

“There is no universal good or bad, right or wrong,  
healthy or unhealthy about the ‘naturalness’ of a substance.  
*Echinacea* is a natural substance. So is penicillin. So is cyanide.”



## Chapter 3

### Sorry, Mother Doesn't Care if You Live or Die

**Y**ou know what it takes to live a long, happy life. Escape our high-pressure, emotionally-charged, crazy-making culture and get in tune with nature. *Mother Nature*. Live in harmony with her beauty and bounty. Let her nurture, heal, sustain, protect, and renew your soul.

Mother has been revered by all civilizations that recognize how human survival relies on her good graces. Our modern, enlightened, high-tech society still believes, as nomadic tribes did, that Mother Nature exists to keep us alive and well. So we bow to her wisdom and gentle harmonious teachings. When we step out the door into a glorious, serene spring morning, well, who could argue with her beauty or power?

Mother *is* the source of everything we need to exist: air, water, food, wind, and fire. She deserves to be appreciated and respected.

But not trusted.

She has a dark side. I don't just mean flood, famine, pestilence, and earthquakes. I mean damaged genes, the plague, unfathomable pain, disability, death by, uh, *natural* causes.

My family loves the wilderness that surrounds our community. The Cascade mountain range, roaring rivers, serene lakes, open meadows and forests. It's easy to drop my guard as I admire nature in all her glory on a Saturday morning hike. But I'm in the guarding business, and, when my first patient Monday morning is a patient with cerebral palsy or diabetic blindness, I must deal with Mother on an entirely different level. I face the grim reality that her interest in these people is merely one of curiosity, not compassion.

Life on planet Earth has been evolving and shifting over billions of years. Only recently have humans begun adapting nature to our needs, effectively accelerating this process. We began to alter the natural plant life with farming and the natural animal life with domestic livestock. Fruit trees, vegetables, and grains produce more food per plant than their recent ancestors, and the docile cattle, sheep, and chickens of today are known to bear little resemblance to their more aggressive ancestors of just a few thousand years ago.

It's tempting to believe that these necessities of life were put here *deliberately* for our benefit. But in fact, just like the life forms we rely on for survival, we humans were shaped and culled and eventually became the creatures we are as a *response* to the environment. Nature is the cause; we are just one of her effects. Mother has always been a detached manipulator—playing with and experimenting on all forms of life. Ours included. And she does it on a grand scale.

Thomas Edison stated he learned a thousand ways *not* to make a light bulb before finally discovering how to transform electricity into light. His trials and errors were nothing compared to Mother's experiments. Edison focused and directed his work with a *deliberate* goal in mind, yet he still suffered a thousand defeats for one success. By contrast, Nature's fiddling around is completely random, occasionally striking pay dirt, like the opposable thumb, but hitting dead ends, literally, millions of times more often.

The forces of Nature mutate life, a little at a time, often invisible to the naked eye. They cause genetic changes through radiation, DNA transcription errors and other mechanisms that alter the existing code. Organism by organism, she plays around to see what turns up. The great experiment goes on, advancing certain members of a species a tiny bit at a time while, at the same time and through the same processes, hurting or killing millions more along the way.

Sickle Cell Anemia is a simple but elegant example of both effects.

This single mutation in the genetic code for hemoglobin, found mostly in people of African descent, is harmless to children unless both parents pass on the defective form of the gene to their child. In that case, the child's abnormal hemoglobin molecules can stack together in his red blood cells to form long, rigid structures, morphing the cells from smooth disks into sharp, pointed sickle shapes.

These cells plug up capillaries, and the result is a sickle cell crisis, an excruciating event that can last days or weeks and wreak havoc on oxygen-starved organs. The crisis is a living hell for the child and for the family at the bedside. The life span of such children, while

improving slowly with research, is seriously reduced, and the quality of life pretty grim.

Yet, the sickle cell mutation is believed to be a *benefit* to the individual who inherits the defective gene from *only one* parent, because it provides some protection against deadly malaria. In Africa, that is a very good thing. In the United States, it is neither good nor bad. And, for a child *anywhere* who inherits the defective gene from both parents, it is a tragedy.

If you've ever sat with such a person during a crisis, it is easy to view Mother Nature as the enemy. However, she's neither an ally nor a predator. She isn't intentionally out to get us, and she isn't here to save us. Whether we live or die, individually or as an entire civilization, is of no interest to her.

We're here because our species hasn't yet been wiped out by her ongoing experiments, and because we haven't yet done ourselves in. This is *our* time on the planet. Keep in mind, however, that for every species alive today, thousands are now extinct.

I've never heard it better said than by author, Sam Harris:

*The very mechanisms that create the incredible beauty and diversity of the living world guarantee monstrosity and death. The child born without limbs, the sightless fly, the vanished species—these are nothing less than Mother Nature caught in the act of throwing her clay.<sup>1</sup>*

Brutality, violence, pain, and grief are not the monopoly of man and his inhumanity to man. They're an integral part of all life on earth. If you're a parent, imagine losing half of your children before their fifth birthday. I often think I might not survive such a loss, yet mankind has lived with this pain since prehistoric times.

Only in the last few hundred years have life expectancy and child mortality rates improved significantly, and nature had nothing to do with it. We have, in fact, needed to battle her greatest assassin—*infection*. Our species came up with the four greatest life-saving inventions of all time: soap, sewers, antibiotics, and vaccines. Of course, the brains brilliant enough to stop the spread of infection were her creation too. But it's up to us as individuals to use them for our own protection.

And, if nature can be a cold-hearted and indifferent mother, she's even worse after you've reached middle age. Now she's really no longer on our side! The strength of youth can allow some remarkable recoveries from illness and injury, but once we've past our reproduc-

tive years, our resistance to the harsh elements seems to evaporate as if dear old mom is done with us. I was born. I grew up. I've reproduced, thank you very much, and now she doesn't need me any more. And she really doesn't owe me a darn thing. The next generation is in place, and the species goes on. The rest of my life doesn't matter one bit to her. Nor should it. But it does to me.

One hundred years ago, our average life span was about 40 years. Imagine: infancy, childhood, 10 or 20 years of adulthood, death. We've always wanted more and have been willing to work for it.

Each generation has used their brains, creativity, and new scientific knowledge to buy more time. Today, most Americans can expect to live long enough to see their children grow up and to be part of their grandchildren's lives. But not because Mother Nature warmed up to us. She still doesn't care if we're around once our ability to procreate ends.

If we'd like long, healthy lives, we have to do it for ourselves. It's not on Mother's agenda. This means we have to take full control of our health. It means we have to make informed medical decisions and smarter lifestyle choices. We have to override mental programming formed by superstitious beliefs, obsolete information, and Madison Avenue hype. Here's one example that combines all three:

***One hundred percent All Natural!***

If I offer patients a choice between a supposedly natural versus artificial remedy, no matter the age, education, or IQ of the person I ask, the hands-down winner is: *Natural, doc*. When I ask how they define a natural treatment, the responses become vague, uncertain, posed more as a question. *Pure? No chemicals? Organic? Not toxic? No chemicals?*

Many people have a positive feeling about a product they buy in health food stores or naturopathic, chiropractic, and acupuncture clinics. They believe it is "of the earth herself" infused with an almost magical healing energy that is pure, safe, and wholesome, so long as it hasn't been touched by researchers, scientists, and quality control experts.

Early societies, you know, the ones where the life span was half of what it is today, had nothing *but* natural. They did their best with what Mother Nature had to offer.

Today, we have the wonders of mass marketing promoting a huge industry of natural anything, natural everything. The ad wizards know how the public feels about any product—food, remedies, vitamins, toothpaste, etc.—labeled natural. And they know the public is suspicious

of products without that label: Probably unsafe. Probably a money-making, cancer-causing scam of evil corporations. It's all about emotion, not facts.

*Natural.* The word has been perverted, exploited, and shoved down our throats to sell everything from toilet paper to motor oil. So it might be in our best interest to know its definition. Here's the meaning as defined by *The Oxford American Dictionary*:

**natural** (nach-u-ral) adj. 1. of, or existing in, or produced by nature.

That seems simple enough. Let's take a few examples: Tulips and butterflies in spring. A young mother beginning labor. A native boy climbing trees and splashing in the water. Each of these describes a scene easily found in nature before cities, cars, drugs, and pollution.

Now, look closer.

A tulip eaten by a young deer and a butterfly eaten by a bird. A young mother hemorrhaging to death during labor and delivery, leaving behind a doomed newborn. A young boy dying of lockjaw from a tiny splinter. A life expectancy of 32 years, and a 30 percent infant mortality rate. All common scenes found in nature before cities, cars, drugs, and pollution. Sometimes "All Natural" isn't all that pretty.

Yet every day we are hit with advertising claims of "All Natural," as though no other quality should be necessary to compel us to buy their amazing new product.

One day, I counted all the advertising messages I encountered for "All Natural" products—forty-three. Did you know there are "all natural" tampons and shaving creams? It was news to me. We all know that pharmaceutical "chemicals" in little pills are not natural, but maybe early man really could pick little time release gel caps off a melatonin tree to help him with his insomnia.

The concept of "natural medicine" is an oxymoron. Like any medical intervention, natural medicine involves a deliberate act, above and beyond nature. Concentrating any biologically active substance to swallow or apply to the body is not an act of nature but of man.

There is no universal good or bad, right or wrong, healthy or unhealthy about the "naturalness" of a substance. Echinacea is a natural substance. So is penicillin. So is cyanide.

It's perfectly natural for young people to get excited and make babies. That doesn't make it a good idea for a 14-year-old couple in today's society. It's natural for lightning to start a brushfire that clears debris from the forest floor, promoting new growth. It's not a good

idea to let the fire rage on its own until it wipes out families and homes. Most of us would employ an unnatural water system to save our homes and our loved ones.

And yet, we may automatically reach for those “natural” products without a second thought other than the basic assumption it will be good for us. If, God forbid, it’s a *chemical*, we are pretty sure it will slowly poison us, and we won’t even know it until our hair falls out in clumps.

The only way to avoid being misled by your own beliefs and the effects of mass marketing is to become aware of them in the first place. If anything you come across claims to be natural, stop and ask yourself, “Does this occur in nature?” Shampoo with honey and milk added? Shaving cream? That multi-vitamin? Probably not.

But even if it does, ask yourself, “So what?” Does the fact that it’s found in nature mean it’s safer, more effective, and relevant to its application...to your life?

Let’s look at the other side of the “natural” coin. *Artificial*. According to *The Oxford American Dictionary*:

**artificial** (ahr-ti-fish-al) adj. 1. not originating naturally—made by human skill.

Here’s my list: nuclear bombs; automatic weapons; cars emitting tons of CO<sub>2</sub>; Twinkies; plastic everything; and the chlorofluorocarbons opening a hole in our planet’s ozone shield—all artificial, man-made creations.

On the other side of my paper: vaccines that stop plagues like smallpox and polio; toilets that flush; antibiotics; sterilizing machines; surgical soap and instruments; a near-zero maternal death rate; a life expectancy of 80 years. None of these were gifts of nature.

I can hear you groaning, “Okay, I get the point!” But here are some artificial things in our lives that are often *touted* as natural by their advertisers: clothes; a chiropractic adjustment; acupuncture; bread; herbal and homeopathic medicines; soaps and moisturizing creams. These were either invented or artificially altered by man. They are about as natural as your toaster.

Our emotional reaction to the word “artificial” is also a conditioned response, not the result of conscious, informed thinking. You may equate the word “chemical” to “toxin,” yet everything we are, every molecule that goes into the making of our bodies is a chemical. So are water, carbohydrates, vitamins, herbs, prescription medications, minerals, amino acids, and olive oil.

In the world of medicine, the word “artificial,” like the word “natural,” is not what makes something good or bad, healthy or toxic, safe or risky.

Our society has not yet developed a strong immunity to subtle marketing messages. Selling health food products is not just about promoting real, exaggerated, or bogus benefits. It’s also about strong but subtle suggestions that all prescription medications are dangerous chemicals. We become conditioned to think we must avoid them or pay the price, and this affects our healthcare buying decisions, political views, even our moral opinions. We assume medication should only be a last resort.

Once you realize you may have idealized Mother Nature, you can appreciate her for what she is and accept what she is not. When I’m hiking with my family, I admire her for all the things she’s done right. When I’m making a decision about my children’s health, I am very aware of her dark side. She is an indiscriminate killer and an indifferent experimenter, a true sociopath, no more concerned about us as a species or as individuals than she was about the dinosaurs or the dodo bird.

I use the brain she gave me to understand she *does not love me*.