty-two thousand dollars.) She told the audience that she had built her oils business while working up to sixty hours a week as a television anchor and homeschooling her special-needs child. "There is nothing holding you back but yourself. We all have the same oils, we all have the same twenty-four hours in the day. The only ones that don't make it to Diamond are the ones that give up. *Anybody* in this room can do it," she said, to huge cheers. On another panel, the featured speaker was a tan woman in a white dress and strappy gold sandals. "As a Royal Crown Diamond, I work only four hours a day. I have a personal chef—my chef

is right here," she said, pointing into the audience. "And I am so blessed. That's what happens when you get to this level. You get blessed with these things. When I wake up, I don't look at the Internet. I go outside. I swim every day. I didn't always have that luxury. But as you advance you get to treat yourself."

Multilevel-marketing companies such as Amway and Mary Kay have long sold people —primarily women—the idea of building a business by working their social connections. A decade ago, that happened through hosting parties or classes; these days, the chatty, relationship-based sales pressure favored by the companies takes place largely on social media, and the industry is attracting a greater share of young people. In recent years, a number of multilevel-marketing companies that target millennials have cropped up, selling everything from leggings (LuLaRoe) to jewelry (Stella & Dot). Marketing pros advise newcomers to "friend" strangers, reach out to acquaintances from high school, and post daily selfies of themselves enjoying the products they sell. (The onslaught of relentlessly sunny product-pushing posts has also led to a backlash, including memes on Facebook and Pinterest: "Someone needs to create a new essential oil called 'Leave Me the Hell Alone.' ") Though the medium may have changed, the sell remains the same—becoming a distributor is a path to independence, flexibility, and "abundance," the industry's favorite euphemism for money.

The reality for most recruits is quite different. Multilevel-marketing companies are structured in such a way that a large base of distributors generally spend more than they make, while a small number on top reap most of the benefits. It is often expensive to invest in an initial stock of products, as well as to make required minimum monthly purchases—around a hundred dollars for Young Living members who want to receive a commission check. According to a public income statement, more than ninety-four per cent of Young Living's two million active members made less than a dollar in 2016, while less than one-tenth of one per cent—that is, about a thousand Royal Crown Diamonds—earned more than a million dollars. Everyone in the industry studiously avoids any comparison to pyramid schemes, which are illegal, but the structural similarities are hard to ignore. "You have the two legs of your pyramid," a doTerra employee told me, as she explained the company's compensation structure. "I mean, not a *pyramid*, but, you know, it has a triangular shape."

Despite the workshops on marketing and business-building at the Young Living conference, the subject of money felt vaguely taboo. "I don't feel like I'm selling, I feel like I'm sharing," a Canadian distributor told me, a sentiment I heard over and over again. "What's different with this company is the heart motive."

Turnover is notoriously high in the multilevel-marketing world, but many distributors who don't make a substantial income nonetheless stick with it, in part because the benefits are more than just monetary. Distributors, many of whom are stay-at-home mothers, find social connections and creative outlets through their oil business. "Some months, I think she spends more than she makes," the daughter of a Young Living distributor told me. "We moved around a lot, that was hard for her. She's made a lot of friends through it. She's happy."

In 2000, Michael Pratt, a professor of management at Boston College, conducted an ethnographic study of Amway distributors. He concluded that the company offered few of the benefits that traditionally inspired loyalty. Its workforce was geographically diffuse; workers had inconsistent income, no benefits, and little job security. What held Amway together was its ability to foster strong feelings of identification, and to get its members to see the company as the embodiment of an idealized life. Young Living's affection for abstract nouns—purity, abundance, wellness, vitality—helps to define a shared culture that prizes freedom, family, and self-sufficiency, and is suspicious of regulation and Big Pharma. All the ancillary swag for sale at the conference—the T-shirts and bumper stickers and magnets—helped to transmit the message that Young Living's distributors were not just people who sold oils; they were *oil people*.

Gary Young, the founder of Young Living, made his first appearance at the convention by riding into the arena on a sled pulled by a team of huskies. (Last year, he flew in on a zip line.) An annual highlight is the announcement of a new oil blend. This year's concoction, Fulfill Your Destiny, was available to distributors for thirty-four dollars for five millilitres and included black pepper, blue spruce, and frankincense, "which opens up your pineal gland," Young said from the stage.

Young is a tall, lean man in his late sixties with a handsome lined face and a penchant for cowboy hats. His origin story is a key part of Young Living lore: how he grew up in Idaho in a cabin with a dirt roof and no running water; how, in his early twenties, he was working as a logger when a tree fell on him, fracturing his skull, rupturing his

spinal cord, and breaking nineteen of his bones; how, once he woke up from the coma, doctors told him that he would never walk again. After two suicide attempts, he decided to drink nothing but water and lemon juice. After two hundred and fifty-three days, he regained feeling in his toes. "That he walks today is a miracle that defies his medical prognosis," according to his biography, "D. Gary Young: The World Leader in Essential Oils," which was written by his wife and published by Young Living.

Young's recovery spurred his immersion in alternative medicine. In 1982, he opened a health center in Spokane, Washington, that included birthing services. One of the babies he attempted to deliver, his own daughter, died after spending an hour underwater in a whirlpool bath. The death was ruled an accident, but the county coroner said that the baby would likely have lived if she had been delivered under conventional conditions. The following year, Young said in the presence of undercover detectives that he could detect cancer with a blood test; he was arrested for practicing medicine without a license and, according to the Spokane *Spokesman-Review*, pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge. Around the same time, Young opened a clinic in Tijuana. John Hurst, a reporter for the Los Angeles *Times*, submitted a blood sample, posing as a patient, and was told that it showed signs of aggressive cancer and liver dysfunction. A "health educator" suggested that Hurst undergo the clinic's two-thousand-dollar-a-week detox program. When Hurst revealed that the blood sample had come from a cat—"a healthy 7-year-old, 20-pound tabby cat named Boomer"—she replied that the cat was "not healthy" and "probably has leukemia." (It did not.)

After meeting a French lavender distiller and grower at a Whole Life expo in California, Young became fascinated by the medicinal properties of essential oils. In the early nineties, he travelled to France to study distillation methods. He bought a hundred and sixty acres of farmland in Idaho and planted peppermint, tansy, and lavender. In 1994, he married his third wife, Mary, a trained opera singer and a driven businesswoman. The couple renovated a run-down building in Riverton, Utah, to use as the headquarters of Young Living Essential Oils; Young mixed his Abundance oil blend into the paint he used on the walls.

In 2000, Young opened the Young Life Research Clinic, in Springville, Utah, which administered essential oils and other alternative therapies to patients with heart disease, depression, and cancer, among other conditions. The clinic employed a pediatrician

named Sherman Johnson, who had recently had his medical license reinstated. About a decade earlier, Johnson had been investigated by the state medical board after a woman had died while he was treating her for cancer. According to the Salt Lake *Tribune*, after a nurse raised questions about the woman's death, the body was exhumed. In a subsequent probe, it was determined that she had had multiple-personality disorder but not cancer; that Johnson had believed her story that she had been injected with cancer by a group of witches and gay doctors; and that she had died from an overdose of Demerol, administered by Johnson. Johnson pleaded guilty to manslaughter.

In 2005, the Young Life clinic settled a lawsuit with a patient who claimed that infusions of Vitamin C had caused renal failure, almost killing her. Young closed the Utah clinic and opened one in Ecuador.

As Young Living grew, former employees told me, reining in Young's spending became an issue. At the company's showcase farm, in Mona, Utah, Young built replicas of a Wild West town and a medieval castle. As "Sir Gary," he hosted tournaments, in which he donned a suit of armor and competed in jousting events. He had plans drawn up for a two-hundred-and-fifty-million-dollar theme park, Mount Youngmore, which would feature jousting, a five-star hotel, and a mountain with Young's face etched on it. (Young has denied this.) "It was just crazy what they were trying to build out there," David Stirling, then Young Living's chief operating officer, told me. Stirling said he was also alarmed by a video he saw of Young, whose only medical degree is a doctorate in naturopathy from an unaccredited school, performing gallbladder surgery and giving essential oils intravenously at the clinic in Ecuador. Stirling attempted to shift Young Living's focus away from Young to the oils, but he met with resistance from Young—and also from many distributors, who felt a deep loyalty to Gary and Mary.

Young eventually fired Stirling, citing, among other reasons, the fact that Stirling kept Young out of the company magazine. (A spokesperson said he was let go for "performance reasons.") "Satan exercised dominion over you to the point where you started thinking that you had knowledge and ability greater than anyone else, including me, the creator of the company," Young wrote in an e-mail. Young declined to speak to me, but the spokesperson said, "Successful company founders are often cut from a different cloth than the rest of us, which is true of Gary Young and his pioneering cowboy spirit."

In April, 2008, Stirling and several other former Young Living executives founded doTerra. Their goal was to make essential oils more appealing to a general audience. "At Young Living, we sold to a lot of Reiki masters," Emily Wright, one of doTerra's co-founders and Mary Young's former personal assistant, said. "When we started doTerra, we really wanted to focus on mothers, to teach them to be empowered to take care of their families. We took essential oils out of this weird healers' niche and into the mainstream."

At first, doTerra's distributors, whom it refers to as Wellness Advocates, were largely concentrated in Utah. Several doTerra executives are Mormons, and the company's connection to the Church was an advantage, because distributors could rely on its large number of stay-at-home mothers and its naturally networked communities. Utah has more multilevel-marketing companies per capita than any other state; direct sales are Utah's second-biggest source of revenue, after tourism. The Mormon Church also has a long-standing mistrust of federal oversight, which has made Utah a friendly home for businesses that operate outside medical norms. Attempts to regulate these industries are often portrayed as threats to individual freedom. In the nineties, during a battle over the regulation of dietary supplements, vitamin advocates paid for a TV ad starring a bewildered, bathrobed Mel Gibson, accosted in his kitchen by a SWAT team for having a bottle of vitamins. More recently, parents have begun refusing in large numbers to vaccinate their children; in Utah County, the hub of the state's alternative-health industry, forty-three per cent of kindergartners have not received their full suite of vaccinations.

DoTerra positions itself as friendly and transparent, selling oils as something between a home remedy and a craft project. The company's social-media posts encourage a D.I.Y. approach to health: "Rosemary supports healthy digestion and internal organ function. Next time you're creating a pizza masterpiece, add a drop of Rosemary to gain these benefits!" One of its best-sellers is a kit called Family Essentials, which includes lavender ("take internally to reduce anxious feelings") and lemon ("to clean tables, countertops, and other surfaces"). Where Young Living had emphasized oils' mystic qualities, with talk of energy fields and harmonic frequencies, doTerra's marketing made oils seem like a normal part of any family's medicine cabinet. The company's friendly tone and Pinterest-ready suggestions were soon the dominant mode for spreading the message about oils. Today, Young Living's and doTerra's social-media posts are virtually

indistinguishable; both feature empowering slogans ("You are beautiful, inside and out"; "You're like really pretty"), flower petals, and smiling babies.

By 2012, doTerra had pulled even with Young Living in terms of total revenue and number of distributors; a market-research group called doTerra "singularly responsible" for the industry's rapid expansion. That year, Young Living sued doTerra for three hundred and fifty million dollars, alleging, among other things, that the company's founders had stolen trade secrets and poached Young Living distributors. At the end of 2015, doTerra claimed that it had surpassed a billion dollars in sales; the following February, Young Living said that it had, too. The court case dragged on for five years, concluding with a civil jury trial this spring. On the second day of the trial, the smells of oils in the courtroom "gave me a bit of a headache and even a stomach ache," the judge said. "I hope we can keep down on the aromatherapy." In June, a jury dismissed all charges against doTerra and its executives.

During the final week of the trial, I toured doTerra's headquarters, in Pleasant Grove, Utah. An employee led me through an air-conditioned warehouse full of fifty-gallon barrels of oils with labels identifying their origins: frankincense from Oman; lavender from Bulgaria. Essential oils, which are made by steam-distilling or cold-pressing plant material, are incredibly resource-intensive to produce. It takes more than a million rose petals to make an ounce of rose oil, which doTerra says is good for the complexion. A single barrel of frankincense oil is worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. The rose oil is so valuable that it was locked in a separate area. As oils have become more popular, sourcing has become contentious. Frankincense, coveted both for its alleged ability to regenerate cells and for its Biblical prominence, is derived from the resin of trees that grow only in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. Anjanette DeCarlo, an environmental scientist who specializes in frankincense, told me, "If the demand keeps up without proper controls, we risk causing an ecological crash of a rare and endangered ecosystem." Young Living recently pleaded guilty to illegally trafficking in rosewood oil from Peru, which considers rosewood trees a threatened species.

Companies in the fragrance and food industries regularly supplement naturally derived oils with synthetic molecules, yielding cheaper products and greater consistency. "An oil that is synthetic in its chemistry won't work the same way," David Hill, an avuncular chiropractor who was formerly the director of Gary Young's Utah clinic and is now

doTerra's chief medical officer, told me. Last year, a former Young Living distributor named Miles Jordens crowdsourced the funds to have several companies' oils analyzed by an independent lab. He found that two of Young Living's oils contained synthetic adulterants. "When you start to see the amount of plant material required to produce oils, and when you have millions of people ordering—I just question how the demand can be met without possibly cutting corners," Jordens told me. A Young Living spokesperson said that the company tested its oils in independent labs and found no evidence of adulteration.

Representatives of both doTerra and Young Living like to highlight the medical benefits of their products. "There are literally thousands of studies on the benefits of essential oils," Hill said. In fact, there have been very few large-scale, peer-reviewed studies of essential oils' use on humans, and their conclusions have been relatively modest. It appears that lavender may improve sleep quality and duration, and that peppermint may reduce symptoms of headache and irritable-bowel syndrome. Many more studies have looked at oils' impact on cell cultures in a lab, sometimes with encouraging results. Some oils have been shown to have antimicrobial effects, and to work synergistically with antibiotics. But the conclusions reached by scientists are beside the point for many consumers. "I'll use my wife as an example," Hill said. "She's not going to be able to tell you the first thing about chemistry. Put a research paper in front of her—zero interest. And that's probably how most people are. What's real to them is the experience they're having."

The Food and Drug Administration is charged with preventing sellers of alternative-health products from making unfounded medical claims. Without ample independent testing, companies can't assert that their products prevent, diagnose, treat, or cure disease. They get around this by relying on abstract words like "vitality" and "balance," and by talking in vague terms about general body systems or mild issues that don't rise to the level of disease. Young Living and doTerra have attorneys on staff to insure that product descriptions are within legal bounds.

It's much harder to police the millions of independent distributors. In September, 2014, the F.D.A. sent a sternly worded letter to doTerra, scolding the company for distributors' claims about oils and conditions including cancer, brain injury, autism, Alzheimer's disease, and A.D.H.D. The agency cited a tweet by a doTerra consultant

using the handle Mrs. Skinny Medic that listed "oils that could help prevent your contracting the Ebola virus," and a Pinterest post by Wellness Empress that recommended peppermint oil for asthma, autism, bacterial infections, and brain injury. (Young Living received a similar letter.)

A few weeks later, federal agents appeared at doTerra's Utah headquarters, and began examining the company's files. "It's always fun when the F.D.A. shows up on your doorstep," Hill said. "And they walk into your office and say things like 'Dr. Hill, you are personally culpable for every single person using these oils.' These were scary moments." DoTerra instituted a fifty-person compliance team to scour social-media posts, looking for noncompliant language, and hosted weekly conference calls, helping distributors translate their stories into acceptable language. "We have a whole team using very sophisticated software, whose whole job is to systematically go through and look for potential claims, like 'frankincense and cancer,' or 'doTerra lavender Ambien,' " Kirk Jowers, the doTerra vice-president, told me. "Anything suspect that goes up, we try to get it down within twenty-four hours, and we're very effective."

But although doTerra supplies educational materials to its Wellness Advocates, there are no requirements that they review or distribute them. "The multilevels have the whole aromatherapy community worried," Peter Holmes, the author of the textbook "Aromatica," told me. Both doTerra and Young Living encourage consumers to drink certain oils, a position that's controversial even among alternative-health practitioners. Holmes said that, while he is unaware of the practices of specific companies, "You hear about completely untrained housewives telling people to ingest up to fifty drops. That is sheer insanity. That is medically dangerous. It's a crazy situation."

This May, a doTerra representative named Lara held an Essential Oils 101 class at a barbecue restaurant in Waco, Texas. The wood-panelled room had paintings of trains on one wall and of hunting dogs on another. Lara, a bright-eyed woman in chunky jewelry, introduced herself as "the crazy oil lady." She was in the midst of a doTerra leadership-training program that brought her to a handful of states to lecture about oils. She told the dozen people assembled that she had become interested in oils a few years ago, when her three-year-old son started showing symptoms of autism after receiving the measles-mumps-rubella vaccine. "My pediatrician had no help for me,"

she said. But diffusing oils made her son as "calm as a kitten." After a few years of treatment with oils, she said, he is on track developmentally.

Lara distributed a handout that listed various ailments and their oil treatments: eucalyptus for bronchitis, lavender for third-degree burns, cypress for mononucleosis, rosemary for respiratory syncytial virus. Diffusion "kills microorganisms in the air which helps stop the spread of sickness," the pamphlet read. Oils "repair our bodies at a cellular level so when you are not sure which oils to use, don't be afraid to use several oils and the body will gain a myriad of benefits." Lara told the people in the room that doTerra had oils that were "very antiviral" and could knock out bronchitis in twenty-four hours. She shared essential-oil success stories—her migraines gone, her friend's rheumatoid arthritis reversing, a colleague's mother's cancer in remission. A blond woman at the back of the room raised her hand. "Cancer?" she said, sounding both skeptical and hopeful. She explained that her sister-in-law had recently been treated for breast cancer, and was taking a pill to prevent its recurrence, but the side effects were terrible. The blond woman was hoping for a more natural solution.

"There is an oil for that," Lara said cautiously. "There is some research. It is an option. It would not have those side effects."

A young man in an orange shirt identified himself as having autism and Tourette's syndrome. Lara passed him a vial of vetiver. He held the bottle up to his nose and inhaled deeply. "Am I supposed to get chills?" he said. "I'm getting chills."

I thought of a book I'd recently read, "The Chemistry of Essential Oils Made Simple: God's Love Manifest in Molecules." In it, David Stewart, an aromatherapist affiliated with Young Living, writes that essential oils have a divine intelligence and discernment that allows them to heal without harming, to provide our cells with exactly what we need and nothing we don't. "The molecules of a therapeutic grade essential oil form a harmonious, coherent, functional family designed and intended to serve us and heal us according to the highest will of their creator and our creator who is one and the same—God," Stewart writes. The idea could give anyone chills: a better kind of medicine, one that's pure and uncompromised, derived from nature, sold to you by a friend. A small bottle full of all the good things and none of the bad. ♦

This article appears in other versions of the October 9, 2017, issue, with the headline "Something in the Air."