

Around the world in 18 minutes.

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Today, I'm going to take you around the world in 18 minutes. My base of operations is in the U.S. But let's start at the other end of the map in Kyoto, Japan, where I was living with a Japanese family while I was doing part of my dissertational research 15 years ago. I knew even then that I would encounter cultural differences and misunderstandings, but they popped up when I least expected it.

On my first day, I went to a restaurant, and I ordered a cup of green tea with sugar. After a pause, the waiter said, "One does not put sugar in green tea." "I know." I said. "I'm aware of this custom. But I really like my tea sweet." In response, he gave me an even more courteous version of the same explanation. "One does not put sugar in green tea." "I understand," I said, "that the Japanese do not put sugar in their green tea. But I'd like to put some sugar in my green tea." (Laughter) Surprised by my insistence, the waiter took up the issue with the manager. Pretty soon, a lengthy discussion ensued, and finally the manager came over to me and said, "I am very sorry. We do not have sugar." (Laughter) Well, since I couldn't have my tea the way I wanted it, I ordered a cup of coffee, which the waiter brought over promptly. Resting on the saucer were two packets of sugar.

My failure to procure myself a cup of sweet, green tea was not due to a simple misunderstanding. This was due to a fundamental difference in our ideas about choice. From my American perspective, when a paying customer makes a reasonable request based on her preferences, she has every right to have that request met. The American way, to quote Burger King, is to "have it your way," because, as Starbucks says, "happiness is in your choices." (Laughter) But from the Japanese perspective, it's their duty to protect those who don't know any better -- (Laughter) in this case, the ignorant gaijin -- from making the wrong choice. Let's face it: the way I wanted my tea was inappropriate according to cultural standards, and they were doing their best to help me save face.

Americans tend to believe that they've reached some sort of pinnacle in the way they practice choice. They think that choice as seen through the American lens best fulfills an innate and universal desire for choice in all humans. Unfortunately, these beliefs are based on assumptions that don't always hold true in many countries, in many cultures. At times they don't even hold true at America's own borders. I'd like to discuss some of these assumptions and the problems associated with them. As I do so, I hope you'll start thinking about some of your own assumptions and how they were shaped by your backgrounds.

First assumption: if a choice affects you, then you should be the one to make it. This is the only way to ensure that your preferences and interests will be most fully

accounted for. It is essential for success. In America, the primary locus of choice is the individual. People must choose for themselves, sometimes sticking to their guns, regardless of what other people want or recommend. It's called "being true to yourself." But do all individuals benefit from taking such an approach to choice? Mark Lipper and I did a series of studies in which we sought the answer to this very question. In one study, which we ran in Japantown, San Francisco, we brought seven- to nine-year-old Anglo- and Asian-American children into the laboratory, and we divided them up into three groups.

The first group came in, and they were greeted by Miss Smith, who showed them six big piles of anagram puzzles. The kids got to choose which pile of anagrams they would like to do. And they even got to choose which marker they would write their answers with. When the second group of children came in, they were brought to the same room, shown the same anagrams, but this time Miss Smith told them which anagrams to do and which markers to write their answers with. Now when the third group came in, they were told that their anagrams and their markers had been chosen by their mothers. (Laughter) In reality, the kids who were told what to do, whether by Miss Smith or their mothers, were actually given the very same activity, which their counterparts in the first group had freely chosen.

With this procedure, we were able to ensure that the kids across the three groups all did the same activity, making it easier for us to compare performance. Such small differences in the way we administered the activity yielded striking differences in how well they performed. Anglo-Americans, they did two and a half times more anagrams when they got to choose them, as compared to when it was chosen for them by Miss Smith or their mothers. It didn't matter who did the choosing, if the task was dictated by another, their performance suffered. In fact, some of the kids were visibly embarrassed when they were told that their mothers had been consulted. (Laughter) One girl named Mary said, "You asked my mother?"

(Laughter)

In contrast, Asian-American children performed best when they believed their mothers had made the choice, second best when they chose for themselves, and least well when it had been chosen by Miss Smith. A girl named Natsumi even approached Miss Smith as she was leaving the room and tugged on her skirt and asked, "Could you please tell my mommy I did it just like she said?" The first-generation children were strongly influenced by their immigrant parents' approach to choice. For them, choice was not just a way of defining and asserting their individuality, but a way to create community and harmony by differing to the choices of people whom they trusted and respected. If they had a concept of being true to one's self, then that self, most likely, composed, not of an individual, but of a collective. Success was just as much about pleasing key figures as it was about

satisfying one's own preferences. Or, you could say that the individual's preferences were shaped by the preferences of specific others.

The assumption then that we do best when the individual self chooses only holds when that self is clearly divided from others. When, in contrast, two or more individuals see their choices and their outcomes as intimately connected, then they may amplify one another's success by turning choosing into a collective act. To insist that they choose independently, might actually compromise both their performance and their relationships. Yet that is exactly what the American paradigm demands. It leaves little room for interdependence or an acknowledgment of individual fallibility. It requires that everyone treat choice as a private and self-defining act. People that have grown up in such a paradigm might find it motivating. But it is a mistake to assume that everyone thrives under the pressure of choosing alone.

The second assumption which informs the American view of choice goes something like this. The more choices you have, the more likely you are to make the best choice. So bring it on Walmart with 100,000 different products, Amazon with 27 million books and Match.com with -- what is it? -- 15 million date possibilities now. You will surely find the perfect match. Let's test this assumption by heading over to Eastern Europe. Here, I interviewed people who were residents of formerly communist countries, who had all faced the challenge of transitioning to a more democratic and capitalistic society. One of the most interesting revelations came not from an answer to a question, but from a simple gesture of hospitality. When the participants arrived for their interview I offered them a set of drinks, Coke, Diet Coke, Sprite -- seven, to be exact.

During the very first session, which was run in Russia, one of the participants made a comment that really caught me off guard. "Oh, but it doesn't matter. It's all just soda. That's just one choice." (Murmuring) I was so struck by this comment that from then on I started to offer all the participants those seven sodas. And I asked them, "How many choices are these?" Again and again, they perceived these seven different sodas, not as seven choices, but as one choice: soda or no soda. When I put out juice and water in addition to these seven sodas, now they perceived it as only three choices -- juice, water and soda. Compare this to the die-hard devotion of many Americans, not just to a particular flavor of soda, but to a particular brand. You know, research shows repeatedly that we can't actually tell the difference between Coke and Pepsi. Of course, you and I know that Coke is the better choice.

(Laughter)

For modern Americans who are exposed to more options and more ads associated with options than anyone else in the world, choice is just as much about who they are as it is about what the product is. Combine this with the assumption that more

choices are always better, and you have a group of people for whom every little difference matters and so every choice matters. But for Eastern Europeans, the sudden availability of all these consumer products on the marketplace was a deluge. They were flooded with choice before they could protest that they didn't know how to swim. When asked, "What words and images do you associate with choice?" Gregors from Warsaw said, "Ah, for me it is fear. There are some dilemmas you see. I am used to no choice." Boudin from Kiev said, in response to how he felt about the new consumer marketplace, "It is too much. We do not need everything that is there." A sociologist from the Warsaw Survey Agency explained, "The older generation jumped from nothing to choice all around them. They were never given a change to learn how to react." And Thomas, a young Polish man said, "I don't need twenty kinds of chewing gum. I don't mean to say that I want no choice, but many of these choices are quite artificial."

In reality, many choices are between things that are not that much different. The value of choice depends on our ability to perceive differences between the options. Americans train their whole lives to play "spot the difference." The practice this from such an early age that they've come to believe that everyone must be born with this ability. In fact, though all humans share a basic need and desire for choice, we don't all see choice in the same places or to the same extent. When someone can't see how one choice is unlike another, or when there are too many choices to compare and contrast, the process of choosing can be confusing and frustrating. Instead of making better choices, we become overwhelmed by choice, sometimes even afraid of it. Choice no longer offers opportunities, but imposes constraints. It's not a marker of liberation, but of suffocation by meaningless minutiae. In other words, choice can develop into the very opposite of everything it represents in America when it is thrust upon those who are insufficiently prepared for it. But it is not only other people in other places that are feeling the pressure of ever-increasing choice. Americans themselves are discovering that unlimited choice seems more attractive in theory than in practice.

We all have physical, mental and emotional limitations that make it impossible for us to process every single choice we encounter, even in the grocery store, let alone over the course of our entire lives. A number of my studies have shown that when you give people 10 or more options when they're making a choice, they make poorer decisions, whether it be health care, investment, other critical areas. Yet still, many of us believe that we should make all our own choices and seek out even more of them.

This brings me to the third, and perhaps most problematic assumption: "You must never say no to choice." To examine this, let's go back to the U.S. and then hop across the pond to France. Right outside Chicago, a young couple, Susan and Daniel Mitchell, were about to have their first baby. They'd already picked out a name for

her, Barbara, after her grandmother. One night, when Susan was seven months pregnant, she started to experience contractions and was rushed to the emergency room. The baby was delivered through a C-section, but Barbara suffered cerebral anoxia, a loss of oxygen to the brain. Unable to breathe on her own, she was put on a ventilator. Two days later, the doctors gave the Mitchells a choice. They could either remove Barbara off the life support, in which case she would die within a matter of hours, or they could keep her on life support, in which case she might still die within a matter of days. If she survived, she would remain in a permanent vegetative state, never able to walk, talk or interact with others. What did they do? What do any parent do?

In a study I conducted with Simona Botti and Kristina Orfali, American and French parents were interviewed. They had all suffered the same tragedy. In all cases, the life support was removed, and the infants had died. But there was a big difference. In France, the doctors decided whether and when the life support would be removed, while in the United States, the final decision rested with the parents. We wondered: does this have on how the parents cope with the loss of their loved one? We found that it did. Even up to a year later, American parents were more likely to express negative emotions, as compared to their French counterparts. French parents were more likely to say things like, "Noah was here for so little time, but he taught us so much. He gave us a new perspective on life."

American parents were more likely to say things like, "What if? What if?" Another parent complained, "I feel as if they purposefully tortured me. How did they get me to do that?" And another parent said, "I feel as if I've played a role in an execution." But when the American parents were asked if they would rather have had the doctors make the decision, they all said, "No." They could not imagine turning that choice over to another, even though having made that choice made them feel trapped, guilty, angry. In a number of cases they were even clinically depressed. These parents could not contemplate giving up the choice, because to do so would have gone contrary to everything they had been taught and everything they had come to believe about the power and purpose of choice.

In her essay, "The White Album," Joan Didion writes, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We live in entirely by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the idea with which we learn to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience." The story Americans tell, the story upon which the American dream depends is the story of limitless choice. This narrative promises so much: freedom, happiness, success. It lays the world at your feet and says, "You can have anything, everything." It's a great story, and it's understandable why they would be reluctant to revise it. But when you take a close look, you start to see the holes, and you start to see that the story can be told in many other ways.

Americans have so often tried to disseminate their ideas of choice, believing that they will be, or ought to be, welcomed with open hearts and minds. But the history books and the daily news tell us it doesn't always work out that way. The phantasmagoria, the actual experience that we try to understand and organize through narrative, varies from place to place. No single narrative serves the needs of everyone everywhere. Moreover, Americans themselves could benefit from incorporating new perspectives into their own narrative, which has been driving their choices for so long.

Robert Frost once said that, "It is poetry that is lost in translation." This suggests that whatever is beautiful and moving, whatever gives us a new way to see, cannot be communicated to those who speak a different language. But Joseph Brodsky said that, "It is poetry that is gained in translation," suggesting that translation can be a creative, transformative act. When it comes to choice, we have far more to gain than to lose by engaging in the many translations of the narratives. Instead of replacing one story with another, we can learn from and revel in the many versions that exist and the many that have yet to be written. No matter where we're from and what your narrative is, we all have a responsibility to open ourselves up to a wider array of what choice can do, and what it can represent. And this does not lead to a paralyzing moral relativism. Rather, it teaches us when and how to act. It brings us that much closer to realizing the full potential of choice, to inspiring the hope and achieving the freedom that choice promises but doesn't always deliver. If we learn to speak to one another, albeit through translation, then we can to see choice in all its strangeness, complexity and compelling beauty.

Thank you.

(Applause)

Bruno Giussani: Thank you. Sheena, there is a detail about your biography that we have not written in the program book. But by now it's evident to everyone in this room. You're blind. And I guess one of the questions on everybody's mind is: How does that influence your study of choosing, because that's an activity that for most people is associated with visual inputs like aesthetics and color and so on?

Sheena Iyengar: Well, it's funny that you should ask that, because one of the things that's interesting about being blind is you actually get a different vantage point when you observe the way sighted people make choices. And as you just mentioned, there's lots of choices out there that are very visual these days. Yeah, I - as you would expect -- get pretty frustrated by choices like what nail polish to put on, because I have to rely on what other people suggest. And I can't decide. And so one time I was in a beauty salon, and I was trying to decide between two very light

shades of pink. And one was called "Ballet Slippers." And the other one was "Adorable." (Laughter) And so I asked these two ladies. And the one lady told me, "Well, you should definitely wear 'Ballet Slippers.'" "Well, what does it look like?" "Well, it's a very elegant shade of pink." "Okay, great." The other lady tells me to wear "Adorable." "What does it look like?" "It's a glamorous shade of pink." And so I asked them, "Well, how do I tell them apart? What's different about them?" And they said, "Well, one is elegant, the other one's glamorous." Okay, we got that. And the only thing they had consensus on: well, if I could see them, I would clearly be able to tell them apart.

(Laughter)

And what I wondered was whether they were being affected by the name or the contents of the color. So I decided to do a little experiment. So I brought these two bottles of nail polish into the laboratory, and I stripped the labels off. And I brought women into the laboratory, and I asked them, "Which one would you pick?" 50 percent of the women accused me of playing a trick, of putting the same color nail polish in both those bottles. (Laughter) (Applause) At which point you start to wonder who the trick's really played on. Now of the women that could tell them apart, when the labels were off, they picked "Adorable," and when the labels were on they picked "Ballet Slippers." So as far as I can tell, a rose by any other name probably does look different and maybe even smells different.

BG: Thank you. Sheena Iyengar. Thank you Sheena.