

Opinion: You're a jerk if you leave a small tip

By Colleen Shaddox, Washington Post

A Facebook friend was offended by the presence of an attendant with a tip jar in an airport bathroom.

"I felt harassed and examined and judged when I did not leave a tip or make conversation with the attendant," she wrote, revealing herself to have zero experience being harassed, examined or judged. Many folks added a riposte sympathizing with her and making fun of anyone who had to earn their living minding a restroom.

"It's how she feeds her family," I commented.

My incredibly hardworking mother was a waitress, and I became one as soon as I turned 16. After almost 20 years surviving on tips, I understand what it's like to be on the other side of that jar. Tipping is a demeaning custom. A worker's compensation should not rest on somebody's whim. Nor should she have to put up with insulting or handsy customers because she doesn't want to endanger her pay. Tip-based compensation not only institutionalizes the examination and judgment of workers, it invites harassment, too.

Tipping absolutely should be replaced by fair wages. The regular federal minimum wage stands at \$7.25 per hour, but for tipped workers, it's just \$2.13. While the regular minimum wage has risen by \$3 since 1991, the tipped minimum wage hasn't changed at all. People who work for tips are more likely to live in poverty. So until the system is overhauled, and all workers are given fair pay, your tips always should be large. If you can dine out, travel or get someone to clean your house, then you have discretionary income. Adding another \$5 to the tip isn't going to affect your standard of living,

but it will make a big difference to the person serving you. That person almost certainly waits until her car's gas gauge light comes on before pulling into the filling station. For \$5, you can be a hero.

But when you do tip big, try not to think of yourself as a hero, lest you morph into a jerk. When my mother worked as a waitress in a private club, the staff had to wear white gloves and line up like little tin soldiers as the officers of the club passed out the Christmas gratuities. The first year she worked there, she wondered – without any sarcasm whatsoever – if she should curtsy. No one should have to sit up and beg for a tip, but many customers think otherwise.

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