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Body odor: Aura's aroma or olfactory assault?

*By Diether Haenicke
May 06, 2009*

Of all the many speeches I have given over the years, I very distinctly recall one where the body odor of my audience was so powerful that I had to end quickly for fear of fainting.

The situation was mainly the fault of Greg Dobson, at the time my trusted assistant. Always an enthusiastic supporter of the university's athletic teams, he had scheduled me to give a pep talk to the hockey team. What he had not warned me about was that I would speak in a windowless locker room right after the players returned from the ice after a two hour practice session. I used to swim competitively. When swimmers return to the locker room they do not sweat, and they do not smell. I grew up in farm country and have worked close to goats, but 20 men just off the ice in a small room blew the lid off all previous experiences. I love the hockey men, but far more overwhelming than their dedication were their odiferous evaporations.

I remembered this olfactory experience the other day while reading an interview with the English rocker Sting in the English Sunday Times Magazine. There the widely admired musician declared: "I don't like soaps, and I don't use anything like soap or deodorant. I actually like my own smell." How good for him.

Is it something British? My wife and I experienced difficulties years ago when attempting to purchase deodorant soap in London. What we found instead were strongly scented soaps that covered odors but did not prevent or eliminate them. But Sting doesn't even go for scented soaps. He prefers none at all. However, chances that I'll ever sit next to him are minimal, and so I confidently leave his problem to those who admire him in spite of this unappetizing idiosyncrasy.

Odors are clearly a matter of habit and conditioning. My son does not faint in locker rooms, but when I took him as a little boy into a barn with pigs, cows and goats he almost lost his meal. To me animals smell down-to-earth and wholesome.

Also, strong cultural differences exist. Dick DeVos once told me how much experimentation and research Amway puts into finding the right scents and colors for soaps, perfumes, and toiletries that go into Asian or Latin American markets. What may smell delightful to a North American nose might be repulsive to a Korean or a Brazilian nostril.

Even garlic does not smell offensive in countries where it is a daily staple. I used to fortify myself for bus rides around Athens by eating as much garlic as the other passengers and after a week became oblivious to the smell. Only my mother's embraces became ever shorter and less cordial.

As a teenager, I often heard European travelers returning from the USA talk condescendingly about the "American bathroom culture," and I recall that American exchange students who insisted on taking a shower every single day were not only a nuisance and but an enigma to their German landladies. We used to keep clean by washing with contortionist movements out of a wash bowl and a ewer, both now elevated to the status of heirlooms and to be found only in antique stores. Since then, I have become addicted to the mocked American way of regular showering and have gratefully noted on recent trips that Europe has Americanized itself in the area of personal hygiene.

Nevertheless, in many countries a distinct personal, shall we say, aroma is still perceived as quite stimulating and even sexually enticing. A European colleague of mine, a follower of New Age thinking, assures me that all too frequent bathing and soaping destroys the body's aura and thus its health. Last time I met him he was obviously in great health because his strong aura greeted me the moment I entered the room.

Whether one welcomes body odors as erotic stimulants or conveyors of good health, all this is obviously a matter of degree and intensity, with hockey practice clearly producing too much of a good thing.

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