

That Smell

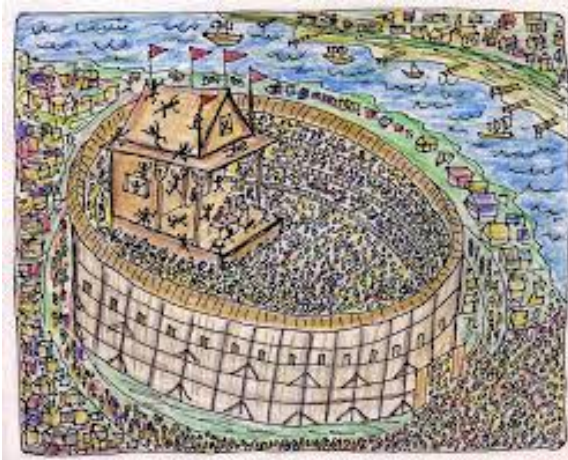
"That Smell" LYNYRD SKYNYRD

*Whiskey bottles, and brand new cars
Oak tree you're in my way
There's too much coke and too much smoke
Look what's going on inside you
Ooooh that smell
Can't you smell that smell
Ooooh that smell
The smell of death surrounds you.*

The year was 1977 and those were the opening lyrics of a song by Lynyrd Skynyrd. The song was about Skynyrd guitarist Gary Rossington, who bought a new car, got drunk, and crashed it into a tree and then a house (“whiskey bottles, brand new car, oak tree you’re in my way”). While it was an early and perhaps futile attempt for the band to try to go “straight” and give up drugs and alcohol, that meaning was lost on the general public because the lyrics took second place to the mesmerizing music. Most people would pipe up and sing, “*Ooooh that smell*” when those words came across the radio but were oblivious to the underlying message the band was trying to convey. In this piece, I will do pretty much the same thing regarding our sense of smell.

London, England and the Globe Theatre

William Shakespeare’s own production company built the Globe theatre in 1599. Its purpose was to showcase his works to both the aristocrats of society



as well as the commoners who could not afford such entertainment. The Globe was a three-story open-air amphitheater that could house as many as 3,000 spectators. At the base of the stage was an area called the “pit” where, for a penny, people (whom Shakespeare referred to unaffectionately as the “groundlings”) would stand on the earthen and cobblestone floor to watch the performance. The richer patrons would sit in the more expensive covered

galleries.

Standing in the pit was uncomfortable, and people were usually packed in tightly. The groundlings were commoners who were also referred to as “stinkards” or “penny-stinkers,” and this was for a good reason. What we deem acceptable standards of personal hygiene today were then hundreds of years away. In Shakespearian plays, there are numerous references to the stench of the crowds (which was always heightened when the actors found themselves downwind of their audience).

The toothbrush and other hygienic aids

If we study history going all the way back to the days of our ancestors, the cave dwellers, it is difficult to find evidence that people were concerned about any form of body odor. For the next thousand or so years, it really didn't matter if we stunk or not. In fact, it wasn't until the Egyptians (who were pretty good at building pyramids) developed a way to mask human odors by inventing perfumed baths. (Later in this piece, you will see how some of our current populace still resort to this procedure.) Then came the middle ages. It was during that period that certain religious sects proclaimed that being naked was evil . . . even if it was while taking a bath. As a result, people stopped washing themselves for fear of consequences. Those who could afford it covered themselves with perfume to combat those eventual musk related stenches.



The toothbrush as we know it today was not patented until 1938. Boar bristles were used for brushing teeth. Nylon toothbrushes were introduced by DuPont in that year, some 339 years after the Globe Theatre opened. However, early forms of the toothbrush have been in existence since 3000 BC. Ancient civilizations used a "chew stick," which was a thin twig with a frayed end. These “chew sticks” were rubbed against the teeth and removed food particles. The first trademark deodorant was patented in 1888 and was called “Mum.” It was a paste that was applied to the underarms. “Ban” roll-on was introduced in the 1950s, and “Right Guard” appeared with its familiar spray can ten years later.



In this pre-World War II ad, a topless model demonstrates proper brushing techniques.



All of this begs the question, “What did we do before the advertising and marketing people convinced us that we smelled bad and that soap alone wouldn't do the trick?” The human race was without toothbrushes and deodorant for centuries and we have yet to go the way of the dinosaur. It was a widely held belief that nobody spoke about perspiration or any other bodily functions in public. While this was strictly speaking a private matter, it did affect the public . . . and more precisely, their noses.

Never underestimate the power of perception

There is a difference between wants and needs. Most people cannot do without something they need. Human nature provides us with ways and instincts to hunt down and obtain whatever we need to survive. Years ago, somewhere in a smoke-filled back office of an upstart Madison Avenue advertising agency, a team of copywriters and marketing gurus came up with a strategic plan on how to convince people that they really want things they do not actually need. The first



Are you telling me that if I wear Coco Mademoiselle by Chanel, I can get a date with George Clooney?

key word here is want. At the midpoint of the twentieth century, they discovered the way to accomplish this. If something is suddenly in vogue and others have it, you will do whatever you can to get it. The second key to this approach is perception. This is accomplished by leading a person to believe that by using a certain product, they will be able to do things they couldn't do before. All they have to do is create a media blitz and people will buy in (otherwise, they wouldn't be stylish or in vogue).

Let's take women's perfume. The average cost of a bottle of Chanel No. 5 is \$200. That's a pretty steep retail price for a small bottle, but if you were to purchase a gallon of the stuff, it would work out to the staggering \$25,600. (And we complain about gasoline when it reaches \$3.50 per gallon!) According to studies, a single applicator bottle is enough "spray-on" to last for more than a year of regular use. Two things are happening here. First, consumers are swayed by ads on television and via the print media to believe that men will worship you if you use this product. The second is that the more you use, the more men you will have to fend off each day. While most women use the common-sense practice of lightly spraying the perfume's mist into the air and "walking through" it, others just fill up the bath tub and wonder where their money (and their close friends with normal senses of smell) went. Does anyone actually enjoy smelling someone who just spent an hour in a perfume bath?



His cologne arrived five minutes before he did and lingered twenty minutes after he left.

When does too much of a good thing become a bad thing? Sometimes, this is simply crossing the fine line that separates common sense from foolish behavior. Things done in moderation are fine, and in some cases, people rush over that line into the realm of excess. I think all of us would agree that perfumes

and colognes are pleasant smelling. Many are named after pleasurable sensory recollections. If they didn't, they would remain on the shelves and ultimately be removed from inventory only to fade away into obscurity. Like anything else in life, there is a risk in excess. You might love an expertly grilled sirloin steak, but eighty ounces of meat at one time would be more than you can reasonably handle. Even if that steak were served in a sensible twelve ounce portion, it could be ruined by an excess amount of seasoning. The same goes for the application of perfumes and colognes. What some



heavy perfume or after-shave users fail to realize is the effect of their excessively applied scent on the taste buds of others. (Yes, the sense of smell and taste are related.) Many a good meal at an upscale restaurant has been ruined by someone seated a table away whose expensive and recently applied "body spray" has overpowered that dry-aged sirloin steak the waiter has just placed in front of you. The issue is not people wearing cologne per se; it's people who wear too much. If someone can smell your "scent" from more than an arm's distance away, you're wearing too much. Also keep in mind that perfumes and colognes will react with individual body chemistries. A fragrance can smell wonderful on one person and dreadful on someone else.



Everyone has a different degree of sensory perception.

Some people have perfect vision, while others need glasses for distance or close up work. Humans by nature perceive the outside world through their five senses (hearing, sight, touch, smell, and taste).



Who said I need glasses to apply my makeup?

Some simply have desensitized themselves to the point where even excesses (loud noises, strong odors, etc.) seem "normal" or even imperceptible to them. Others simply can't see things up close clearly. As in most things that deteriorate slowly in conjunction with the aging process, people don't realize how much of their original sensory perception they have lost. One of the reasons that older people tend to overdo their fragrance application is that they can no longer smell it, especially when they are getting dressed. If they have used a particular scent for years, not only are they desensitized to it, but that aroma probably permeates everything around their

dressing area, and many of their other possessions. When it comes to the olfactory senses, humans are dwarfed by the animal kingdom. A bear's brain is a third of the size of ours despite its obvious physical size advantage, yet the part devoted to smell is five times larger. They possess big noses and the inside surfaces of their nostrils are enlarged with folds that make room for thousands of

smell receptors. Their sense of smell is certainly better than a bloodhound's, and quite possibly is the best of any land animal. Bears would not survive a walk through the perfume aisle at Macy's. Perfume is to the nose as touch is to the body - a light one can tantalize, but one that is too strong is like getting a kick to a very sensitive area.

Irony

For the most part, our noses can be quite sensitive. There isn't one among us who would have trouble recalling a number of instances of when something smelled wonderful to them. This could range from the freshness of a pine tree in a forest to the smell of that Thanksgiving Day turkey dinner slowly cooking in your grandmother's oven. But lately, we are encountering more than our share of "olfactory abuses" that also find their way into our memories. You might encounter one tomorrow morning when your boss invades your space with a mixture of strong espresso and onion bagel on his breath and tells you that you need to put in some overtime this weekend.

The irony of bad breath is that your nose is barely one inch "north" of the habitual offender.



How is this possible? While our noses can't compare to that of the previously referenced bear, certainly we should be able to smell that leftover shrimp scampi or that pile of onion rings we devored at lunch on our breath . . . especially if others have been rolling their eyes and holding their breath each time we speak in their direction. Did Mother Nature fit each of us with our own individual "bad breath" filter that works only for us? How are our own noses capable of ignoring something so close?



Nature has provided us with everything we need to survive. Our planet is in reality a geosphere with self-renewing resources. Because man sits atop of the food chain and has been gifted with a brain that is capable of logic and creativity, we have become the beneficiaries of progressive thinking. We continue to invent things that make our lives easy. Change is a constant when it comes to improvements in the way we do things. From the beginning, we have found ways to keep ourselves clean. Soap has been around for a long time, and water, well, we know how long we've had that resource. The combination of those two things will keep us sanitary and off the "offensive" scale of others. Masking odors only creates new ones, and not all of them are pleasant.

If life teaches us anything it is moderation. Things done to excess usually have short term results, and many of them produce overkill of some sort. While we can't control what others do, we certainly can take care of ourselves. No matter how hard we try, there will always be "sensory offenders" to some degree. There is no pattern as to when and where these offenders will appear and disrupt our daily routines.

But when one appears, all I'll ask for is a head start . . .

*"Won't you give me three steps,
Gimme three steps mister,
Gimme three steps towards the door?
Gimme three steps
Gimme three steps mister,
And you'll never see me no more."*

"Gimme Three Steps"
LYNYRD SKYNYRD