Joseph Chehouri

The Personality of Personality:
My Experience Bridging the Gap of Time

[Abstract] “What makes me, me? More so, what differentiates you and I?” I began to ask myself these questions at an early age, I wanted answers. I wanted to know. How we understand the world is not dictated by some predetermined set of values, but is, as the philosopher John Locke argues, determined by our sensory experience of people, places, and events. Accordingly, my first trip to Lebanon, Lebanon, as a youth, affected the way I see the world today, and even the way I taste it. In sharp contrast with Denver living, the fast-paced Lebanese lifestyle made a lasting impression on my personality. This piece prompts readers to discover the experiences central in shaping their own personality. []

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It was the oppressively hot midday sun that clouded my vision, not the beads of sweat that were slowly trickling from my hair down my temples and into my eyes. As I stepped out from the shade of a local soda shop into the bustling marketplace of Saida’s old district, the souk, it donned on me that this new cultural landscape resembled nothing of my native Denver. I made my way through the sweltering doldrums of meat and vegetable vendors, letting the scents of fresh soaps and olive oils overtake my senses. I pushed onwards through the souk, dusty, with patches of sunlight seeping into forgotten corners of alleys; alleys left only to the weary cats and travelers, both trying to momentarily escape the clamor. The vendors constantly preaching their produce to passersby, yellah khiar, yellah kousa, yellah batata,
would not let me forget that a shopping experience here was incomparable to the micromanaged and pristine isles of King Sooper’s back in Colorado.

Turning down the summons of sellers to purchase a sweet, a *bon bon* or two, I finally reached the docks of the local port. Taking a moment to rest my overtaxed senses by closing my eyes, I heard for the first time the call to prayer blaring from a nearby minaret. Reopening my eyes, I looked across the water while the smell of fried fish gently reminded me that I had yet to escape the sea of street peddlers I thought I had left behind. I watched the fishing boats take off, bouncing somewhat clumsily atop the mild waves of the Mediterranean, their Lebanese flags proudly waving goodbye to the wonderful chaos of the old port and all of its markets, in search of a breath of fresh air and possibly some tuna in the open sea. Feeling a tap on the shoulder I turned to see my dad beckon me towards my own “private yacht,” complete with a red and white striped vinyl canopy and chipped, blue painted benches that had seen better days. The fittingly sun-burnt “captain” acknowledged us with a slight nod. A black cloud of exhaust sputtered from the engine and we were off.

The answers to my opening questions aren’t in a book. Nor are they in a whole library. They are found in the tangible world of our existence. How we understand the world is not dictated by some predetermined set of values, but is, as the philosopher John Locke argues, determined by our sensory experience of people, places, and events. The sight of a boat bouncing clumsily atop the waves, the sound of a chaotic market, the smell of frying fish, the taste and texture of a *bon bon*, all determine the way we come to represent these objects in our minds. These distinct representations then determine the way we interact with one and other and the environment. Although we could both have the exact same experience, the different way we two perceive it uniquely affects our personality. Thus, the empirical experiences of our past end up shaping the way we experience life in the present. My first trip to *Libnan*, Lebanon, as a youth, continues to affect the way I see the world today, and even the way I taste it. The gustatory grandeur of the *souk* gave me an appreciation for appetite, and a love of food and cooking, that will always remain with me.
Last week as I ambled shoes in-hand into the kitchen from out-back, I was greeted by the savory scent of simmering stew, and the unmistakably exciting crackle of olive oil working its way into freshly picked yellow squash. These aromas, products of an age-old cooking tradition, have a particular personal effect on me. I stopped. Put my shoes down. Then peered into the pot and sampled the ingredients. They are simple. Jute-plant, freshly diced lamb, minced garlic cloves, and fresh squeezed lemon. However, harmonizing together they create, moloukhia, a perfect ensemble that invites everyone to remember.

*Moloukhia* provokes a different memory for each family member. For my dad, it begs him to remember growing up in Lebanon. For my mom, possibly her early encounters with my dad’s cooking, where she was first introduced to Lebanese culture. For my younger brother, spinach stew with a different name. But, for me the dish tempts me to recall my first trip to Lebanon and the *souk* as a kid. It awakens the vivid memories of peddlers preaching their produce to passersby. It leads me through the marketplace, where chefs, mom’s and grandma’s alike go to purchase its ingredients. *Moloukhia* invites me to recall dinner time on my grandpa’s, ghidou’s, veranda watching the fading sun set over the Mediterranean as the prayer from the minarets grows faint. *Moloulkhia*, is always there to make sure that these memories, unlike the prayers, will never grow faint.

But the real question is, had I not journeyed to Lebanon as a child, what would *moloukhia* remind me of today? Had my experiences in the Orient never occurred, maybe my perceptions of *moloukhia* would mirror my brother’s; simply spinach stew with an exotic ring to it. Would I still appreciate the culinary arts? Would I value the time taken to prepare the dish? A time machine would making answering these questions easier. Maybe. But, they are already easy to answer without spinning backward, through time and space.

John Locke insists our understanding of the world is formed by our sensory experiences with places, people, and events. These specific experiences determine our behavior among others and our environment. They craft our personalities, and define us as individuals. They allow *moloukhia* to represent different ideas to each family member. Hence I answer my initial questions. My experiences in
my father’s homeland unmistakably shaped my personality; who I am, and the way I interact with others today.