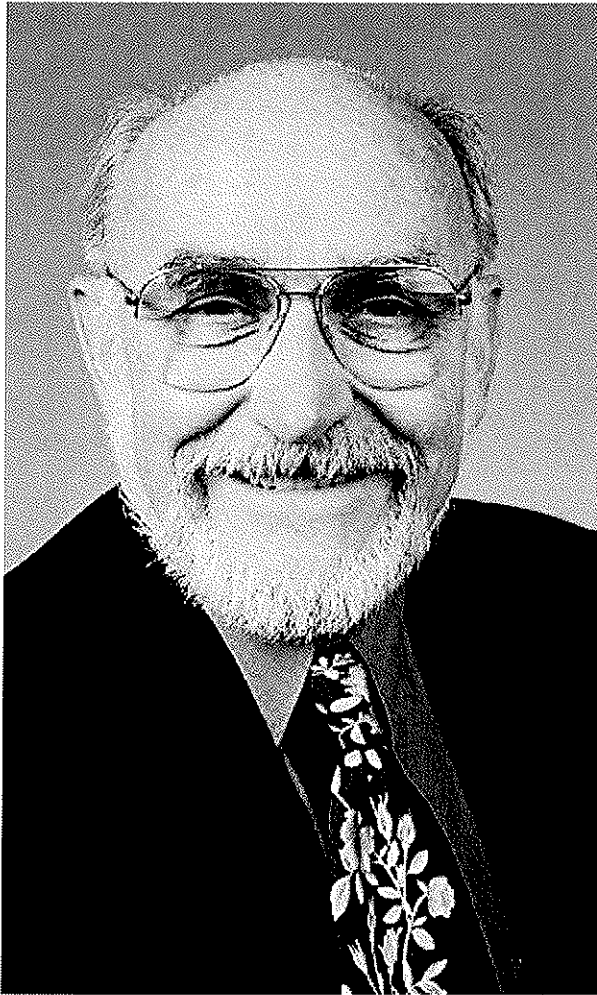


Commentary Bill Hall The scent of home



The scent of home

Posted: Sunday, July 31, 2011 12:00 am

Bill Hall The Lewiston Tribune

I have lost the original scent of my grandparents' house but I still find it in my mind.

I recently located the house in Nampa where my grandparents lived when I was a child. The same familiar outside structure remains, but the home I knew doesn't exist. A house is not your home forever so you truly can't go home again.

That house was virtually my second home when my grandparents lived there. We farmed a few miles away and visited them weekly. For good measure, my grandparent's home

was across the street from my elementary school. Little ingrate that I was, I frequently skipped the watery vegetable soup of the school hot lunch program and slipped across the street for the grandmother-fried chicken.

Oh, we had a few classmates in that school who preferred vegetables to meat, but they were widely recognized as being strange for their age.

I was recently able to see that Grandma House of Chicken again. The friendly couple who live there today kindly gave my wife and me a tour. They have remodeled and improved the property. However, one precious thing is missing - the previous aroma of the place.

Each family that occupies a house eventually creates its own distinctive background bouquet. I had breathed that one familiar mixture of aromatic grandparent air inside that house for much of my childhood.

I am told that smells are the most indelible aspect of memory. You may forget a face. You may not recognize a voice out of the past. But you never forget certain scents in your early life - fresh-mowed alfalfa, raspberries, home-popped popcorn, your mother's shampoo and, yes, also her cigarette smoke, not to mention the fragrance of fresh bread dough that surrounded her like a large yeasty halo.

The smells of life (and of their other half, the flavors) infest the memory for good or bad. Somewhat unfortunately, I can easily recall the scent of my dog's breath (Gag!) and the odious odor of his drenched fur on a rainy day. Every dog and every grandparent can be associated years later with distinct smells.

One of our sons once told me that, among other scents, our house today, oddly enough, smells of curry powder, a result of our occasional kitchen adventures in exotic foods.

In the case of my grandparents, the collective smell was an odd, almost irrational cocktail of harsh and pleasant. My grandmother was a cleanliness freak, so the home smelled clean with overtones of household germ-chasing products like soap and bleach and vinegar.

Add to that the smell of fried chicken cooked in lard, so much lard over so many years that the scent hung in the air in a density that would slicken your lungs.

Included in the olfactory memory of that house is the strong overtone of my grandfather's pipe tobacco. I'm not saying that the smoky cloud of that stinky old pipe of his was a pleasure, but it was the background scent in which our conversations took place as I sat at my grandfather's knee inhaling the wisdom of his words.

He was born a farmer 140 years ago in Southern Illinois on the edge of the Deep South and its chronic segregation. He never had more than a few years of elementary schooling,

but he had an inborn understanding even then of the sameness of people inside their diverse skins.

That old man was the dominant teacher of my life. As the smoke rose from his ghastly pipe, his warm words rose from a civilized nature, softly expressing his elemental belief that we all have potential and rights. He lived in a house of common sense as well as of common scents.

The mingled smells in that dwelling that still waft through my mind today were like an orchestra of oddly mixed instruments - violins and cow bells, musical saws and harmonicas, plus the dominant sizzling beat of drumsticks frying in hot lard.

Marcel Proust in "The Remembrance of Things Past" made a similar point about the scents of yesteryear:

"When nothing else subsists from the past, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time (in) the immense edifice of memory."

In other words, you personally can never go home again, but your nose can.

Hall is editor emeritus of the Tribune's Opinion page. His email address is wilberth@cableone.net.