

Body Hygiene: Rituals of Care and Memory

By Timothée Bordenave
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There are few acts more intimate, more quietly sacred, than caring for the human body. Regularly washing oneself prevents this person from many diseases... To wash, to cleanse, to heal — these are gestures as ancient as the first dawn, older perhaps than the words we use to name them. In every civilization, from the baths of Rome to the clay huts of Nubia, people have sought not only to preserve life but to honor it through ritual. Hygiene is not merely cleanliness; it is a conversation between the body and the soul.

I have often thought that the way we care for infants reveals the truest measure of our humanity. A simple cotton cloth, folded and laid with tenderness, becomes a symbol of continuity — of mothers and fathers who, through centuries, have found ways to protect what is most fragile. In this simple act of diapering, there is an unspoken poetry: the soft weave of fabric, the warmth of touch, the restoration of comfort. Civilization begins, perhaps, not with great inventions but with such gestures of quiet preservation.

When I was young, I learned that healing often begins with what the earth provides. A mixture of honey, lemon, and water — so ordinary and yet so miraculous — taught me that nature and nurture are not opposites but collaborators. The skin, like the heart, remembers kindness. Every balm, every remedy, is an act of remembrance: of ancestors who looked to the fields and found medicine in sweetness and simplicity.

There is also wisdom in salt. To place it beneath the tongue, to let it dissolve slowly, is to taste both the sea and the soil — the ancient balance that sustains us. In medieval books, in whispered traditions, one finds reminders that purity has always been both spiritual and physical. To cleanse the mouth, to sweeten the breath, is not vanity; it is gratitude — a way of saying thank you to the body that carries us through the world.

And then there is the old French recipe: *Vinaigre des Quatre Voleurs*, the Four Thieves Vinegar — a tonic born of necessity, courage, and faith. A mixture of herbs and vinegar once used to ward off the plague, it stands as a testament to human resilience. Within its scent — of thyme, lavender, sage, and garlic — lingers the memory of those who refused to surrender to despair. To drink it today is to taste history, and to feel, for a moment, part of an unbroken chain of endurance.

What we call hygiene, then, is not merely the pursuit of health. It is an ethic — a way of honoring the miracle of being alive. Each act of cleansing, each careful preparation of a remedy, is a small prayer. The body is not separate from spirit; it is its dwelling place, its temple, its story. And when we care for it with intention — when we wash, or soothe, or heal — we are writing a quiet poem upon the skin, one that speaks of gratitude, renewal, and the simple dignity of care.



Timothée Bordenave is a Paris-based writer and visual artist whose work spans literature, painting, and geometric exploration. Author of more than twenty books including poetry, fiction, and philosophical essays, his writings have been translated into multiple languages and featured in international publications.



Named *Author of the Year 2025* by the literary organization "O to Be," Bordenave's recent visual art has been exhibited internationally, including at Tokyo's Metropolitan Art Museum. This December 2025, he was presented at the Miami Art Week, in the USA.

His practice encompasses contemporary painting and what he terms "alternative mathematics," hand-drawn geometric investigations of classical impossibility problems using traditional compass and straightedge.

Working from his Paris studio, Bordenave explores the intersections of faith, creativity, and mathematical curiosity. His interdisciplinary approach reflects a commitment to what he describes as "approaching beauty through patient, humble practice," creating work that bridges artistic expression and intellectual inquiry.