

Jonathon Kahn

I didn't really know how to cook before I met my wife. I realize that this sentence implies that I now know how to cook. So just to be clear, I, indeed, am claiming that I know how to cook today because of my partnership with the person to whom I'm betrothed.

The question, of course, that I'm trying to set up here is: What does it mean to cook? Or what do I mean by cooking, and why for me is it connected to cooking for someone else?

During my twenties, I certainly knew how to apply heat and add salt to organic material to turn that material into food. For a decade after graduating from college, I lived, what is often called, "by myself," which is to say mostly going to bed alone but also sometimes sharing living space with someone else as we figured out whether we wanted to spend more time together. During those years, I also invited friends over to hang out. In all instances, I would prepare food and, if there was an other or others sharing space with me, I would with joy and real relish prepare and serve food to them. Eating together, eating with others, is something I did often. And it brought me a measure of pleasure.

But I'm not calling that cooking.

I should probably add that those years, my twenties, were tremendously difficult for me. I found it very hard, too hard, to connect with others. If my college years were a time when I cathected powerfully, after college my abilities to feel strong connections did not simply happen in the same way; they did not seem to happen at all. Something in my countenance and in my bearing had shifted after college, and for a long decade I walked through the world oddly. When I found myself in settings when I wanted to care, where I even felt like I cared, I would extend my arms to reach for a spirit or a wind or a breath of belonging, and yet I would remain un-embraced. It was as if the eyelets that figuratively lined the seams of my self could not be threaded.

I started with eggs, gently scrambling them. Cooking, I discovered, is not in the heat or the salt, but in the implicit insistence that I was determined to repeat these sets of actions--the cracking of the eggs and folding in a bit of cream or cheese. I learned to cook when I understood that each time I cooked, I was asking if I could do this again. She could say no. But I was moved to ask. Learning to cook, I discovered, lay in the possibility of refusal. Because invariably something would go wrong: I would misunderstand her and I would be misunderstood. Truthfully either of us at any point might say no. But if we weren't going to say no, then we needed to eat together. I learned to cook as I learned to stay.

Cooking, in the sense I am using it, can really only be done in a home. Each instance of cooking invokes the next instance. I will cook for you today because I intend to cook for you tomorrow. I cook in order to learn how to sit, in order to learn how to sit still, in order to say that I am here, not there or anywhere else.

No one ever wants to feel taken for granted. At least I don't. But if I'm honest, part of my learning to cook functions as encouragement for her to rely on me, to come to assume that each night I will call out, when the scent of the garlic is just right, that dinner is ready. I want to build the grounds for that assumption. There should be no fanfare as we come around the table. The regularity of it feels extraordinary. I cook in order to gather round, in order to make eye contact. I have expectations that we nourish each other, which requires nourishment.

Most nights begin with a quiet swirl of oil, followed by a slow thrum of activity. I'm alone. And I start crafting anew the day's most important statement, which was the same as yesterday, and which tomorrow I will try to say once again: here is our place. Come and join me.