

*Washington Post* column by Alexandra Petri

Good news, front-line worker: You are *essential*. No, more than that: You are a *hero*.

Look, some jets are flying over! Here is your salute! Here is your banging of pans! Look, your employers have made you — with their own dollars! — a commercial with gentle piano music, in the tenderest possible tone, to say *thank you*. We salute you. No, we do more than that: We owe you a *debt of gratitude*. No, wait, let us not introduce the word “debt,” which might imply monetary compensation of some kind. You are a *hero*, after all. You are beyond all that money nonsense. We are beyond all that.

Look, here are some more jets! We cannot hope to thank you for this sacrifice you are making so we can be fed and entertained and comforted. But we will offer you this word: *essential*! Do you not feel better? Is the word itself not better than any kind of safety gear? Okay, here are some masks — not to wear, but affixed together into a big collage, as a symbol! As [the vice president has shown](#), masks are optional. But symbolism — that is *essential*.

Like you, who can keep the meat plant open, without a thought spared for their own safety! Yes, the president himself has decreed that your workplace *must* remain open. Isn't it good to feel needed? Does there need to be a thought spared for your safety? If you could just go to work and do your job in modified conditions without fearing for your life, that would be much less heroic. Then you would just be a worker, not a Front-Line Essential Hero. And that is worth more than — why, anything! We could not possibly hope to put a dollar value on that, which is why your pay is remaining the same.

We are #hereforyou. We are #withyou. Not literally, or physically, or fiscally, but — symbolically. We mean we are sending the maximum amount of thoughts and prayers, on which no one can ever put a price tag. We would *never* offer you [hazard pay or paid sick leave](#), lest people suspect you had a motive for helping besides sheer, radiant heroism.

Look, we intend to do our part to give you protection. Mitch McConnell would like to secure you the best kind: protection to your employer, against [liability](#) for forcing you to come in to work. Never say that your workplace lacks adequate protection! Your workplace will be very well protected indeed.

Did you think when you signed up for this low-wage job that you were actually fighting on the front lines? Did you notice how by this rhetorical sleight of hand we stripped you of the expectation that you could do what other people do: work and come home to your family without getting yourself sick or making them sick?

Do not say this reveals a fundamental gash in society between those who have

(safety; the luxury of remaining home) and those who have not. Do not point out how this divide falls sharply along racial lines. Never suggest that you would not do this if you could instead receive unemployment, or that you would not be laying down your life if you were given the right equipment. That you feel you never signed up for this at all — no, please. That would not be heroic.

What you ought to feel is special. Not everyone gets to be a hero. Some people must stay home and have things brought to them by heroes. They are grateful for you, and they thank you, and they bang their pans for you. They cannot be (alas, alas) on the front lines (alas, alas) but they appreciate that you are.

There go the planes again! We will give you everything except PPE, and we will offer you all the thanks in the world but an increase in compensation. We will spare no expense except that which might be incurred in requiring a safer workplace or in giving you money on which to stay home. Perhaps you will get your [education paid for](#)! It is the least we can do, although we are trying to see if we can do less. Thank you for your sacrifice! Dare we make these thanks meaningless by not forcing you to commit one.