

Victimized by a word burglar

BY LEONARD PITTS JR.

Dear Chris Cecil:

Here's how you write a newspaper column. First, you find a topic that engages you. Then you spend a few hours banging your head against a computer screen until what you've written there no longer makes you want to hurl.

Or, you could just wait till somebody else writes a column and steal it. That's what you've been doing on a regular basis.

Before Tuesday, I had never heard of you or the Daily Tribune News, in Cartersville, Ga., where you are associate managing editor. Then one of my readers, God bless her, sent me an e-mail noting the similarities between a column of mine and one you had purportedly written.

Intrigued, I did a little research on your paper's website and found that you had "written" at least eight columns since March that were taken in whole or in part from my work. The thefts ranged from the pilfering of the lead from a gangsta rap column to the wholesale heist of an entire piece I did about Bill Cosby. In that instance, you essentially took my name off and slapped yours on.

On March 11, I wrote: I like hypocrites. You would, too, if you had this job. A hypocrite is the next best thing to a day off. Some pious moralizer contradicts his words with his deeds and the column all but writes itself. It's different with Bill Cosby.

On May 12, you "wrote:" I like hypocrites. You would, too, if you had this job. A hypocrite is the next best thing to a day off. Some pious moralizer contradicts his words with his deeds and the column all but writes itself. It's different with Bill Cosby.

The one that really got me, though, was your theft of a personal anecdote about the moment I realized my mother was dying of cancer. "The tears surprised me," I wrote. "I pulled over, blinded by them." Seven days later, there you were: "The tears surprised me. I pulled over, blinded by them on central Kentucky's I-75."

Actually, it happened at an on-ramp to the Artesia Freeway in Compton, Calif.

I've been in this business 29 years, Mr. Cecil, and I've been plagiarized before. But I've never seen a plagiarist as industrious and brazen as you. My boss is calling your boss, but I doubt you and I will ever speak. Still, I wanted you to hear from me. I wanted you to understand how this feels.

Put it like this: I had a house burglarized once. This reminds me of that. Same sense of violation,

same apoplectic disbelief that someone has the testicular fortitude to come into your place and take what is yours.

Not being a writer yourself, you won't understand, but I am a worshiper at the First Church of the Written Word, a lover of language, a student of its rhythm, its music, its violence and its power.

My words are important to me. I struggle with them, obsess over them. Show me something I wrote and like a mother recounting a child's birth, I can tell you stories of how it came to be, why this adjective here or that colon there.

See, my life's goal is to learn to write. And you cannot cut and paste your way to that. You can only work your way there, sweating out words, wrestling down prose, hammering together poetry. There are no shortcuts.

You are just the latest in a growing list of people—in journalism and out—who don't understand that, who think it's OK to cheat your way across the finish line. I've always wanted to ask one of you: How can you do that? Have you no shame? No honor or pride? How do you face your mirror knowing you are not what you purport to be? Knowing that you are a fraud?

If your boss values his paper's credibility, you will soon have lots of free time to ponder those questions.

But before you go, let me say something on behalf of all of us who are struggling to learn how to write, or just struggling to be honorable human beings:

The dictionary is a big book. Get your own damn words. Leave mine alone.

P.S.: Chris Cecil was fired by Daily Tribune News Publisher Charles Hurley, immediately after he learned of the plagiarism.