The Scent of Humility

According to Isaac the Syrian, a famous 7th Century bishop and theologian, a person who's genuinely humble gives off a scent, a smell that even animals will pick up, so that wild animals, including snakes, will fall under its spell and never harm that person.

Here's his logic: A humble person, he believes, has recovered the smell of paradise and in the presence of such a person... No wonder people like Francis of Assisi could talk to birds and befriend wolves.

But, beautiful as this all sounds, is this a pious fairytale or is it a rich, archetypal metaphor? I like to think it's both—and perhaps even something more. Humility, indeed, does have a smell, the smell of the earth, of the soil, and of paradise.

But how? How can a spiritual quality give off a physical scent?

Well, we're psychosomatic, creatures of both body and soul. Thus, in us, the physical and the spiritual are so much part of who we are that the authentic spirit will, indeed, give off a scent that can be sensed physically and Isaac the Syrian's concept is more than just a metaphor.

But it's also a metaphor: The word humility takes its root in the Latin word, humus, meaning soil, ground, and earth. If you're humble, you're humble as a piece of soil and not as something separate from the soil. In other words, to be humble is to take one's rightful place as a piece of the earth and not as someone or something separate from it.

The renowned mystic and scientist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, expressed this sometimes in his prayers. During the years he was a priest, he didn’t speak for the earth; he spoke as the earth, giving it voice, in words to this effect:

Lord, God, I stand before you as a microcosm of the earth itself, to give it voice: See in my openness, the world’s earth. Lord, I speak for the earth. For I am of the earth, a piece of earth, and the earth opens or closes to you through my body, my soul, and my voice.

This is humility, an expression of genuine humility. Humility should never be confused, as it often is, with a wounded ego or a passive aggressive person. It should never be confused with someone who's a wimp, a weakling, or someone who nurses some not-so-hidden angers.

The most humble person you know is the person who's the most-grounded, that is, the person who knows she's not the center of the universe but rather a piece of earth. Such a person will give off a scent that carries both the fragrance of paradise (of divine gift) as well as the smell of the earth.

Ron Rolheiser, OMI