**But Didn't They Smell?**

For the modern, middle-class North American, “clean” means that you shower and apply deodorant each and every day without fail. For the aristocratic seventeenth-century Frenchman, it meant that he changed his linen shirt daily and dabbled his hands in water but never touched the rest of his body with water or soap. For the Roman in the first century, it involved two or more hour of splashing, soaking and steaming the body in water of various temperatures, raking off sweat and oil with a metal scraper, and giving himself a final oiling—all done daily, in company and without soap.

Even more than the eye or the nose, cleanliness exists in the mind of the beholder. Every culture defines it for itself, choosing what it sees as the perfect point between squalid and over-fastidious. The modern North American, the 17th-century Frenchman and the Roman were each convinced that cleanliness was an important marker of civility, and that his way was the royal road to a properly groomed body.

It follows that hygiene has always been a convenient stick with which to beat other peoples, who never seem to get it right. The outsiders usually err on the side of dirtiness. The ancient Egyptians thought that sitting a dusty body in still water, as the Greeks did, was a foul idea. Late-19th-century Americans were scandalized by the dirtiness of Europeans; Nazis promoted the idea of Jewish uncleanliness. Sometimes the other is, suspiciously, too clean — which is how Muslims, who scoured their bodies and washed their genitals, struck Europeans for centuries. Muslims returned the compliment, regarding Europeans as downright filthy.

Most modern people have a sense that not much washing was done until the 20th century, and the question I was asked most often while researching and writing Clean always came with a look of barely contained disgust: "But didn't they smell?" As St. Bernard said, where all stink, no one smells. The scent of each others' bodies was the ocean our ancestors swam in, and they were used to the everyday odor of dried sweat. It was part of their world, along with the smells of cooking, roses, garbage, pine forests and manure. (Extraordinarily smelly people were a different story.) Twenty years ago, airplanes, college classrooms, restaurants, hotel rooms and most other indoor spaces were thick with cigarette smoke. Most of us never noticed it. Now that these places are usually smoke-free, we shrink back affronted when we enter a room where someone has been smoking. The nose is adaptable, and teachable.

The North American reader, schooled on advertisements for soap and deodorants, is likely to protest at this point: "But body odor is different from smoke. Body odor is innately disgusting." My own experience tells me that isn't true. For the first seven years of my life, I spent countless hours with my maternal grandmother, who came from Germany. She lived only a few houses down the street from us in Rochester, New York, and she often took care of us grandchildren. She was a cheerful, hard-working woman, perpetually cooking, cleaning, sewing, crocheting or knitting. Two smells bring my grandmother vividly to mind. One is the warm amalgam of yeast and linen, from the breads she shrouded in tea towels and set to rise on her dining-room radiators. The other smell came from my grandmother herself. As a child, it never occurred to me to describe it or wonder what it was — it was just part of my grandmother. Whom I loved, so the smell never troubled me.

When I married, my husband and I went to Germany on our honeymoon, staying in bed-and-breakfasts in small, clean-swept Bavarian towns. There, unexpectedly, memories of my grandmother came flooding back. The industrious Bavarian women who cleaned our rooms and made our breakfasts didn't only act like my grandmother; they smelled like her. By then, as an adult raised in cleaner-than-clean North America, I knew what the smell was — the muffled, acrid odour of stale sweat — and for the first time, I consciously connected my grandmother's characteristic smell to its cause. She cleaned her house ferociously but not her body, or not very often. (Later, I would realize that at that moment I was stepping in the footsteps of earlier European travellers, as far back as the 16th and 17th centuries, who marvelled at the cleanliness of Swiss, German and Dutch houses and even streets, but noted that it did not extend to the inhabitants' bodies.)

I had to learn that my grandmother's smell was not "good," as determined by 20th-century North American standards. My natural, uncultivated reaction was that it was neutral or better. Similarly, there are tribes that consider the odour of menstrual blood pleasant, because it signifies fertility; others that find it repulsive, because their taboos include blood or secretions, and still other tribes that remain indifferent to it. When it comes to feelings about our bodies or those of other people, much depends on the assumptions of your group.

To modern Westerners, our definition of cleanliness seems inevitable, universal, and timeless. It is none of these things, being a complicated cultural creation, and a constant work in progress. My grandmother kept her Old Country notions of cleanliness until she died, in the late 1970s. Her daughter, my mother, left Germany when she was six, in 1925. Growing up in Rochester, she went to college and became a nurse. She also became an American, watching with the immigrant's ever-vigilant eye as her adopted country ratcheted up the cleanliness standards in the 1930s and 40s.

She remembered the advertising campaigns launched by razor manufacturers, inculcating the novel idea that women's hairy legs and underarms were bad and, in the case of underarms, encouraged body odour. She remembered when she first heard of a new-fangled product known as deodorant, and when she realized that something called shampoo worked better than the boiled-down soap her mother produced for hair-washing. She never wore perfume because, as she liked to say, "That's what Europeans use instead of soap." (Not that perfume had ever touched her no-nonsense mother's body.) Her own regime involved plenty of soap and Mitchum's, a clinically-packaged deodorant "for problem perspiration."

In my generation, standards reached more absurd levels. The idea of a body ready to betray me at any turn filled the magazine ads I pored over in Seventeen and in Mademoiselle in the late 50s and early 60s. The lovely-looking girls in those pages were regularly baffled by their single state or their failure to get a second date or their general unpopularity, and all because their breath, their hair, their underarms or — the worst — their private parts were not "fresh." A long-running series of cartoon-style ads for Kotex sanitary napkins alerted me to the impressive horrors of menstrual blood, which apparently could announce its presence to an entire high school.

The most menacing aspect of the smells that came with poor-to-middling hygiene was that, as we were constantly warned, we could be guilty of them without even knowing it! There was no way we could ever rest assured that we were clean enough. For me, the model of feminine daintiness posed on the cover of a Kotex pamphlet about menstruation, titled "You're a Young Lady Now." This paragon, a blue-eyed blonde wearing a pageboy hairdo and a pale blue shirtwaist dress, had clearly never had a single extraneous hair on her body and smelled permanently of baby powder. I knew I could never live up to her immaculate blondness, but much of my world was telling me I had to try.

While ads for men told them they would not advance at the office without soap and deodorant, women fretted that no one would want to have sex with them unless their bodies were impeccably clean. No doubt that's why the second-most-frequent question I heard during the writing of Clean — almost always from women — was a rhetorical, "How they could bear to have sex with each other?" In fact, there's no evidence that the birth rate ever fell because people were too smelly for copulation. And, although modern people have a hard time accepting it, at least in public, the relationship between sex and odorless cleanliness is neither constant nor predictable. The ancient Egyptians went to great lengths to be clean, but both sexes anointed their genitals with perfumes designed to deepen and exaggerate their natural aroma. Most ancient civilizations matter-of-factly acknowledged that, in the right circumstances, a gamy, earthy body odor can be a powerful aphrodisiac. Napoleon and Josephine were fastidious for their time in that they both took a long, hot daily bath. But Napoleon famously wrote Josephine from a campaign, "I will return to Paris tomorrow evening. Stop washing."

Until a few years ago, I had a vague notion that after the Roman baths petered out, everyone was more or less filthy until, perhaps, the end of the 19th century. The world I imagined was very like Patrick Susskind's description of 18th-century Paris in his novel Perfume, except that it went on unchanged for 1500 or so years — an overwhelming, rank palimpsest of rotten meat, sour wine, grimy sheets, excrement and, above all, the look and smell of dirty human flesh. Then, one day in the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, I paused in front of a picture of an 18th-century crowd. The caption underneath read, "The aristocrats in this picture are as dirty as the peasants. Press the button and learn more."

I pressed the button, and learned a great deal. The aristocrats were dirty, according to the audiotape, because of an undulating chain of events that began with the Crusaders in the 11th century. They returned from the East with the news of Turkish baths, and for a few centuries medieval people enjoyed warm water, communal baths and plentiful opportunities for sexual hi-jinks. Although syphilis and ecclesiastical disapproval cast a shadow on the bathhouses, it was the devastating plagues of the 14th century that closed their doors. The French historian Jules Michelet called the years that followed "a thousand years without a bath" — an exaggeration, but only in terms of the time. At least until the mid-18th century, Europeans from the lowliest peasant to the king shunned water. Instead, they convinced themselves that linen had admirable cleansing properties, and they "washed" by changing their shirts.

For me, the medieval interlude of cleanliness and its end were startling and absorbing news. Personal cleanliness, even during the relatively few centuries detailed in the museum's audiotape, suddenly had complications, ups and downs I had never suspected, and it connected to far more than soap and water. I needed to know more about all the tentacles — social, intellectual, scientific, political and technological — that found their way in and out of a condition we call "clean." Following those twists and turns led me from Homer's Greece to the American Civil War, from Hippocrates to the germ theory, and through a handful of Revolutions - French, Industrial and the sexual one of the 1960s and 70s. Cleanliness played a part in all of them.

If not quite the world in a soap bubble, the evolution of "clean" became a history of the body — how our attitudes to cleanliness reveal much, perhaps too much, about our most intimate selves, how we want to be seen and what we most desire. Benjamin Franklin claimed that, to understand a community, he needed only to visit its cemeteries. While there's truth in that, I suggest a smaller and likelier place. Show me a people's bathhouses and bathrooms, and I will show you what they value, what they ignore, sometimes what they fear — and a significant part of what they are.

Excerpted from The Dirt on Clean by Katherine Ashenburg. Copyright © 2007