

HOW TO WRITE A COLUMN WITHOUT EXHALING

The Woman Who Shares My Name told me she does not want to see one of my usual bomb-throwing columns this week. "It is the Christmas season. I don't want you criticizing anybody or anything," she ordered.

Having been blessed with exceptional negotiating skills, I immediately went for the middle ground. "Good suggestion," I said, "but I have to mention President Peanut. If I don't, he gets very sensitive and blames the omission on George Bush." No. "Then, I will take a job at our lieutenant governor, The Big Guy. I will say that the job of lieutenant governor is so secret, not even The Big Guy knows what he is doing. Isn't that funny?" No. "Okay, suppose I talk about how broccoli, if eaten on a regular basis — which I would define as once a year — can cause serious toe fungus and make your foot fall off." No. "Well," I whined, "there is nothing left for me to talk about. My once-promising career as a humble but much-beloved newspaper columnist is history. I will now hold my breath until I turn blue."

The Woman Who Shares My Name didn't seem overly concerned by my threat. As I inhaled what was sure to be my last breath, she said, "Why don't you write about the true meaning of Christmas? We have gotten so caught up in the frenzy of decorating and shopping and parties that we have forgotten what Christmas really means.

"Tell your readers that Christmas is about love. Isn't it ironic," she said, "that we wear ourselves out trying to find just the right present, when the most appropriate gift is love? It is something that everyone appreciates getting. There are so many ways to give the gift of love. It always fits, it needs no batteries and it can last forever. Besides, when we give the gift of love, chances are excellent that we will get love back in equal or greater measure than we gave it. What could be better than that?"

"Tell them that Christmas is about family and friends," she suggested, and then reminded me that we had been blessed beyond measure by a wonderful family and by loyal friends who have been with us through good times and bad. She was sure you felt the same way about your family and friends.

"Tell them Christmas is about reflecting on our blessings." She wanted me to tell you what our friend Rev. Ann Self told me one time. When stopped by an inconvenient red light, don't get all bent out of shape. Take that time and think about all the good things in your life. The light will turn green before you can finish, and you will realize how blessed you are. It never fails.

"Tell them Christmas is about remembering that we are very rich, and being rich has nothing to do with money. It is hearing a child laugh, the embrace of a friend, the unwavering loyalty of a pet. It is seeing a majestic sunrise over the ocean or the quietness of a snowfall on a mountain. It is going to bed knowing young men and women overseas are risking their lives daily for us. It is living in the greatest nation on Earth and having freedoms most of the rest of the world can only imagine — that is what makes us rich.

"Most of all," she said, "tell them Christmas is about Peace on Earth and Good Will toward All Men. If we spent less time worrying about shirt sizes and return policies and more time reflecting on the true meaning of the season, we might just find the time to pray that one day there truly will be peace on earth, as promised in the Christmas story. What a gift that would be!"

It was then that I exhaled, having effectively made my point. I thanked the Woman Who Shares My Name and said I would carefully consider her comments. I didn't have the heart to tell her that nobody would be interested in hearing stuff like that. The Woman Who Shares My Name may know a lot of things, but she doesn't know anything about writing columns.