

Deep Culture Podcast – Transcript

The Deep Culture Podcast explores the psychological impact of intercultural experiences, informed by the sciences of brain, culture and mind. Join hosts **Joseph Shaules** and **Zeina Matar** as we look at the personal growth that can come from travel, living and working abroad, learning a foreign language, growing up in a multicultural context—and the challenges of bridging different cultural worlds.

(Episode 38 – Transformation and the Road Less Traveled)

A foreign experience takes you down a road less traveled . . . it leads to new worlds that transform us. In this episode, we hear stories about the decisions that lead us into an unforeseen future. Zeina Matar talks about leaving Lebanon and her feeling of exile; Ishita Ray introduces us to Champa's dreams of a better life for her daughter; Joseph tells of a small notepad that changed his life, together with stories from Emre Seven and Yvonne van der Pol. We also learn about the science of decision making and the transformative learning theory of Jack Mezirow.

Time	Speaker	
00:00:00	Zeina	(Hook) When we get together, we have this deep trust because of our long relationship. So you find yourself in a protected cocoon. You are loved, you are not criticized. You feel cozy, we talk, we eat. But for me, there is this gap.
00:00:26	Joseph	Hello, this is Joseph Shaules and welcome to the Deep Culture podcast, where we explore the science of cultural understanding and the mind. And I am here with Zeina Matar. How are you today, Zeina?
00:00:38	Zeina	Fine, Joseph. Thank you. How about you?
00:00:41	Joseph	Oh, doing great. Happy to be here with you. So, Zeina, the inspiration for this episode came from a poem that is dear to you by Robert Frost called <i>The Road Not Taken</i> .
00:00:55	Zeina	Yes, indeed. We were talking about the decisions that take us away from home and lead us to foreign experiences. For example, my decision to leave Lebanon to study abroad, a choice that changed the course of my life. And this is what reminded me of the poem.
00:01:13	Joseph	So let's hear the last stanza of the road not taken. And we asked our colleague Daniel Glinz to be the voice of poetry today.
00:01:26	Daniel	<i>"...I shall be telling this with a sigh Somewhere ages and ages hence: Two roads diverged in a wood, and I— I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference."</i>
00:01:45	Joseph	So does that describe your life, Zeina?
00:01:49	Zeina	Well, yes. When I decided to make my life away from Lebanon, I chose a different path. Every time I meet my friends from school in Lebanon, I realize this very much. I have lived such a different life. I didn't even realize that, in fact, I was standing at a fork in the road of life. When we

		leave home, we don't know what it will be like to come home, or even if we'll be able to come home. Or maybe you can go home, but you don't feel at home anymore
00:02:19	Joseph	But you don't regret.
00:02:25	Zeina	Not at all. It opened up new worlds to me. I became someone I could have never imagined. I would never give those things up. My career, my life in Germany, now my family. Of course, it wasn't easy to create a new life for myself outside of Lebanon. But that's what's magical about choosing the road less traveled. We commit ourselves to a big change, even if we have no idea what we're getting ourselves into.
00:02:55	Joseph	So you know, I find an odd contradiction here because most people, human beings in general, we usually choose the easiest path when we seek a reward. If you can make the same money for less work, you do. But when you launch yourself into this new or foreign experience like you did, it takes more effort, but you don't know where you'll end up. So a decision like that is a gamble.
00:03:23	Zeina	Yes, that's true. For some reason, we're ready to take on this gamble. And this transformative decision does change our lives and changes us in ways we cannot predict.
00:03:38	Joseph	So in this episode, we thought we'd hear some stories about the decisions that take us onto the road less traveled and the transformations that can result. And we'll dig into all of this from the brain mind perspective. We'll look at the science of decision making. We'll see that when we are at a fork in the road, we aren't weighing pros and cons.
00:04:03	Zeina	And we will explore how learning theory can help us understand what makes an experience transformative.
00:04:10	Joseph	And that's because from the brain mind perspective, the road less traveled is a journey of the mind.
00:04:18	Zeina	And that brings us to Part One: The Leap of Faith
Part 1: The Leap of Faith		
00:04:32	Joseph	Zeina, let's ask a basic question. Why is it that some people choose the road less traveled, even sometimes without noticing it?
00:04:42	Zeina	For me, the decision to leave was a very spontaneous one. I was offered an assistantship at New York University, and my Australian boyfriend at the time was going to the University of Pennsylvania. It actually happened rather quickly.
00:04:57	Joseph	But you were ready to take the leap?
00:05:00	Zeina	Absolutely. I was always curious, rebellious, even. I think it's curiosity that leads us to that leap of faith.
00:05:09	Joseph	Well, that's so interesting, because I wasn't a rebel. I was a bored teenager. Yet I ended up leaving the US. And if I trace it back, it was, I think, the tiniest of decisions that started me on that path. I put a small notebook in the pocket of my work shirt, and somehow it changed my life.

00:05:32	Zeina	Well, Joseph, That's a story you'll just have to tell.
00:05:43	Joseph	<p>When I was 18, I had a great summer job. I worked at the front gate of SeaWorld, a marine park in my hometown of San Diego. They had a dolphin show, a killer whale named Shamu, and a Japanese themed pavilion where Japanese pearl divers would dive down to retrieve an oyster from the bottom of an enormous saltwater tank.</p> <p>There were also seagulls constantly squawking overhead, and they pooped on tourists and locals alike.</p> <p>My job was to take the tickets of guests as they entered the park and to direct them to the information booth with a set phrase that I repeated all day. "Maps and programs are across the bridge to the left." "Maps and programs are across the bridge to the left." "Maps and programs are across the bridge to the left."</p> <p>I really liked the atmosphere at the front gate. There were kids running ahead of their parents, full of anticipation, tourists who were not used to wearing shorts. Their legs sticking out of dress socks. And also pretty often there were guests, families especially, speaking Spanish. And Spanish sounded somehow cool to me, and I thought, wow, it would be neat to learn my line in Spanish. And so I picked up one of the small notepads I found in the employee lounge. I asked someone how to translate my phrase into Spanish, and I wrote it down:</p> <p>Hay - there is/ There are; Mapas y programas - Okay, got that... cruzando Crossing; El Puente - the bridge; a la izquierda - to the left.</p> <p>Put it all together.</p> <p>"Hay mapas y programas cruzando el puente a la izquierda".</p> <p>Practice a few times, ready to go, with notepad in my shirt pocket for backup, I took my post, did my job as usual. But then I heard people speaking Spanish.</p> <p>So just as I took their tickets, I smiled and said, "Hay mapas y programas cruzando el puente a la izquierda".</p> <p>And they smiled back.</p> <p>It was like a tiny miracle, really, that these sounds that I had memorized actually meant something to people. Of course, I knew that. But experiencing that connection was cool. And for a while, it became a kind of game. I would wait until I heard Spanish, then use my phrase in Spanish when I took their tickets. And it was great!</p> <p>Until, of course, before too long, someone turned to me and asked me a question in Spanish.</p> <p>I had no idea what they were saying, but I had my notepad. So I started to write down words and phrases I might need – Bathroom, the park closes at..., where can I rent a dolphin stroller? - And they all went into the notepad, which I soon realized wasn't enough. So I borrowed a high school textbook, I took a class at a community college, I spent a summer in Mexico on a homestay... I was hooked. And I had no</p>

		way of knowing it at the time, but that notebook was the first step on my journey down a road less traveled, one that led me, ultimately, to this podcast.
00:10:15	Zeina	What a great story. And were you thinking, “Oh, I'm going to learn Spanish. It'll changed my life”?
00:10:22	Joseph	Of course not. I nearly failed Spanish in high school, but somehow this was different. It felt like there was a world of Spanish speakers out there.
00:10:33	Zeina	And I think this feeling that there's another world out there waiting to be discovered is what hooks us on the road less traveled.
00:10:42	Joseph	And yet we need something or someone to make these other worlds real to us, to give us the sense that we can go there, too.
00:10:52	Zeina	Which is precisely what Emre Seven's uncle did. Let's take a listen.
00:11:05	Emre	<p>In my family, the road less traveled was speaking English. Exotic things like English and foreign countries were something far away. That was like a dream for me.</p> <p>But I had someone pointing the way. My father's brother, my Uncle Erdal. Uncle Erdal commanded great respect in my family. He was a successful banker. He was the first person in our family to get a BA, an advanced education in English language and literature.</p> <p>When I was small, of course, I couldn't have understood what it means to get a university degree or to master a foreign language. But how could I not notice his affluent lifestyle? He had a car. He bought me lavish gifts. All of this taught me that there was another road, less traveled, maybe, but with potential for great rewards. I aspired to follow in his footsteps. I wanted to be just like him. I did well in school, and I was so proud when I would hear a family member say, “He will be as successful as his uncle!”.</p> <p>All this reached new heights when I heard that my uncle had gone abroad to Hungary for a holiday with friends. The story of his trip was recounted over and over by different family members. There were photos of him on the chain bridge on the Danube river spanning between Buda and Pest. I envision him as a character from a fairy tale embarking on an enchanted journey. And these tales always mentioned his proficiency in English as a pivotal part, making this experience a reality, which only strengthened my resolve to pursue the same path. And I did. I graduated from Samsung Anadolu Lisesi, his high school. I got my BA from Hacettepe University, the same as him, and from the same department, English Language and Literature. And I traveled abroad at even a younger age, the youngest in my family to do so. It may seem I chose the road that has been already traveled by him, but it was a road less traveled for me, for my family, and it helped me discover ways of life that I didn't know existed.</p> <p>English was an entry point into new worlds. Unfortunately, my uncle was recently diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. It fills me with deep</p>

		sadness that in the future he may forget his story and how he showed me the road less traveled. Thank you, Uncle Erdal.
00:14:31	Zeina	Our hearts go out to Emre and his family and our thanks for sharing this story.
00:14:39	Joseph	Zeina. Emre's story reminds us that we often need something or someone to show us that there can be another road to take. And then we also need the opportunity, the resources to make that happen.
00:14:53	Zeina	That's so true. As Ishita Ray reminds us:
00:15:13	Ishita	<p>Champa works as a cook in my parents' home. My father says that when she and my mother talk, it generates enough voltage to light up an entire village. Champa and I both grew up in Durgapur, West Bengal. She is about my age. We are both Bengali speakers. She works independently, like I do.</p> <p>But there are differences. My parents were educators. I grew up on a school campus, I spent hours reading books in a library. When I was bored, on long summer afternoons, I wrote poetry. For me, education was the entry point for the road less traveled, and it wasn't a struggle. I did well in high school, moved to Kolkata for college. A scholarship allowed me to do graduate studies in a different city.</p> <p>Champa's life was different. Her father ran a small paint store and her mother was a domestic worker. Champa left primary school after fifth grade to help out at home while her parents were out working. She cooked and washed clothes and cleaned all day. It would, quote unquote, prepare her for her future life. She was married at 14, had a child at 16. Champa can just about read and write in the local language. She has picked up a few words of English here and there. But Champa wants more for her daughter, Julie.</p> <p>Champa faced tremendous community pressure but refused to have more children even though she did not have a son. She sent her daughter to school. She beamed with joy and brought my parents sweets when Julie graduated junior High school. She said if her daughter studied well, that she could get a "real job".</p> <p>And then last year, Julie failed her high school final examinations. Champa came to work that morning, red eyes swollen from crying all night. With her daughter's report card in her hand, Champa was shattered. Her dream was that her daughter would have a real job. "What is this real job?", I asked her. "Real job? You know, like working in an office."</p> <p>200 million Indian women have never been to school. More than 500 million Indian women are unemployed. Women in the least wealthy families, the bottom 20% have completed less than a year of school on average. In rural areas, 33% of household populations have no schooling.</p> <p>Imagine growing up like this. You are not standing at a fork in the road,</p>

		free to make life decisions. You are being pushed downstream by forces beyond your control. To take the road less traveled, you must swim against the current of social expectations, economic pressures, pressure to marry. For Champa and her daughter and many people around the world, access to education and a chance at a real job is itself a road less traveled.
00:19:24	Zeina	This is a heartbreaking story. It reminds us that the road less traveled is not just about foreign countries. It's about seeking a different life, even if we never leave home. Which brings us to Part Two, Transformation.
Part 2: Transformation		
00:19:55	Joseph	So let's dig into this idea of transformation a bit more. If a new life experience changes us, in our case, a foreign experience. Then what is it exactly that changes?
00:20:10	Zeina	Yes, it's an odd feeling. I am the same person, but it still feels like I have changed. I think that what changes is not our personality or character. It's how we experience the world.
00:20:25	Joseph	And this is in line with the work of Jack Mezirow. He was a sociologist and educational theorist known for researching transformative learning.
00:20:36	Zeina	And for Mezirow, the key element to making an experience transformative is that it involves what he calls a disorienting dilemma. For example, in New York, I met a young Lebanese man who was studying there. His parents also lived in Beirut. Once he told me, "Please don't tell my family that I'm taking a trip with friends here in the US!". He had lied to them, said he wouldn't visit them in Lebanon due to his studies. At first, I couldn't understand why he lied. Now I realize the heavy emotional load that he was carrying. In Lebanon, family is, or should be first on your list of priorities. Not wanting to go visit is a betrayal. So he was fighting this incredible pressure. He felt guilty not wanting to hurt his parents but wanting to live his own life. And juggling these two things was his disorienting dilemma.
00:21:39	Joseph	And how about for you, Zeina? After leaving Lebanon, did you feel disoriented?
00:21:46	Zeina	In some ways, when we leave home, we discover new worlds, but this changes us. We can never fully go back to being the person we were before. It's a kind of exile.
00:21:59	Joseph	And when do you notice this feeling?
00:22:03	Zeina	Last July, for example, I spent three weeks in Lebanon. So we were six women who met at the house of a dear friend. The house is on top of a hill overlooking the seashore in one direction and hills in the other, far away from the busy city. When we get together, we have this deep trust because of our long relationship. So you find yourself in a protected cocoon. You are loved, you are not criticized. You feel cozy, we talk, we eat. But for me, there is this gap. Of the six women, only two have lived abroad. And my life is so different. They don't really understand. I

		<p>sometimes feel, what the heck am I doing here? I've been exposed to different values, like being a professional woman, like being more individualist. Of course, I'm still Lebanese, but I have lived in different worlds, and that has changed me. In the end, taking the road less traveled is a mental journey as much as a physical one.</p>
00:23:09	Joseph	<p>And that is something that our colleague Yvonne van der Pol learned at a young age...</p>
00:23:23	Yvonne	<p>When I think of a road less traveled, a couple of stories come to mind. One may sound exotic and far away, and the other is very ordinary and close to home, yet it's the more powerful.</p> <p>Many years ago, my partner Eric and I decided to travel for three months through Madagascar, one of the most disadvantaged countries in the world. 16 languages, influences from Africa, India and the Middle East, French colonial heritage, yet unique in so many ways and with a great biodiversity. The capital, Antananarivo, was crowded. Seeing people walking barefoot, struggling to get by. It was really a different world. The rhythm of life was different, and we started traveling slower and slower, staying longer in local places, which led to deeper conversations.</p> <p>And, for instance, we learned the essence of the proverb - <i>Kidiaran, tsarety ny fianinana</i> - life is like a wheel of an ox cart. It goes round and round. We learned about Famadihana, the celebration for the deceased, with dancing and singing to honor and remember one's ancestors. And the reburial of the dead. We also learned about <i>Fadi</i> - taboos and sacred traditions. It is <i>Fadi</i>, for example, to point at a grave with your finger. And all this magical thinking was new to Eric and me. And life can be harsh there. We also got robbed, we got sick. We experienced everything from good to bad. For us, at least, it was really a road less travelled.</p> <p>But if I have to measure the impact that this experience had on me, then there was another journey that I took of just a few kilometers that transformed me even more.</p> <p>I grew up in Boskoop in the Netherlands. My family had a small business, a tree nursery. There was stability, community. And then, at age twelve, I faced a decision - the fork in the road. I needed to choose whether I wanted to go to a regular high school, in the village, or to try to enter a more advanced one in a village 8 kms away. And I actually had no clue what to expect in that high school. Yet I knew I wanted to try. I wanted to learn about new and unfamiliar things. I wanted to spread my wings, to learn to fly. I was a small girl, and my parents were worried about me cycling 16 kms every day. But I was committed and luckily my mom supported me, and I got accepted. It was this choice, this high school, that broadened my horizons. I became the first person in my family to study at university. The wider world entered my mind.</p>
00:27:14	Zeina	<p>I love how the 8 kms to high school had a bigger impact than going to the other side of the world. Which brings us to Part Three, Stretching</p>

		your Mind.
Part 3: Stretching Your Mind		
00:27:37	Joseph	Zeina, Let's shift gears a bit. Let's look at the road less traveled from the brain-mind perspective.
00:27:44	Zeina	First decision making. And the most basic question is, how do we make the choices to take a new path? Why did going abroad appeal to me? Why did hearing Spanish make you decide to take a notepad? Why did Champa want her daughter to go to school?
00:28:03	Joseph	And of course, there can never be a single or simple answer to these questions. But we can shed light on the process of deciding by understanding the structure of our motivation system.
00:28:19	Zeina	From the brain and mind perspective, motivation is a relationship between you and the world, between your hunger and a bag of potato chips, between your desire for status and an expensive sports car. So to ask why people do what they do, we have to understand their internal states and the world that they operate in.
00:28:43	Joseph	But there's something else, too. We are wired not simply to seek reward, but we also have avoidance motivation. We are motivated to avoid negative consequences. And that's the same for most organisms, from cats to camels. We seek positive stimulation, food, comfort, a mate. And we avoid danger, discomfort, wasted effort.
00:29:08	Zeina	And these two motivational systems work independently. We can want something and fear it at the same time. We may be dying to play in the tennis tournament, but also be terrified of it.
00:29:21	Joseph	So, in your case, Zeina, when you decided to study abroad, what was your sense of the possible reward?
00:29:29	Zeina	Well, it was starting an adventure. Being a student not far away from my boyfriend, this was very exciting. And I was also rebelling against many social norms.
00:29:41	Joseph	So, wanting an adventure, that's approach motivation, that is, desiring something. But rebelling against the social norms, that's avoidance motivation. You wanted to get out.
00:29:54	Zeina	And it's the same for Champa, the cook. She was attracted to the idea of her daughter having a real job, but also by her daughter not being a cook. That's both approach motivation and avoidance motivation.
00:30:12	Joseph	But how do we make these judgments? How did I know that studying Spanish words would benefit me? Something quite deep was going on.
00:30:21	Zeina	Yes, you got hooked by some future possibility without even knowing it. That's incredible.
00:30:28	Joseph	And that may be because our motivation system responds to the potential for reward. It is the anticipation of reward that feels so exciting. That's why people gamble. It's not winning the jackpot which hooks you. It's the possibility of winning a jackpot.
00:30:48	Zeina	So being attracted to the road less traveled is a gamble. We are stimulated by the possibility of a reward. But that's amazing, too,

		because how do we know?
00:31:01	Joseph	Right. We are not going through a conscious list of pros and cons. We are driven by a feeling. The desire to take the road less traveled is based on unconscious evaluation, on intuition.
00:31:14	Zeina	And we're getting a bit technical here, but the unconscious judgments we make are related to valence, which is the word psychologists use to describe the positive or negative feeling we have about a stimulus. And that's why Emre's uncle was such an important influence on him. The positive feelings he had about his uncle became associated with English.
00:31:40	Joseph	Okay, let's summarize. Taking the road less traveled involves an intuitive judgment, which may be based on an unconscious attraction to the possibility of a reward or something we want to avoid.
00:31:55	Zeina	Okay, so that's how we choose the road less traveled. But we haven't really explored how once we have made that choice, going down this new road transforms us.
00:32:13	Joseph	Well, what makes you feel you have changed when you are with your friends in Lebanon?
00:32:19	Zeina	When I left, I was forced to change how I looked at everything, because now the people around you don't think like you, so you adjust, you adapt, you question.
00:32:30	Joseph	And that sounds exactly like what Mezirow calls <i>perspective transformation</i> . You see that there are new ways of making sense of the world. Let me quote Mezirow here: <i>"It is not so much what happens to people, but how they interpret and explain what happens to them. And these new interpretations challenge the old ways of seeing things."</i>
00:32:57	Zeina	And this is the gap I feel when I'm sitting there with my friends. I had learned to make sense of things in a new way. This even triggers a kind of boredom sometimes. I'm connected at the emotional level, but everything else has become different because I see things differently. This is a kind of exile. You feel so close, yet there's always this distance.
00:33:23	Joseph	And Mezirow talks about that, too. He says, <i>"Any major challenge to an established perspective can result in a transformation. These challenges are painful. They often call into question deeply held personal values and threaten our very sense of self."</i>
00:33:44	Zeina	I see it as growing pains, what happens when we stretch our minds to include a new way of looking at the world.
00:33:52	Joseph	And I think that we can see this in all of the stories we talked about today. Champa's idea of a real job is a frame shifting of a kind. She did not just want her daughter to earn more money working at people's homes. She wanted a different life for her altogether.
00:34:11	Zeina	And learning the Spanish phrases was not just to help you do your job of guiding tourists to the information booth. It was a new way of seeing the world and your place in it.
00:34:22	Joseph	And Emre had a vision of a different world through the example of his

		uncle. And of course, Yvonne experienced a new world of learning at her high school. She even talks about learning to fly.
00:34:36	Zeina	Learning to fly. What a beautiful metaphor! And this is what makes the growing pains worth it. Once we learn to fly, we cannot unlearn it.
00:34:48	Joseph	And Mezirow also talks about this. He says, " <i>The transformative learning process is irreversible once completed, that is, once our understanding is clarified and we have committed ourselves fully to taking the action, it suggests, we do not regress to levels of less understanding.</i> "
00:35:09	Zeina	And that reminds me of the same poem we started with. Let's listen to the second to the last stanza.
00:35:19	Daniel	<i>"And both that morning equally lay In leaves no step had trodden black. Oh, I kept the first for another day! Yet knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted if I should ever come back."</i>
00:35:41	Joseph	Indeed, once we choose the road less traveled, we can't go back. But we have moved forward, and so maybe that's a good place to end this episode. If you are interested in decision making, and particularly in cultural differences in decision making, check out <i>The Art of Choosing</i> by Sheena Iyengar. That's I-Y-E-N-G-A-R. She also has a very popular TED Talk. And we took quotes from <i>Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning</i> by Jack Mezirow. That's M-E-Z-I-R-O-W. The Deep Culture podcast is sponsored by the Japan Intercultural Institute, an NPO dedicated to intercultural education and research. I am the director of JII. If you liked today's episode, subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. You can also subscribe on YouTube, and you can get in touch with us at dcpodcasts@japanintercultural.org . Thanks to our sound engineer, Robinson Fritz. Thanks to Daniel Glinz for being the voice of poetry today, and Emre Seven, Yvonne Van der Pol, and Ishita Ray for their stories. And all the best to Champa. Thanks also to Ikumi Fritz and all the members of JII, and to you, Zeina, for sharing this time with me.
00:37:10	Zeina	Thank you, Joseph. It was a pleasure.