

## **(I Always Kill) The Things I Love: How I Navigate Ethical Relationships with Food as a Carnivore**

*Page Shepard 11/12/2021*

As many already know, I'm a canine psychopomp: a glorified magical hunting dog that's tasked with hunting down the unruly deceased and dragging their souls back to wherever they're supposed to be. Being that I'm a large, arguably tamed but not domesticated, canine who was bred or otherwise created for a specific predatory purpose in mind, that means I have both a hyper-active prey drive and an extremely heavy lean towards meat-heavy diets.

With that said, existing in a human body as a canine doesn't negate the responsibilities I have as a global citizen when it comes to sustainability and ethics of consumption and food. In some ways, it actually makes me feel as though I have to pay closer attention to the fine details of such, because I've already given my place on the food chain and my perspectives on environmentalism so much thought. The relationship people have to food is also a subject that gets brought up in my field a fair bit: some scholars theorize that food is inherently religious or spiritual in that its essential to our forms of ritual and the ways we perceive ourselves and others, with people even going so far as to theorize that "it is human relationships with other species that are key to understanding real world religion" (Harvey, 2). I tend to agree with these perspectives, which just makes understanding my relationship to food all the more relevant.

Within the United States—where I live—perhaps the biggest issue with food is where it's coming from. Farming labor practices from many of the places out-of-country where produce and product are imported from are often terrible, typically used in conjunction with paying people as little as possible and through importers ignoring more local, but operationally expensive, options to maximize their profit. Shipping out-of-season fruits and vegetables is also exorbitant in terms of carbon emissions as well, which can't be ignored.

With meat, you run into similar issues. Large groceries stores and chains will often purchase meat from companies which have questionable ethics, which prioritize money above all else, making for unfortunately vague situations. It is often difficult, if not outright impossible, to know both how an animal was treated and raised before it died, and how it was killed when one is shopping for meat at a Wal-Mart or Publix. The exception to the rule is Halal and Kosher meats, but that focuses significantly more on the practices of ethical slaughter than the animal's livelihood—something still important, but perhaps not as whole of a picture as an individual may desire.

There's also the problem of large-scale animal production on a more general front, outside of animal welfare-oriented concerns: it doesn't take a rocket scientist to say that collapsing large swathes of land into cookie cutter pastures to raise huge amounts of animals that aren't native to an environment is going to have wide-reaching effects on all levels.

So how does someone like me engage in this verifiable minefield when it comes to purchasing the food that I need to eat?

In a perfect, picturesque world, I'm sure someone would suggest that I simply stop eating "bad" things and start to make sure I eat "good" things. Usually this takes the form of militant/radical vegan commentary on how you can only be ethical if you're sucking off an asparagus at any given time, but these types of options are things I've already tried in the past.

I've tried going into no-meat diets to at least stem the flow on one front and focus solely on vegetable and fruit problems, but it just wasn't realistic for me as a person. I have a nut allergy that makes most substitutes untenable and the texture problems I have related to my ADHD make the rest almost entirely unpalatable. Unless it's fried, tofu is gross...and frankly, even then it's not my favorite thing. There's also a medical issue where I can't eat most forms of pasta and tomato products, which are major staples in many meat-free diets. My mental state started to swing towards more feral and animalistic behaviors and feelings in the months I tried this no-meat diet, which culminated in some sort of black-out food-related berserk shift when I "woke up" and found half of a multiple-meat omelet in my hands, with the rest in my mouth. Needless to say, I didn't try a vegetarian or vegan diet again after that.

As of right now I don't have a strict "I can eat x amount of y" type diet, though I do consider my food consumption as falling into the flexible "low-meat" category: my polycule tends to have meat with most dinners, but lunches and breakfasts are much more of a coinflip depending on leftovers and what we have in the fridge, with us often defaulting to smaller, more simple meals like salads, rice, and egg-based meals. This is largely because of our lifestyle, which doesn't lend itself to multiple "big" prep-heavy or time-heavy meals a day, and of our budget and how we go about getting our food.

We're very lucky in that there are small farms, butchers, and fishing companies local to our area which stage up at the weekly farmer's market, an opportunity that not many people have. Purchasing produce locally is significantly less expensive than buying it at Wal-Mart or Publix, with the added benefit of a longer shelf life and the functionally insignificant downside of a smaller selection based on what's in-season. The money we save on produce gets flipped into the money we spend on fish at the market, where we'll grab whatever's in-season and looking good from a sustainable fishing-focused company. The fresh caught fish is more expensive than what you'd find elsewhere due to the company's practices, but it's significantly more flavorful *and* we know how and where it's being caught.

We also have more food-related plans for the future: as silly as it might initially sound, owning chickens is an option we have seriously looked into, should we ever have the space to do so. Producing our own eggs with animals we know are being well cared for is something both myself and my polycule would love to do, especially given how much our household relies on eggs as a staple. It'd also give me the option of butchering my own meat or bringing my meat to a butcher of my choice, something which I've wanted to get involved with for a long time.

Maybe it's *because* I've done so much introspection as a carnivore, but it feels strange and almost unethical to not take part in the actual act of killing and preparing an animal for food. If I'm eating creatures that were previously alive and had emotions of their own, it feels disingenuous and dishonorable to not take part in the process of butchering itself at least once so that I can more fully understand and appreciate the work that goes into turning, say, a chicken into chicken. In Western society it's so common for us to just not know (to even prefer not to know) how it's best to kill and

prep certain animals and I think that's a major part of the problem with how people both tend to overconsume certain varieties of meat *and* how people tend to overcorrect into anti-meat attitudes that support harmful or downright dangerous industries, all the while both types of individuals refuse to engage with the potential problems or ramifications of doing so. Eating meat isn't a one-way street or black-and-white in how it functions, and I hate that it's so often treated as such: it's not something that you should just ignore the facts around because it makes you uncomfortable. You should know where your meat comes from in a more intimate fashion, confronting that discomfort and fear head on because it is genuinely your responsibility to do so if you're going to partake in either eating meat or judging those who do as unconscionable.

This all is a part of the reason I'm also interested in hunting and fishing. Florida is so full of invasive species that there's a major environmental benefit to be had from going out and spearing lionfish or shooting boars, and it would also let me engage in the acts myself, rather than just shoving the job onto someone else while I get to reap the delicious rewards. And it guarantees that all parts of the animal that can be used will be, and that nothing will go to waste—bones, hides, organs, everything. Were it not for the fact that I lived in a capital hellscape that required me to spend a majority of my time and energy making money for other people, this would truly be the ideal option, and it's one I'm hoping to more seriously engage with it post-Covid in a few years.

This knowledge and recognition of the cycle of life at play in regards to my own food source has massively influenced my larger perspectives on both animals and death. Learning about death in all its forms makes it so much less mysterious and terrifying. It's an inevitable end for all forms of life and that is a unifying fact in it of itself: it's something natural, something that we shouldn't shy away from or ignore over the course of our lives. It should function as a reminder to be kind to ourselves, tolerant of each other, caring to the animals we are caretakers for, and supportive of the larger ecosystems that sustain us and will be needed to sustain future generations. I think that if we can improve larger Western societal understandings and intimate interactions with where our food comes from, especially in regards to other animals, it might help to salvage some of the cluttered and terrified relationships we have at large with death and could also foster more of a sense of responsibility on a larger scale as we become intimate with death more face-to-face. Ignoring death is not understanding death, and

all ignoring it does is prevent us from seeing the necessity of it and, when applicable, the tragedy of it. This can be applied on multiple levels, but I personally believe it starts first and foremost with our relationship with food.