

Silencing the voice of Scrooge in her head

I thought I had grown numb to the annual ambush of advertising that keeps retailers in the black and that helped me stay employed in my teens and early 20s. But this year, the trio of Gap commercials — happy, pretty people rhyming about cuddling in flannel, declaring freedom from frilly dresses and spending money without regard to the meaning of what anyone celebrates — made the voice of an indignant Scrooge rise up inside of me.

It went beyond “humbug” I wanted to put the spots’ creator in front of a firing squad. I didn’t want the firing squad to shoot; I just thought that the people behind the advertising might benefit from having a few moments to consider what really matters, especially at the holidays.

Remembering that there are people in need

and people who receive gifts as a result of a stranger’s kindness instead of as a result of exploited cultural norms, illogical insecurities and greed helped to calm my grumpy spirit. I sought out a story of someone who had been on the receiving end of such kindness in the past.

Laurene Scalf remembers the Christmas Eve when the Salvation Army showed up at her home with a Christmas feast, a tree and a gift for each of the 10 children in the house-

hold, who ranged in age from 10 months to 12 years. Scalf was the oldest.

Her father was unemployed due to an injury on the job, and food, baby formula and medical bills were already hardships for her parents. Although her family’s holiday traditions included church and visits with extended family members, Scalf recalled that without the Salvation Army, Christmas that year would have been “pretty dreary.”

A sweater helped to brighten the season for her. Scalf admits she didn’t like it when she opened the box, but that she grew to admire it once she tried it on. She also received a necklace, a gift she found instantly marvelous. Looking back on the occasion now, Scalf realizes that the person who donated the necklace “probably paid \$5 for it at Woolworth’s,” but to her, it was special. “Because of the size of my family and my father’s income, that was something that we just didn’t

get,” said Scalf.

She continued, “Each year I contribute to the Salvation Army, and I think about the gifts the kids are getting. To a lot of the kids, something inexpensive can seem to them really extravagant and precious.”

At least, Scalf hopes that’s the attitude that persists. There were no little Gap girls striking poses in their cute boots in 1962, and getting only one Christmas present even when her father was working was the norm for Scalf. She said receiving one gift — “the” gift — made it special. “One of the most regrettable results” of child-targeted consumption advertising “is the sense of entitlement it engenders. We grew up taking nothing for granted. You were grateful for what you had. The things you didn’t have, you didn’t think, ‘My life is not complete’ if you didn’t have them,” said Scalf.

This year I had the opportunity to collect gifts and log outgoing angels at the Salvation Army Angel Tree station

in Jefferson Mall. There were no specific brands on the wish list of any angel, only the word “TOY” and the child’s clothing sizes. Some shoppers returned with heavy, bulky bags that took some effort to load into the tractor trailer that would take the gifts to a distribution center. Others brought bags containing one lightweight item.

I can’t picture the children who will receive the latter throwing their Christmas present onto the floor and stomping off in a huff. Although I’m sure it could happen, I prefer to think that some grateful people exist today. Even if that’s a fantasy, at least I got to interact with kind strangers and find a story that silenced the Scrooge voice and made me forget about the Gap trio for a while. ♣

Mariam Williams is a Louisville native who writes about the random thoughts that hold her attention for two minutes or more.



**MARIAM
WILLIAMS**