

Loving doggies and eating pigs

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Bill Hall Commentary

Dr. Melanie Joy, the provocative vegetarian who rubs the noses of meat eaters like me in our hamburgers and pork chops, has written a book that asks meat people a question about our inconsistent relationship with animals:

Why do we treat some of them like beloved relatives and others like dinner?

The book is called, "Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows: An Introduction to Carnism."

Joy suggests that we have been taught by our culture to treat some animals like family. We treat dogs and cats like substitute children, albeit weird, little children who run around on all fours and are too lazy to learn how to read and write.

She pretty much has us dead to rights when she asks why we love the doggies, regardless of their marginal behavior, while eating pigs, an animal that many assert is more intelligent than dogs and no more slobby.

Does that make any more sense than the fact that some people in the world eat dogs while other people in the world find the idea of eating pigs to be disgusting?

Why is an animal a pet in one culture and stroganoff in another?

Joy offers a change from the superior vegetarian attitude that often treats being a vegetarian as a holier-than-thou existence. The normal vegetarian harangue is that we meat eaters are morally inferior.

Ordinarily, we tend to reciprocate in kind - partly because we have tasted tofu and feel genuinely sorry for anyone who subsists on a food with the texture of coagulated snot.

Melanie Joy's argument in this new book is more generous than many previous vegetarian treatises in that it tries to appeal to our better nature, thereby revealing her friendly belief that we have one. In effect, this book apparently asks how people as sweet as we are could be so decent and loving with some animals while heartlessly devouring others.

She suggests we are in denial about where that steak, pork roast or chicken leg came from. But we're so darned nice that she thinks she can convert some of us to her belief by holding up our affection for dogs against our unconsciously savage affection for bacon.

She calls our way of life "carnism." Actually, we aren't totally carnivorous. As a species, we are naturally omnivorous, going through life half carnivore and half vegetarian.

Previously, I have been asked another provocative question on this topic by an old friend who takes a sorrowful view of the way our world works. My friend is always asking: "How could God or Mother Nature or

whomever create a world in which the only way a cougar can survive is by killing and eating bunnies?" (A cougar would croak on a diet of tofu.)

Not all the vegetarian lectures combined can alter the fact that some thoughtless power has created a world in which big cats can exist only by murdering other creatures. Even if a cougar thinks bunnies are cute, it's kill or starve for a cougar.

We humans also exist by killing other creatures. A totally vegetarian diet, though a noble gesture, is not our natural tendency. Just as big cats were designed and built to eat the flesh of other creatures, and just as cows were designed and built to eat nothing but vegetables, we humans were designed and built to go both ways.

That is a fact and vegetarianism is the deviation, even though that style of eating works for some and is well intended. Humans were built primarily with the super-survival ability to exist on whatever we can get our little paws on, animal, vegetable or chewy rock.

That versatility has been part of the secret of our success as a species. And until about 100 years ago, that was at the heart of our phenomenal ability to survive. In fact, eating whatever you can lay your hands on, animal or plant, is still a matter of survival with millions of starving people in the world. Vegetarianism (plantism) is a luxury of the fortunate.

But it's true that we lucky ones in affluent societies do have the kinder choice of eating veggies alone.

However, converting things like dogs (not to mention chickens and shrimp) into nothing but inedible companions is essentially abnormal for our kind.

We are all a little weird. Some of us practice carnism. And the Melanie Joys, bless their kind hearts, practice petism, converting potential protein into artificial relatives.

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