

Dignity at the airport

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November 24, 2010



When I flew home this past weekend, I got to see the new TSA screening measures in action. The tiny airport I flew out of didn't have the new backscatter machines, but TSA agents were selecting passengers to receive the full-body pat-downs. I watched as a very elderly man was pulled to the side and patted down head to toe, the agent's hands rubbing all over his chest and touching his rear end and groin. The man's wife stood by looking helpless.

I was appalled by the intrusive nature of the pat-down but even more horrified by how unaccommodating the agents were to the man's age and frailty. He had to hold his arms out to the side for a significant amount of time. My elementary school teachers used this as punishment, until the district made them stop because it was cruel and unusual. Yet this elderly gentleman was forced to do so to the point of physical strain--I saw him shaking--in the name of national security.

I've seen the YouTube videos of young children being stripped searched, of sexual assault victims sobbing because they've been touched in ways that resurface terrifying memories. I've read conflicting reports as to whether the backscatter machine's radiation is harmful. I have friends who, when the TSA asks for their cloak, plan to shame the shamers by giving them their tunic too. I'm having a hard time discerning if I am outraged or simply heartbroken.

As more and more people protest this invasion of their bodies, the TSA agents who bear the brunt of the anger have [complained](#) to their union, asking for more protection from upset passengers.

They don't like being shoved or called molesters, and they want to be able to do their job professionally without interference. Part of me wants to respond with incredulity--how it is okay for a stranger to touch my breasts but not okay for me to feel violated by that? But I feel for the agents and the difficult position they are in.

What is at stake is human dignity of passenger and agent alike. There's no dignity in being inspected like an animal--nor in performing the inspection. Ironically, our fear of terrorism has led us to toss aside this dignity.

These security measures are meant to build a safer community for us to live in, but there can be no community when there is no respect for the dignity of other people. When the government mandates acts that in any other situation would get someone fired for harassment or arrested for assault, we have to ask if we have sacrificed the freedoms and community that we're trying to protect.