

**WE
BECOME
FRAGRANT**

In the very, very old books of the lives of the saints the phrase “the odour of sanctity” was used to describe the live and/ or death of a special person. It did not refer to the incense, flowers, candles which may have been present, nor to the stories of perfumes which were reported after someone had died, but was used instead to explain the quality of that person’s presence; to impart to the reader some idea of the quality of the person’s holiness. It implied a quality of holiness in live which surrounded others, which spread around others like a fragrant air, so people could feel that they were breathing it in.

The sense of smell has a lot to do with breathing. It is the most primitive of our senses, the earliest to develop, the most evocative.

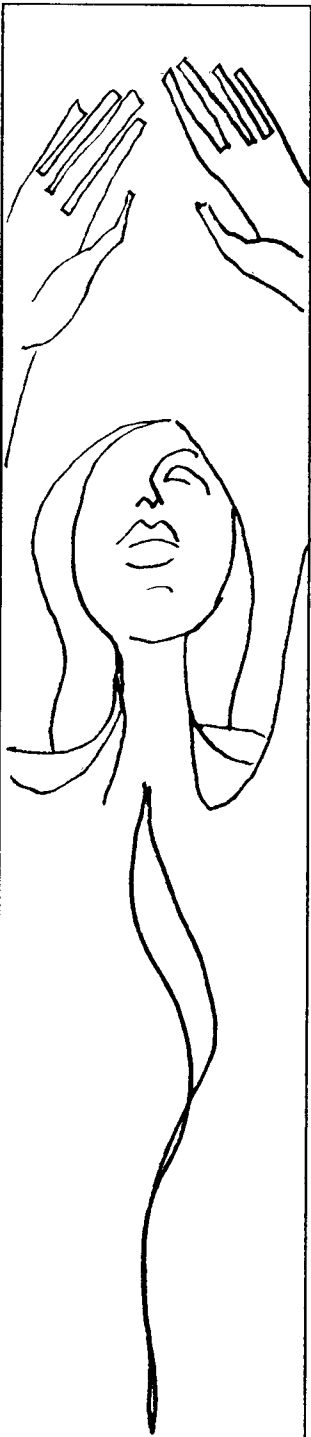
In your earliest days, sniffing the air that surrounded you, becoming aware of the usual smells and sounds of activity in the house, washing machine, vacuuming, polish, doors opening and closing... nothing much different, until...that other smell wafted over you: the smell of comfort, contentment, safety.

The approach of your mother, coming first through smell, alerted you to look at her face. You may remember being lifted from your cot, or being carried, but somehow in your sub-conscious is still an awareness of your mother as you knew her then, and some faint smell can evoke her presence for you.

The sense of smell is one of the first ways in which we make sense of our world.

The novelist Patrick Suskind, in his (rather gruesome) book “Perfume”, describes a character who is quite the opposite to the saints of the Church, and bearing no resemblance to innocent babyhood, a vile and cruel man, uncaring of anyone...BUT...one who has a heightened awareness of his sense of smell, who is a talented genius of a perfumer in pre-revolution Paris. Suskind describes the ability to differentiate the different strands of odours present in the air..

“The air at ground level formed damp canals...a mixture of human smells, water and stone, ashes and leather, ale and tears, grease... He did not merely smell the mixture of odours, but dissected them analytically...(then he would go) to the market where the odours of the day lingered on... vegetables, eggs, wine, spices, cloth, shoe soles. ...He had so thoroughly smelled out this quarter that he could find his way around in it by pitch dark night.” Could you??



OFFERINGS

There was a time once, when you were able to recognise faint changes of smell in your surroundings, can you do it now? The sense of smell has become less necessary to human beings, and many of us do not use it to its full extent. We can tell if we are near a chip shop or a curry house, a farmyard or a gas works, but that apart, how do we use our sense of smell?

The sense of smell, like the sense of taste, has no defence mechanism, an odour comes to us on our indrawn breath. If we do not like it, we may try to block it out, but it has already reached us, touched us. We can refuse to look at something, refuse to listen, refuse to touch, but a smell comes wafting in to our nose cavities before we can know it is there.

Is any of this significant? Yes, on two human levels and one sacred.

On the human level, we are working in many of our Spred groups with people who have to rely on their sense of smell more than the rest of us. Those who find it difficult to focus, those who find it difficult to identify or categorise the world around them, those who cannot see, for all those people, the sense of smell is more essential and more significant than for the rest of us.

In order to respect that need, and in order to give people in that situation as much help as possible, we have to ensure that our symbols are available to them through their sense of smell in conjunction with the other senses they use.

A symbol may seem to us to be odourless, but for some of our friends with disabilities there is a distinctive reaction from their sense of smell - or there is an absence, which in itself helps with identification, with interaction, with response.

In a later chapter, Suskind describes his character's successes and failures, "he tried to distill the odour of glass, the clayey, cool, odour of smooth glass, something a normal human being cannot perceive at all... . He tried to distill brass, porcelain, and leather, grain and gravel, all without the least success."

A symbol, like a stone or shell, a plate, a hat, sunglasses may seem to me to be obvious from sight and touch, but among our friends there are some to whom these reactions are not enough.

They need to smell.

Not necessarily to have the object thrust under their noses, but they need extra time to interact with it, they need to be in touch with it in such a way that they have time to assimilate the smell of it, or the lack of smell.

It is often necessary to present a symbol more than once to each person so that those who need more time, using different senses can really recognise what we are using and can find it to be evocative. Only when this has happened can we stir the evocation to become remembered experiences. Smell is part of the flow of human life.

If we are really trying to create a community of equals, then there is something the rest of us can learn from these members of our groups. We should all try smelling the symbol in a session.

We should all try to give ourselves more time to awaken our senses and let them work on the symbol without the interference of our intellectual activities. Perhaps that will highlight for us those sensory disabilities we do not know we have, because we find that we do not use our senses as we should, as we could. If we used our senses more, we may discover that it is possible to improve our own interaction with the symbol.

It is beneficial to us all on a human level, that perfumes and smells be used in the activities we provide and in the general decor of the Spred environment.

It enables some of us to identify where we are. It helps some of us to experience pleasure or curiosity. And it helps some of us to try to re-awaken our dormant and under-used sense of smell. Do we need to?

A smell may be unnoticed in our environment, yet may enter our subconscious and evoke a vibrant memory, it may be invisible, worthless to most people, but it can bring about wonderment, satisfaction, ideas, responses; it can create new nuances of life.

Isn't that what God did "in the beginning"? Out of nothing God created our world, people, sustenance and 'breathed the breath of life', making it possible for us to live in relationship with him. The human race was gifted with everything needed for fullness of life, including the sense of smell!

God has given the senses to human beings to enable them to be images of God in relationship: to see and hear and feel and taste what is good and beautiful and true and just. And to smell? Yes, the sense of smell is more than just a warning of danger or an enticement to what is good.

A perfume comes to us on our indrawn breath, enters our being unknown to us, come uninvited, perhaps. It is part of the flow of air which keeps us alive. Its unseen, unfelt, presence can symbolise that more significant flow which is our 'true life in Christ' (Col.3, v1), who is the 'image of the unseen God' (Col. 1, v 15). It can symbolise the inward movement of the Holy Spirit, bestowed on us at Baptism, unseen, undetected, but vitally necessary for our life of faith.

A smell drifting into our awareness can give us information, and it can affect our moods, our responses, our emotions, (as aroma therapists can prove), but through all of those it can also touch our soul, the inner spirit, the place of peace and action, the place of relationships and solitude, that inner sanctum where we know ourselves to be 'temples of the Holy Spirit' (1 Cor 3, v 16)

Can we learn from our friends how to value and use the sense of smell? Can we help each other to consider the sense of smell as a channel of communication with the things of God?

Let's try to use our Spred environment and our Spred symbols to enable us to live as 'fragrant offerings to God.'

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