



Remembering Smell: A Memoir of Losing--and Discovering--the Primal Sense

By Bonnie Blodgett

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In November 2005, Bonnie Blodgett was whacked with a nasty cold. After a quick shot of a popular nasal spray up each nostril, the back of her nose was on fire. With that, Blodgett—a professional garden writer devoted to the sensual pleasures of garden and kitchen—was launched on a journey through the senses, the psyche, and the sciences. Her olfactory nerve was destroyed, perhaps forever. She had lost her sense of smell.Â

Phantosmia—a constant stench of “every disgusting thing you can think of tossed into a blender and pureed” is the first disorienting stage. It’s the brain’s attempt, as Blodgett vividly conveys, to compensate for loss by conjuring up a tortured facsimile. As the hallucinations fade and anosmia (no smell at all) moves in to take their place, Blodgett is beset by questions: Why are smell and mood hand-in-hand? How are smell disorders linked to other diseases? What is taste without flavor? Blodgett’s provocative conversations with renowned geneticists, smell dysfunction experts, neurobiologists, chefs, and others ultimately lead to a life-altering understanding of smell, and to the most transformative lesson of all: the olfactory nerve, in ways unlike any other in the human body has the extraordinary power to heal.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Product Description

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A Q&A with Bonnie Blodgett, Author of *Remembering Smell*

Q: What inspired you to write a memoir about smell?



A: A series of unfortunate events. In the fall of 2005, my nose stopped working. I'd inhaled a zinc-based gel called Zicam to prevent a cold. The cold was unfazed, and I spent a week stuffed up and miserable. A week later I noticed a funny smell. Soon I was overwhelmed by unaccountable odors, unfortunately all of them vile. Imagine a blend of rotten eggs, dead fish, feces, and burning flesh. Versions of these odors came and went, but the smell never left.

Q: You mean it never faded?

A: Unfortunately, no. The brain has a mechanism that tunes out smells after a fairly short exposure. That's why we can't smell our own perfume. I knew something was seriously wrong because they were constant. The fade button had gone on the blink. Naturally, my first thought was that I was just imagining it. Maybe I was going mad.

Q: How did you find out what was going on?

A: An ear, nose, and throat specialist knew immediately that the odors were olfactory hallucinations. I wasn't

making them up, my brain was. He prescribed an old-fashioned antidepressant that would trick my brain into letting up on the odiferous onslaught.

Q: What actually happens inside the nose?

A: The cells begin to divide, making new ones. Olfactory neurons are the only brain cells capable of regenerating the way other nerves in the body do. Recently scientists have shown that neurons deep in the brain can repair themselves, but the process is circuitous and not well understood. Interestingly, the route that cells take is from the olfactory bulb to the rest of the limbic system and then to the other brain regions, by way of so-called exit ramps off what scientists have taken to calling the cell superhighway. If we can figure out how this works, we might be able to send stem cells we've designed for specific purposes into damaged brain areas and jump-start the healing process.

Q: How long does it typically take for olfactory cells to heal?

A: Full recovery (if recovery occurs) usually takes anywhere from three months to a year, depending on the situation. Anosmia caused when the brain suddenly shifts inside the skull--this is what happens with head injuries--severing the long nerves leading from the receptor sheet to the olfactory bulb, is often permanent. Anosmia resulting from an infection typically takes three to six months to resolve itself, if it does. People who lost their sense of smell after taking Zicam have had mixed results. Most were not as lucky as I was.

(Photo © Ann Marsden)

From Publishers Weekly

Minnesota garden writer Blodgett (*The Garden Letter*) lost her sense of smell after using Zicam nasal spray for her cold and had to relearn the central role of smell in the entire makeup of her life. In this thoughtful, informative work, she delves with a layman's tenacity into the complicated science of smell, its role in evolution, memory, and survival, and how the deprivation affected her own life with her longtime husband, Cam, and two grown daughters. Before the full-fledged anosmia (loss of smell) set in, however, came phantosmia, or being plagued by false smells--in Blodgett's case, a bad odor like rotting flesh, such as she recognized from the stench of the corpse flower. Traced to the use of Zicam (its ingredient zinc gluconate proved toxic to smell receptor neurons; the FDA has since pulled the nasal spray from the market), her anosmia brought on depression and loss of sexual desire (the role of pheromones). Through her dogged research to understand what was ailing her, Blodgett discovered olfaction's intimate relationship with the limbic system, which regulates our emotional and instinctive behavior. Thus, robbed of the rich memory tapestry that smell imparted, she couldn't write, stung by the fear of losing what was real--the pleasures of being human. General readers will find her memoir richly nuanced and broadly researched.

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From [Booklist](#)

If asked to voluntarily give up one of their five senses, the majority of respondents would jettison their sense of smell in a heartbeat. Blodgett would probably have counted herself among that group, until a bizarre reaction to a nonprescription nasal spray made the decision for her. After a brief bout in which she was plagued by the constant stench of the most putrid odors imaginable, Blodgett's ability to smell left her completely. Suddenly, her whole world was turned upside down. A garden writer, Blodgett had reveled in the delicate fragrances of roses and lilies, rejoiced over the savory aromas of basil and thyme. Depressed and angry, Blodgett tackled her problem with an inveterate researcher's focused intensity, contacting the leading physicians, neuroscientists, and psychotherapists to help her understand what happened to her and why one's sense of smell is so important. Part personal memoir, part scientific treatise, Blodgett's chronicle of her olfactory ordeal is a revelatory journey into the disconcerting world of sensory deprivation. --Carol Haggas

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Elizabeth Brock:

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