

# Senses

by Roland Foster

"You fill up my senses," sang John Denver to his wife, Annie. It's an interesting concept — how often does someone "fill up" all five of our physical senses, and perhaps others as well? I remember two who did that, for me ....

I was fourteen when my aunt and uncle moved into the little house next door. The house was a modest rental property that was owned by my parents. The tenant having departed, and Mom and Dad knowing that Ralph and Sophie had struggled financially, it seemed an obvious move to offer the house to them for a nominal rent. They arrived a week later.

There were other aunts and uncles scattered across the USA, but Aunt Sophie and Uncle Ralph were the only ones I ever got to know up close and personal. "Personal" was fine, with Sophie, but "up close," with Ralph, had a few drawbacks.

Aunt Sophie was a delight to our senses. She was pleasant to look at, always neat and "together"; never beautiful, perhaps, but still attractive. She smiled a lot and laughed easily; her voice was soft and pleasant, not shrill or nasal as so many are, and she often hummed a little tune as she cooked or sewed. When she hugged me occasionally, which I liked and sometimes initiated, she smelled faintly of lavender soap and also of rose water, which she made and used. And her cooking — well, my mother was a great cook, way above average; Mom could and would cook anything. But Sophie was a chef, and she proved it at every church "pot luck" dinner, our occasional neighborhood cook-outs, and an infrequent Sunday dinner in her dining room. Her pies, especially, were incredible!

By contrast, Uncle Ralph was less than a treat to the senses. He was old, to my eyes — sixteen years older than his sister, my mother, and at least eight or ten years older than Sophie. He was literally old enough to be my grandfather — and in a way he was a substitute for my actual grandpas, who were in their graves. He would never have been considered handsome, and time had done nothing to improve his looks. He had a weak chin, thin lips, a couple of missing front teeth, a too-prominent nose, and big ears that stood out from his head slightly. He was six feet tall and scrawny, and he had big hands and feet. There was no blame in all of that, but nothing much to admire, either.

Uncle Ralph never looked "together." He mostly looked unkempt, unshaven, uncombed, and sometimes maybe unwashed. On Sunday mornings, even cleaned up and dressed for church, he looked much the same. On him, clean clothes looked slept-in after about fifteen minutes.

I can't say Uncle Ralph smelled bad, except for that time he tried to chase a skunk out of his little garden patch. But he did fill our senses, occasionally, with what he called his "good smellow" — an after-shave or cologne Sophie had given him for a Christmas gift — Timber-something, I think it was called. On work days he smelled like old motor oil — he worked part-time doing oil changes and other chores at Little Joe's Garage, a few blocks over. And once in a while he smoked a pipe. Pipe smoke, in my experience, smells

good but tastes terrible. And, of course, when he had been gardening he was apt to smell like the fertilizer-of-the-day.

As for touch, he didn't kiss me, not even in a grandfatherly way, but he sometimes greeted Mom with a kiss, and she said his whiskers felt like a wire brush. I avoided his handshake. His hand was too big, too rough, and too likely to crush mine to a pulp. I like a firm handshake, but there are limits. Uncle Ralph didn't cook, so my taste buds were not offended by him in that way, but he liked liver, which I hated, so when Mom would cook liver for him on a Sunday and invite Ralph and Sophie to come eat with us, I had to eat liver or go hungry. Yuck!

Sounds, though, were where Uncle Ralph could be most offensive. His voice was low-pitched and quiet, and when he talked normally it was hard to understand him. When he was asked to repeat something, he often barked the words or shouted them, to make sure he was heard the second time. He was not ordinarily a great conversationalist. As for singing, he was either off-key or too loud or both. Sometimes in church Aunt Sophie would ask him to tone it down or stop singing, and he usually did as she asked.

Also, there were what I came to call his "sound effects." Any sneeze was dramatically accompanied by what amounted to a shout. Uncle Ralph's sneezes, coughs, burps, belches, and farts were sometimes suppressed, sometimes not. In church, they usually were.

Still, in spite of offenses to my senses, I loved my Uncle Ralph. His offenses were rarely intentional, and I could easily see in him the qualities that made Aunt Sophie love him so faithfully. Kindness, for example. Once a stray cat — obviously a now-homeless pet — had kittens in our garage before we knew she was encamped there. Dad was set to take the whole caboodle to the animal shelter, but instead Ralph took them home, kept them until the kittens were weaned, then took mama and babies to the garage and, over a period of three days, gave them all away to customers. Somehow he had talked Little Joe into letting him do that.

Uncle Ralph was helpful, too. My dad, not being much of a handyman, sometimes would tackle a job, like fixing a leaking faucet or fixing a flat bicycle tire, then he'd make a mess of it and have to pay someone to straighten out his mess and do the job right. Uncle Ralph changed that. He seemed always ready, willing, and fully able to do anything that was needed, thus rescuing my dad from a lot of aggravation and saving him a good bit of money. My parents recognized this pretty quickly. Without telling Ralph and Sophie, Dad opened a savings account for them and deposited all of their rent money in it. When he told them about the account, many months later, they were astonished and, of course, delighted.

There are many senses other than the usual five. Along with my parents, Ralph and Sophie modeled and demonstrated, and thus helped develop in me, some important senses that continue to shape my thinking and behavior. Senses of responsibility, duty or obligation, fairness, justice, compassion, caring, consideration for others — even propriety and ordinary politeness. It seems that when I needed a helpful life lesson, one or two of them would step forward to show me the right path — my mom and dad, first,

but somehow Ralph and Sophie were especially good at capturing my attention and making the lesson stick. I owe them a lot.

Memories. Uncle Ralph, Aunt Sophie, and both of my parents are many years in their graves now. But still, the memories are strong and quite vivid. Sometimes I imagine that I smell the wonderful scent and feel the loving touch of one of Aunt Sophie's hugs. And a sudden sound will sometimes startle me, just like one of Uncle Ralph's explosive sneezes.

Blessed memories.