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Lighting Lanterns in the Morning

Daniel Story

Daniel Story is an ethicist. His most remarkable quality is extrinsic: he has lots of splendid intimates, many of whom are quoted here and deserve thanks for indulging him in this absurd project. Especially—principally—Catelynn Kenner. Thanks also to Amy Kurzweil and Ryan Kearney (both unpictured but nevertheless present).

I have an unusual desire. Call it a spiritual sentiment. I want my loved ones to eat me when I die.

To my friends I wish to give my liver, that hidden alchemist who worked so tirelessly during our revelries. To my family I wish to give my lungs because they have been with me since my first breath. And for my wife I reserve my heart.

Do my loved ones want to eat me?

The general consensus is nicely encapsulated by what my levelheaded friend, Elisa Pelgrift, said:

“If it was important to you, I would take a nibble.”

A striking fact about you and me and everyone else is that we will all permanently cease to exist in the near future. Not today. Not tomorrow, perhaps. But before too long.

Maybe no culture in the history of the planet has possessed such limited resources as ours for dealing with this ineluctable reality.

What do we have at our disposal?

Well, we have religious institutions that have been denuded by centuries of disenchantment. We have various means of stupefaction—television, alcohol, TikToks—which allow us to turn from death in the stillness of the night. And we have a medical-industrial complex all too eager to sell us life and more life, nevermind the costs. There are other things, to be sure, but nothing comparable to the shared understandings and undiluted myths that in previous epochs imbued death with real meaning, a definite place in human flourishing.

And so we minimize and euphemize personal encounters with death. Our meat comes packaged in plastic. Our deceased are whisked away and momentarily returned in peaceful sleep. Then we hide them underground. We see death on TV. We hear ominous statistics and morbid tales from distant lands. But these simulacra rarely move us viscerally. They allow us to acknowledge the reality of death without tasting the rot.

In my view, the nadir of our spiritual impoverishment is the funeral of a WASP like me. These “celebrations of life” mark death with tedious rituals, quiet condolences, and trite sermons. Far from celebratory, they disparage the human spirit.

This facet of our cultural decadence makes it difficult to process mortality on anything like a personal level. I believe we need to develop new cultural resources—new festivals of atonement, new sacred games—which will reconfigure our outlook on death and enable us to better integrate it into life.

This is why I want to be eaten by my loved ones.

When someone dies, we are fond of saying that death does not triumph absolutely. The deceased lives on in the hearts and minds of the bereaved. They carry him forward in spirit.

Suppose we wanted to symbolize this sentiment in our rituals. What might that look like?

In my opinion, it's hard to think of a practice more fitting than ritualized anthropophagy. Think about what happens when you eat something. Your insides are in the business of converting death into life. Your food sustains you by literally becoming part of you. You unite with it and carry it into the future.

I feel it would be beautiful and life-affirming for my loved ones to communally celebrate my vicarious spiritual presence by joining together to consume my flesh. I envision a ridiculous, merry, debauched feast. Wine flows. Food of all sorts is at hand. Selections of my flesh rest on the epergne. Those who partake laugh and grimace as they taste it. Those who refrain laugh and grimace at those who partake. They are having unusual fun. Everyone is viscerally reminded that they too shall return to dust. But that reminder is accompanied by audacious laughter, the sort that erodes fear. They part ways. I go with them in spirit. And in body.

Admittedly, this may not work. But creating rituals *ex nihilo* requires a willingness to experiment without the assurance of success.

My experiment is a shared project of sorts. Shared projects cannot be conducted if only one person is willing. And this one is a Big Ask.

I've been casually discussing this idea with loved ones for years. This essay prompted me to get serious about it, asking after and recording considered opinions.

Not everyone is willing.

My wife's family, the Kenners, already think I'm eccentric. Especially my parents-in-law. I knew the answer, but I had to ask. Would they eat me at my funeral?

"No," Tonya, my mother-in-law said, laughing. "Do you taste like chicken?"

My father-in-law, Paul, chuckled derisively and shook his head. I could tell he wasn't mad, just disappointed.

"No. End of interview."

Believe it or not, this was the only unqualified *no* I encountered. Most loved ones I talked to are open to the idea.

Take Quentin and Alexandra Kenner, my brother-in-law and his wife. Both are laconic, highly pragmatic pharmacists. I believe they think of me as they would a curious sea slug. In any case, they seem to be willing to eat me.

“It doesn’t seem that much more far-fetched than making your body ashes and then planting a tree with it,” Quentin tells me. “I think I would definitely be on board,” he says, provided my flesh is put in “lasagna or something regular.”

(My father mentioned putting my flesh in spaghetti. So maybe we’ll make a point to have a noodle dish).

Alexandra isn’t convinced that my proposal is really more meaningful than more pedestrian ways of remembering someone, partly for technical reasons having to do with, as she puts it, “carbon turnover rates.” Nevertheless, she tells me, “if someone invited me to their body dinner, I would probably still eat it. If that’s something they wanted and thought would be good.”

My other brother-in-law, Cameron Kenner, is inquisitive and extremely nice. He is slightly more hesitant than Alexandra and Quentin: “I think the main thing that keeps me from saying yes is because even though it’s not morally wrong, people still look at it weird.”

We discuss the possibility of keeping the funeral secret.

“As long as it’s close friends and family, and there’s kind of the understanding that, ‘hey this could be looked upon as socially weird, so we should probably not tell a lot of people about it,’ I’d probably be interested in it, as long as that’s your wish.”

You might have thought that some of my loved ones would object on moral grounds. Nobody did. That’s good because, despite what your gut might be telling you, anthropophagy is not inherently immoral.

I suspect that most reasonable people either already accept or can be persuaded to accept this. Words like ‘cannibalism’ tend to call to mind the Dahmer paradigm, which rightly prompts condemnation. But anthropophagy needn’t be associated with harm or violation. For example, human placentophagy is clearly not immoral.

Now, admittedly anthropophagy is disgusting and taboo. But these are notoriously poor guides to moral truth. Many disgusting things aren’t immoral (unclogging a toilet), and many immoral things aren’t disgusting (securities fraud). Many things that are now or were once considered taboo clearly aren’t immoral (interracial marriage).

Moreover, cannibalism is a common occurrence in the natural world, so it's not unnatural. Even if it were, that wouldn't make it wrong, any more than the unnaturalness of chemotherapy makes it wrong.

A more substantive worry is that anthropophagy necessarily disparages or disrespects the person consumed by treating them as an object, a mere means to sustenance or gustatory pleasure. Note, however, that in certain situations eating something is seen as a way of honoring it. For example, Catholics believe they honor God by consuming transubstantiated Communion elements. This suggests that whether eating something is disrespectful depends upon the context and the eater's mental state. If anthropophagy is practiced in a respectful context with respectful intentions, it's hard to see what could be disrespectful about it.

Incidentally, on some subterranean level the Eucharist probably was the inspiration for my experiment. And many of my loved ones picked up on the connection, like my dear cousin Gus Goggin.

Gus is a relentlessly amiable pastor at a church in Muncie, Indiana. Would he eat me?

"Shoot. I don't know. A part of me thinks I would," he ponders. "A part of me is like, sacraments are meaningful. And yah, you're probably right. If I were to take a sacrament of this person, it would be meaningful. And that tracks because I do that at church from time to time. But because I do that at church from time to time I would also probably say I am going to reserve that for my sacraments," he explains.

I watch as his ambivalence solidifies into a no. "For me, this is a thing I want to participate with Christ, but not with my aunt, or not with Daniel. No offense to Daniel." (None taken).

Fellow philosopher Robert Wallace, a practicing Catholic, also notes the connection. "It's a little rich for practicing Christians to say, 'totally crazy to eat somebody,' given the central form of the Christian ritual," Robert opines, smiling gently. His strawberry-blonde hair and reflective sunglasses gleam in the California sun, making him look vaguely angelic.

"Nevertheless, I have hesitation because you're trying to revise the symbolic meaning of an action against a background where certain actions are taken to mean certain things. I guess that's what gives me pause. Could I explain it to my mom?"

I don't know Robert's mom, so I couldn't say.

"I don't hate this idea. I don't think this is bad. But there are broader questions about feasibility and communication." Robert continued, "but I also think if I really knew that sincerely this provided you with meaning, then even out of considerations of friendship, that would provide a very strong reason."

I am touched. I hope Robert's mom understands.

I suppose you might object to ritualized anthropophagy because you think God disapproves.

Personally, I find there to be something absurdly provincial about the idea that the same Unmoved Mover who spoke into existence the light of sextillions of stars and countless other wonders would stoop to wag his exalted finger at my grieving loved ones as they privately nibble a few symbolic portions of my flesh. It would just be such a petty and shameless thing for him to do.

But maybe that's the depravity talking.

The closest thing I heard to divine condemnation came from Brenda Story, my Methodist minister mother. Brenda doesn't think anthropophagy is inherently immoral but is bothered by certain aspects of the process.

"I think that since we were made in God's image, there is a piece of God in all of us and the human is set apart," she tells me. "It would be hard to eat because of that. I'd be thinking, am I eating a set apart part of God? I have maybe too much of a negative connotation with eating, thinking it's just rubbish. It becomes rubbish. It goes into the toilet, and there it goes, that sacred, created being, through the sewer system."

Brenda makes a good point. Not all of what is consumed is absorbed. Some of it is expelled. I can see how this might bother someone who views humans as divinely set apart. But I don't believe that. And I have too much self-loathing to feel disturbed by the toilet.

Most of my loved ones wanted to talk primarily about the culinary and gustatory practicalities.

My friend Jacob Cook, a good-natured navy officer, says he would "probably" eat my flesh. "I think it would depend on how it's prepared. I mean, it's got to be seasoned. Seasoned, smoked over a grill. Would you season it, or does that take away from the meaning of it? Like if it's barbecue seasoning on Daniel's leg fat?"

Season away, I say.

"If I were going to do it," Cook continued, on a roll now, "I would have like a spread of different sauces, meat maybe prepared a couple different ways, some sweet tea at the end of the buffet line. Jerky. We've got jerky. You can keep this, and on the anniversary of my death you can have a piece of jerky."

Needless to say, Cook is in charge of cooking. We'll see about the jerky.

Britney Boylan, Cook's wife, is a jocular conversationalist who produced an impressive number of cannibalism zingers. For gustatory reasons she was more reluctant to partake than her husband. "It's not my cup of tea. I'm picky about my meat. No offense." (None taken). Then again, Britney did admit that if she had "a little bit to drink before," she might join in.

On the other hand, several of my philosopher colleagues were positively excited about the prospect of consuming specific cuts.

For example, my grad school comrade Sam Zahn, a climber type who, if not outdoors, might be found in a seedy cigar bar reading *The Brothers Karamazov*, is not enthusiastic about my liver, which he is “somewhat concerned” will be “almost completely toxic” by the time I die. However, Sam was oddly enthusiastic when I offered my calf.

“I would do pretty much anything to your calf. You can put that in the article.”

Jacob Sparks, another philosopher, says he would eat me, too. “I’m not that squeamish. I’ve tried new things.” Sparks is soft-spoken and gives off the vibe of a sandaled sage. “If I were doing it, and I were trying to make for a fun funeral, I would assign everyone I know a very particular piece of me and then create in each of them this little problem they have to deal with. I think that would be a pleasant way to do it.”

This may have been a self-serving suggestion. Sparks mentioned (without my asking) that he has a very particular piece of me in mind.

“I think ear is what I would most be interested in. I want a crispy fried ear. I like that as symbolic for a philosopher.”

On the whole, my loved ones are fairly open to my experiment. Most are generous and broad-minded, so that makes sense.

I have altered my original designs in response to feedback. I’d prefer my viscera to be eaten, but my loved ones think extremities are safer and more practical. I agree. Anyway, if my organs are medically usable, they should be donated to those in need.

My wife asked our lawyer, Virginia Fuentes, about the legal issues. Virginia explained that I can put my request in my will, but this doesn’t guarantee it will be carried out. “Not many states actually have direct laws on cannibalism, but they do have laws that will still prevent a hospital or funeral home from acting in support of such a request,” Virginia writes. She mentioned the possibility of a religious exemption, which I don’t think would be disingenuous.

The plan, at this point, is to have one of my less squeamish friends cut off some pieces of my leg (and an ear for Sparks) immediately after I die. Then someone will cook them up.

My wife, Catelynn Kenner, is, shall we say, inured to the oddities of philosophers. Catelynn is a research consultant who possesses a practical perspicacity that I obviously lack. She keeps me away from wells and other hazards.

Naturally, Catelynn made the trenchant observations that others were too polite to make.

“There is some narcissistic piece in this in that you’re mandating for your loved ones, the people you care most about in the world, that they enter into this morally ambiguous area. And that is a little sketchy for me. Like if we have to think this hard and whatnot, then is that really a position you’d want to put us in?”

Catelynn is right about the narcissism, of course. This undertaking, like our decadence surrounding death, is surely rooted in self-obsession. But I hope for an ouroboric turn. I want my experiment to facilitate community and reflection of a sort that can put my loved ones into a new position relative to themselves and to death. How could I not desire such a thing for them?

Catelynn, by the way, was initially unsure but now wants to be part of the experiment. For her, the decisive factor was the willingness of our loved ones.

“I like that it forces people together.”