

What value, work?

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It is Labor Day weekend, that special secular holiday that somehow ends up wrapped in the American flag like so many others. It is the weekend for furniture sales, end of the model year close-out sales at car dealerships, and the weekend in which college students return to dormitories all across the country to settle in for the season, every bit as regular as the swallows that return each year to Capistrano,.

It is the unofficial end of summer, the weekend when my grandmother would pack away her white purse and shoes and take out the black set that would be worn until Easter the following year. It is the last weekend to wear seersucker, as well, according to traditional fashion rules.

The academic and agricultural calendars mark this time of the year as one of anticipation, beginnings and endings, and much, much work.

And work is a thing worth considering on Labor Day weekend.

There has been a lot of noise lately about the culture of tipping. During the pandemic, some of the hardest hit employees were those who worked in places that serve food to the public – restaurants, coffee houses, and the like.

Tipping, particularly via electronic purchasing, started as a way to help make up the difference in lost wages for servers, but now seems to be ubiquitous, and people are expressing frustration.

Cannot we just order a sandwich at Subway and get it to go without being asked for a tip by the computer or app on the phone? When did dipping sandwich artists become a thing?

William Scott railed against the psychology, morality, politics, and economy of tipping culture back in 1916, but not much of what he described has changed in the century since he put pen to page. Certainly, there are no more porters at the barbershop, and department stores no longer buy or sell pianos, but the underlying culture of tipping remains.

In a recent broadcast of National Public Radio's *It's Been A Minute* program, host Brittany Luse spoke with historian and NPR podcaster Ramtin Arablouei about the history of tipping culture in the US. It was Arablouei who cited William Scott's book from which I excerpted today's reading.

Arablouei had much to say about tipping culture, and its origins. In the culture of European nobility, tipping was a thing done to servants as a way to show appreciation for goods or services provided. There were complex social rules about tipping other people's servants (don't!) and one's own (only sometimes) or those who were in service in the public marketplace, such as merchants, artisans, or workers at inns, restaurants, or brothels. In those places, a customer paid the house fee for whatever was being purchased, and the noble might offer the individual provider an additional gratuity as appreciation for exemplary performance or attention.

Scott argues that tipping culture is utterly incompatible with a republican democracy, in which each individual is declared to be equal – at least when it comes to voting or purchasing goods.

Many Americans, though, chafe at the notion that the bootblack or garbage collector is a moral and political equal to them in every way. Class issues mix with a human instinct to construct a hierarchy of importance and find one's own place in it. By doing so, there are naturally people above us, and some below us, and how we treat those in either direction says a lot about who we are.

Tipping allows us to purchase a fantasy of superiority, Arablouei says. It allows a customer to behave in a way that feels as though they have servants of whom they can demand a particular level of, well, servitude. If a server is particularly attentive, or differential, providing above and beyond the expected standard of service, then the customer can reward that server with additional cash, and reward themselves with the illusion of generosity, when what they are doing is something far less altruistic.

Scott described it thusly:

“Where all men are equal, some cannot become superior unless others grovel in the dust. Tipping comes into a democracy to produce that relation.

Tipping is the price of pride. It is what one American is willing to pay to induce another American to acknowledge inferiority. It represents the root of aristocracy budding anew in the hearts of those who publicly renounced the system and all its works.”¹

William Scott was ultimately, a man of his time. When he wrote this volume in 1916, women's suffrage had not yet been passed through congress. His language is steeped in the patriarchy and white supremacist culture of the early 20th Century. He tended to view the issue of tipping with the sense of outrage typical of a man who feels entitled to a certain degree of service without having to pay extra to get it. His argument that

¹ Scott, William Rufus, “The Itching Palm; A Study Of The Habit Of Tipping In America” pp. 37, Penn Publishing Company, Philadelphia, 1916

merchants and hoteliers pay their staff decently and forbid tipping so that the customer can be sure of a real price and real level of service seems as much a defense of his own sense of entitlement as sound economic, ethical, and political issues.

He rarely bases his argument in terms of the exploitation of workers who must function in a tipping society. He is able to focus, briefly, on the moral abdication of business owners who enjoy the ability to pay less in wages to tipped workers, putting the responsibility of a living wage onto the customer who has already paid for his meal or his hotel room.

Nowhere does he examine the flaws of Capitalism that prioritize profit over the dignity of employees. Business owners, overall, seek to pay the bare minimum that they can for the materials and staff necessary for their business, and to charge what the market will bear in the public marketplace. He views those who work in a tipping culture as intentional extortionists and not those who must hustle for every penny. Nowhere does he examine the economic system that relies upon exploitation and greed as the skeleton upon which all the muscles rely.

I have said quite a bit about tipping culture, without saying a whole lot about what we might be able to do about it. We can acknowledge that it is wrong, but if we refuse to participate in the system, we either stiff the waitstaff or never get to dine outside of the home. Neither of those options is realistic in our present world.

What I'd like us to think about, then, is the justice and exploitation part of this thing. Certainly, we can work toward legislative changes regarding wages and tipping and all the rest, but in our daily lives, we can do other things to make sure that the people who work in tipped industries are not exploited by US. What might be a manageable thing we can do to ease the exploitation of the servers we come in contact with?

To begin this effort, we must know some basic facts about wages and tips and the rest. The minimum hourly wage for work in the US is \$7.25 per hour. Various states have instituted higher minimum wages, but in some places, that's still the baseline. The current minimum wage in Pennsylvania is \$7.25. However, it will go up to \$11 per hour at the beginning of 2024 and increase again annually until it hits \$15 in 2026.

The minimum hourly wage for people in tipped jobs is \$2.13 per hour. In Pennsylvania, it is \$2.83 per hour. That means that a waitress working a 10 hour shift at Denny's will make \$28.30 in wages for that day. How much she gets in tips depends entirely upon the whim and of her customers. It is possible that she could make more than \$100 or even \$150 in tips that day, but it is also possible that she only makes \$30. It depends on the crowds and how they're feeling.

We judge the person's value as a human in accordance with what value we place on their job. Are they a contributing member of society? Do they do something important, or something ... less.

Think of how people sometimes treat wait staff in a restaurant. No other employees in America depend so heavily upon the goodwill of the people they serve for their very livelihood. And just so we're clear here, do not think for a moment that waiting tables is untrained work. It is complicated, fast-paced, physically challenging, AND requires the server to remain calm, polite, and deferential at all times, or they risk getting stiffed.

The standard practice in restaurants is for the waitstaff to split their tips with the other folks at work that day. The waitress must share a portion of her tips with the cook, with the maître d', with the dishwasher, with the busboy, and depending on the place, with the bartender as well.

I worked for a season as a line cook at a shabby-chic restaurant in Bar Harbor. It was the kind of place where a 6 ounce salmon portion cost 28 bucks, and five scallops on some Uncle Ben's brown rice with a side of mashed sweet potatoes cost 30. The restaurant's signature dish, a lobster strudel, went for over 30, but I don't remember how much. I made \$8 an hour, AS THE COOK, and the wait staff tipped me 10 percent of whatever tips they made over \$50 each night. This was in 2006, I think. I got home at midnight or later, exhausted and smelling of fried fish, and I took home somewhere between 250 and 300 dollars a week.

Patriarchy and colonialism are the waters that feed the very roots of American capitalism. Indeed, as Angela Davis taught us "Racism, in the first place, is a weapon used by the wealthy to increase the profits they bring in by paying Black workers less for their work."

We devalue the work done by those whose humanity we choose to see as less than 100 percent valuable, and vice versa.

As a culture, we pay the absolute least amount of money for the hardest, most miserable or demeaning tasks. Why is that? One would think we'd pay high wages to get people to do unpleasant things on our behalf. But we do not value people who do jobs that we do not value. Our worth as people is bound up in a toxic way with what we do for work.

Do we believe the sanitation worker deserves a living wage? What about a cocktail waitress? A kindergarten teacher? A nurse's aide? A sex worker? A retail clerk? Pizza delivery person? A dancer in a club? Worker in a fast-food burger joint? Wal-Mart greeter?

Do any of these deserve a comfortable wage? A wage sufficient to support a family, own a home, put kids through college? If not, why not? Why do we think it is appropriate for some workers to be paid subsistent wages?

Menial tasks are the ones we least want to do, which should make them the ones we are willing to pay the most to have done, but that's not the case. Not only do we live with the pay inequity, but all too often that inequity is frosted with a layer of arrogance and disdain.

This week, I want you to think about eating in a restaurant.

What would your meal cost if your waiter was paid a living wage instead of relying on tips? Keep in mind that some people tip 15 percent, some 20 percent, and some only 10 percent. Other still leave no tip at all. Keep in mind also that the server shares their tips with the cook, the busboy, the bartender, and the dishwasher. What would it cost for that meal if each of those people received a living wage, and had health insurance provided by their employer? I bet it would cost half again or more the price charged on the menu.

And so friends, here is the real challenge. The next time you go out to eat, I want to challenge you to tip between 50 and 100 percent the cost of your meal. That's something close to what the meal would cost if everyone in the house got paid what they should.

If we do not pay what the meal is really worth, then we are dining at the expense of the exploitation of the workers in the restaurant. It is not the fault of the waitstaff that the system is set up the way it is.

So, until that system is replaced with one that is just and equitable, we can practice justice and equity when we dine out. And if we can't financially afford to tip in a way that doesn't exploit people, then we must consider whether we can morally afford to behave that way.

It's a tall order, I know. But like with any truth, once we see it, once we acknowledge its real-ness, we cannot un-see it. We cannot un-know it. We cannot again tip just 20% without understanding our own complicity in the unjust system.

And with that, I wish you a happy and thoughtful Labor Day Weekend.

May our practice be our prayer. Today and always.

Amen.