

Tanya Domi: Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project, recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences and sciences. In this space we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

This week's guest is Amber Scorah, the acclaimed author of the bestselling memoir, *Leaving the Witness: Exiting a Religion and Finding a Life*. Viking, June 2019. She is also a CUNY BA student who is based at Hunter College. She will be studying psychology of mind control in group dynamics. She is a Thomas Smith Academic Fellow. Welcome to The Thought Project, Amber.

Amber Scorah: Thank you for having me.

Tanya Domi: Congratulations to you for effectively recording traumatic, life altering events through the storytelling and memoir, this genre, that's very challenging. And apparently according to the reviews, you have left many readers and reviewers wanting more.

Indeed, a number of these reviews have called for a second memoir by you. Your book made the top 50 books of Book Riot this summer, for summer reading. How does that make you feel?

Amber Scorah: It's funny for me, and probably extra surprising for me than maybe most writers, in the sense that because of the way I was raised, which is as a Jehovah's Witness, I was taught that the world was ending and that the only thing we should do with our lives was preach.

So growing up and into my adulthood, I never imagined I would do much in this world, because I thought the world was ending. But also because we were discouraged from doing anything other than preaching. So when I finally left the religion and then began to write, to my surprise, I could write a book.

So I think for me, hearing those reviews and hearing people take the subject matter so seriously, is maybe especially in chanting, even more so than for a regular writer.

Tanya Domi: It has to be enthralling too, because you have overcome so much.

Amber Scorah: Yeah. And I think for me, my life has this real split of the before and the after, and writing the book was somehow this way to kind of stitch it back together again. Because my life before, it was unrecognizable compared to the way it is now. It was actually a very moving thing for me to do and it also changed the way that I thought about my past.

Tanya Domi: That makes sense. You made several life altering, if not profound decisions leaving the Jehovah Witness faith. I want to remind people, in China, overseas, and I've lived in 12 countries, worked in 12 countries, so I have some appreciation for just how challenging being overseas, being in a country that's not your own and making the decisions that you made, leaving without money, leaving behind a spouse and your family of origin ultimately, in making this fateful move to leave your faith.

This was a process over time and it is really quite remarkable. How can you describe... You describe it in the book, but for the purposes of our listeners, talk about that process of awakening and realization. It must have been frightening and also somehow you were making a path out.

Amber Scorah: It was funny because I often say that if I hadn't been in China or gone to China, I would have never woken up from the indoctrination I had been born into. And it was that certain amount of cultural disorientation that I'm sure you understand having moved to different countries, that for me set the stage for... It sort of put a wedge into my mind and allowed a means of opening it up to new ideas, to new beliefs, to even questioning my own beliefs.

And yes, as you say, when I did that, it's not something that happened overnight. When the whole fabric of your life is woven by this religious belief, it takes a lot to leave it and not to mention that everyone you know and anyone that you're close to is also in the religion, because that's what we're taught to do, build our lives around it.

It was scary, and it wasn't something that I just woke up one day and walked away from. It took a lot of unraveling bit by bit, and slowly just coming to terms with the fact of not only would I have to leave everything that I knew behind and all of the people that I loved, well, essentially they would leave me behind because I knew that was the cost of leaving, but also to try and figure out now I was already in my 30s, how am I going to live in this world, A, from a practical standpoint, I didn't have a degree.

I didn't really have a career or anything. I had always just mainly preached and worked part-time jobs. So on that level there was a whole set of problems to solve.

Tanya Domi: Just real practical problems.

Amber Scorah: Practical things. But then there was also the kind of existential problems in the sense that I lived my life thinking I was going to live forever in paradise on earth. That it was just a little while longer until I would be able to do everything I had put off, including having children or finding out what my hobbies or interests were, what I was good at.

So suddenly I had to try and figure out how to recalibrate in this way that was really hard and really disorienting, because also didn't really have anyone to guide me. I didn't know anyone in the outside world.

Tanya Domi: Yes, you were alone. You were actually all alone in a third country, no less China, which I find really remarkable. What's so remarkable is that place created space for you to actually go there and reveal yourself to yourself.

Amber Scorah: I know, the irony of it all. Because most people don't think of China as a place where you go to find freedom.

Tanya Domi: Exactly.

Amber Scorah: But a Jehovah's Witness who is used to a very structured, insular life. In any country of the world in which our religion is not illegal, we practice very regimented routines and our community is very tight. China, there was none of that. So it did open up space for me. And also I think the fact that I was-

Tanya Domi: Emotional space, right?

Amber Scorah: Yeah. Emotional space.

Tanya Domi: Emotional and actually intellectual space too.

Amber Scorah: Definitely. And also I think the fact that I was immersed in another language helped too, in the sense that I was thinking differently about the things that I was teaching to people because I was hearing myself say it with a bit of remove, which I had never had before when it's your native tongue.

Tanya Domi: You were witnessing.

Amber Scorah: Yeah.

Tanya Domi: You were witnessing, so double entendre on Jehovah Witness.

Amber Scorah: Exactly.

Tanya Domi: And by the way, just I want you to know and our listeners to know that I grew up in Indiana and I was exposed to and around people who were Jehovah Witnesses, and I always thought they were very strange and very weird and knew how insular they were. And the idea that you would never celebrate your birthday was just so strange to me. So I was familiar before I read this book, not so much about the teachings per se, but about the culture of it.

Amber Scorah: I think that most people that I talk to have some familiarity with Jehovah's Witnesses in the sense that we walk by them in the subway or we have a school classmate from the past that, like you say, was kind of weird and didn't celebrate birthdays. But most people kind of think of them as this sort of like benign quirk, and don't really understand just how controlling the religion actually is, and that it is like this apocalyptic worldview. And that's been something to-

Tanya Domi: Very dire.

Amber Scorah: Yeah, very dire. And that's something that from childhood on when you learn it, it does affect the way that you feel. There's a lot of fear involved in the religion, and that fear is only resolvable by staying with the group. So it has quite an intense hold on people.

Tanya Domi: So therefore the decision to leave could be perceived as really life threatening.

Amber Scorah: Yeah, and that's how it felt. But I got to a point where it was too uncomfortable for me to stay, because I had moral problems with some of the beliefs. I still thought at that time that by walking away I was essentially losing my life, because I still kind of thought that it had to be true. That was the only thing I had known as truth. And so it took a while for me to slowly deprogram and realize like, "No, the world isn't ending or at least not in the way that I think it's ending."

Tanya Domi: So that life did die though. It did die.

Amber Scorah: Yeah.

Tanya Domi: And you're like a phoenix, you've risen from the ashes of the death of that life. I would just say to you that as an outsider, I mean I'm also very familiar with fundamentalism in terms of theology, and it comes from being gay and being around people that have been thrown out of their homes for coming out being gay, and about how religion treats those who are gay.

And so leaving the Jehovah Witness sounds to me like leaving Muslim Wahhabi faith, or extreme Orthodox Judaism faiths, and sometimes in Judaism, not progressive Judaism, certainly not. But in the extreme sects where people actually sit shivah, meaning that you have died when your child came out. So I'm perfectly familiar with all of that.

So major kudos to you. But you also had an inkling, didn't you, of some of the consequences given how the Jehovah Witness viewed people who may have strayed or people who engaged in extramarital sex and things like that?

Amber Scorah: Yes, because at our meetings and in our publications, we were constantly warned, first and foremost, about apostates being, as you say, people who have left. Yes, it is a death of sorts for sure. People treat you kind of like you're dead. They don't talk to you anymore when you leave, especially for this reason, non-belief.

But it goes beyond that in the sense that the organization really vilifies people who leave. They have all kinds of terms that they use to describe people like me, like mentally diseased, gangrene that needs to be cut off, dogs that have returned to their vomit, all kinds of really negative-

Tanya Domi: Really gross and negative.

Amber Scorah: Yeah, gross. So what it does serves to do is not only are you sort of dead to the people who left you behind, but you're also kind of scary. So even though they could reach out to the other side, they're too afraid to, because they're worried that you might be like Satan and break their faith too, which would mean-

Tanya Domi: So in other words, they make sure you're not a threat.

Amber Scorah: Yeah. That's how they-

Tanya Domi: They completely, I would say, defame you.

Amber Scorah: Yeah, exactly. But, yeah, I understood it because I had done it to people before. I knew someone who had left when I was a Jehovah's Witness, and because that was my entire world and my belief system and I was afraid and I was taught to be afraid, I cut people off. Because for us, the most important thing was that we get eternal life. And the cost of people falling by the wayside was sad, but-

Tanya Domi: Was not as-

Amber Scorah: ... collateral damage.

Tanya Domi: Right. Collateral damage. So you ended up staying in China.

Amber Scorah: For a while, yeah.

Tanya Domi: Talk about that. What was that experience like? I mean there you are, trying to figure your way out, and you're in China. There's probably... Seems like there were a number of expats around that you could talk to and establish relationships with them. I thought the incident that you had with your bicycle was a very interesting one.

Do you want to talk about that for a second? I mean that's just like dealing with everyday life. I mean I don't think sometimes people realize that when you go and live somewhere else there's a thing, so I would always refer to in my own personal experience, as cultural meltdowns. Where the bicycle became this standoff you had with with a woman who lived on that block.

Amber Scorah: China's fascinating in the sense that a lot of younger people especially, are really interested in foreigners and they want to be foreigner's friends, which made preaching kind of a really easy job there. But then on the other hand, there are of course people who are like, "What are you doing here?" And aren't interested in having foreigners taking up space on their bicycle street parking lot.

So, yeah, I did encounter a woman in Shanghai who I parked my bike and she was upset about it, and essentially started to yell at me. And then I had lived there a long time by then, so I kind of knew the rules and I knew how to speak Chinese.

Tanya Domi: You were negotiating the culture.

Amber Scorah: I was negotiating, yeah. There was something going inside of me where I had already left the religion by this point mentally and I was tired of being told what to do and I think I was just, I don't know...

Tanya Domi: You were resistant.

Amber Scorah: I was resisting.

Tanya Domi: It was interesting that you spoke to the police officer too.

Amber Scorah: Yeah, so she-

Tanya Domi: I mean she's trying to figure it out legally.

Amber Scorah: Well, the problem is like she threw my bike on the road. So I was like, "I don't think that's allowed." And then it turned into a whole thing. And then, yeah, the police officer came. I mean it's a funny story, but this is the thing about living in China, it is a very intense place because there's 20 million people in one city like Shanghai.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, population just-

Amber Scorah: For example to illustrate, when I moved to New York, I thought, "Wow, after a month here, this place is so laid back by comparison."

Tanya Domi: And most people in America would disagree with you about that.

Amber Scorah: Even now I think I've tempered on that view. But by comparison it was. That's the thing about China, in a sense it was a good place to start over, because there are so many people, as you say, expats who are in a city like Shanghai, working and open to having new relationships with people or making friends who are different than them. But also because, an even among the local Chinese people, a lot of people, for example, my best friend who was also my Bible student in the book, Jean, she had come from one of the provinces for work in Shanghai.

And she was kind of in the same boat too in the sense that she was Chinese, but away from her family, had moved and started a new life. So it was kind of like I felt like a friendly environment to start over in.

Tanya Domi: And you had the space to do it.

Amber Scorah: Yeah. And also because I think if I were at home I would be facing a lot more pressure from my community and family-

Tanya Domi: And from your family of origin.

Amber Scorah: ... to come back in. In China I just sort of disappeared into the 20 million people.

Tanya Domi: So you didn't really have to face a lot of pressure from your family of origin?

Amber Scorah: Not really.

Tanya Domi: So you were in China and you were trying to figure out your life, and when did you begin to make plans to come back?

Amber Scorah: Let me think. It was a slow process, but I knew pretty early on after leaving the religion that I would have to leave China, which in a way, looking back now, I don't know if it was the best decision, but I was already 33 years old and I thought I need to get on with my life and figure out what I was doing.

Tanya Domi: You had a sense of urgency.

Amber Scorah: Yeah. And so I started to look at schools and I tried to start an import export business at some point, tried to find some way to make it work within the framework of what I had to offer. Because what I didn't have to offer, as I said, was an education, some sort of cohesive career path.

I did however have this very successful podcast, which was kind of crazy and happened in a really strange way, and that was something that eventually became a bridge for me to move to New York.

Tanya Domi: Yes. This podcast was Dear Amber, the Insider's Guide to Everything China.

Amber Scorah: That's right.

Tanya Domi: How fascinating to come there thinking you are going to preach and you end up posting a podcast.

Amber Scorah: And also that was when podcasting first started. So it was a very new medium.

Tanya Domi: So you were cutting edge.

Amber Scorah: Yeah, but I always liked radio and when as a kid I used to play with microphones, so it seemed like a natural fit looking back.

Tanya Domi: That makes sense. And here we are-

Amber Scorah: Yes, in the studio.

Tanya Domi: ... in the studio of CUNY TV in The Thought Project, one of the hottest podcasts in CUNY.

Amber Scorah: Amazing. Look how far I've come.

Tanya Domi: Yes, listen, happiness. So this life, it's an incredible life. You have this sense of urgency, you're 33, you probably want to get going, but you discover and think about happiness, which I found to be really interesting and I want to read if I can.

Amber Scorah: Sure.

Tanya Domi: So you ask in the book, "Had I been happier before I left my religion or now? I thought that I might've been happier than C. I could hear my old witness friends saying it was easier then and I was not unhappy now. Is happiness the currency of a life? The kind of happiness had been like a salve that shielded me from some of what it is to be human. Of course it is also human to crave happiness, and the easiest way to achieve it is through self-deception. It is also human to be lazy."

So here you are in your thinking about happiness. And I thought, "Good for her." I was cheering you on. And you not only talk about happiness and about the less obvious road to happiness, which you say, "I had noticed seemed to be a

relative of suffering. And though I had not wanted all this suffering, all of this loss, it was surprising to me that this suffering had a byproduct. The presence of pain had somehow bred me into becoming a more compassionate, just, creature."

And I thought, "Good for her again," because when we experience pain, we don't always become more compassionate. Sometimes we really lash out at others. And so you had this moment of really like probing and meditating on what it meant to be happy and to be grateful too. I find that a remarkable act of wisdom through pain.

Amber Scorah: Thank you. I think that suffering can teach us these lessons. And then maybe for me too, a lot of what forms the way that I think is the fact that I literally thought that I was going to live forever, and then I was confronted with my mortality. And I think, I say this as related to what you just read, in the sense that, yes, I have felt angry. Yes, I have felt bitter about losing so much of my life to something that I was raised in and found out it wasn't true.

But I just felt this sense of I can't waste time on that, on those emotions, because they will just rob me of more time. So in a sense, it wasn't that I didn't ever feel those things, but I chose to turn them around and focus on you have to be gratitude.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, well you have to be conscious. You're consciously making a choice, which is also a sign of wisdom.

Amber Scorah: Thank you.

Tanya Domi: Very, very much so. So I also want to say, just an observation, because of course this isn't necessarily specific to the book completely, but the fact is it would seem that the worst of what you have experienced, the decision to leave a religion, a way of life, a husband, and surviving all of that, living in China, hosting a podcast, creating a new life in New York City, only to experience what just must have been horrific to return to work and take your baby to the daycare.

The way you described that in the New York Times is absolutely mind blowing. And of course, you know what's going to happen as you're describing going to the daycare center on the first day that you returned to work.

Amber Scorah: Yeah. And just to fill in the listeners that my son died that first day in childcare. And, yes, after that happened, I mean obviously I was in a lot of shock and trauma, but I do remember at some point in those early days thinking "What? How could this happen? Like how could one more bad thing happen?" Somehow I had this sense when I got out of the religion and lost so much and then finally got my life somewhat on track, that there was some sort of like... There must be some quota filled that things are going to be good now.

And then things became worse. The loss became more horrendous than I could have imagined ever possible for anyone, let alone me who had already lost so much.

Tanya Domi: Exactly. So I just want to know because having all of us go through really strife and challenge and loss and exodus, I don't think there's anybody in this world that doesn't experience pain. Being in the human body is part of experiencing pain. What enabled you to go on to literally just get up in the morning and make coffee?

Amber Scorah: At first I couldn't. It was only because there were people around me who showed me love and support and just walked me through it. One thing that did help a lot was that one woman who had also lost her child in Oklahoma, the same way, reached out to me and it was within the first few days.

Tanya Domi: Wow.

Amber Scorah: Knowing that someone else in the world had been through it and survived it, for me was probably in those early days the only thing that kept me going, because it felt unsurvivable.

Tanya Domi: What a generous act by this woman.

Amber Scorah: Yes. Later she would go on to become my partner in advocacy work. She was Republican. I'm about to become American actually, but at the time I considered myself liberal but couldn't even vote. But we started at parental leave campaign, bi-partisan together, because we had both suffered this loss in the same way because we had left our children so young when we hadn't wanted to. But we couldn't afford to lose our jobs, so we had gone back to work.

Tanya Domi: Right. This is an increasing issue and there's four states now where parents get parental leave, New York being one of them now, and California was the first. New Jersey and one other jurisdiction, and it escapes me at this moment. But absolutely, I think it should be on the front burner of the presidential campaign.

Now I just do want to back up for a moment. I have to say, I also read in the book that just completely captivated my fascination was that you saw and envisioned yourself being in New York City. That you thought that was the best city in the world.

Amber Scorah: Yeah.

Tanya Domi: And just so you know, I immediately thought of E. B. White when I read that, because he wrote, as you know, the greatest essay ever about New York. And as

a little girl myself, I always thought that destination was Washington D.C., because I was in politics.

Amber Scorah: Interesting.

Tanya Domi: But New York was my destination. And I was like, "Right on." How did you come to that? Why did New York capture your imagination?

Amber Scorah: I don't know. I think I was a total idiot, because I'm not American. I'm Canadian. So the idea that I thought I could just move here, start a new life. However, I feel that like perhaps on some level, I had been to New York once before right after 9/11 actually, and I'd only been here for maybe five days, but it was a place that I just felt I belonged. And from childhood I'd always listened to songs about New York. Was that like Christopher Cross?

Tanya Domi: [inaudible 00:25:39].

Amber Scorah: All those songs really spoke to me-

Tanya Domi: Those are great songs.

Amber Scorah: ... and little kids in books that would be on their fire escapes. So I think that it was some dream that I had, and it felt like a place I could belong. And I think because I had lost everything, I felt I had nothing to lose.

Now secondary to that was that maybe on some subliminal level I knew that New York in a way was a place for people to start over, and although New York proved to be a very difficult place to start over in some ways, in other ways it's not that bad because you don't need a car.

Tanya Domi: That's right.

Amber Scorah: You just got to rent a room.

Tanya Domi: That's right.

Amber Scorah: A lot of people here are open to making new friends, because they are new here too. You could even be quite... Like for me I didn't have much money, but as long as you have cheap rent, you can live cheaply if you just eat like pizza for a while.

Tanya Domi: True.

Amber Scorah: So I guess in that sense too, it called to me.

Tanya Domi: There's an anonymity here too, that can be sometimes very comforting.

Amber Scorah: Yeah. It's a place where people start over, and I mean I didn't have big dreams and think that I could make it in this town by any means. But to me just being able to get there and live in New York was making it, compared to what I had come from, from the former ambitions I had had.

Tanya Domi: Sure. After all of this and looking back on all this, and as they say, if you can make it here, Amber, you can make it anywhere. It seems like you've planted your flag. What has surprised you the most about making this exodus and creating this new life? What surprised you the most? Something you never would have imagined?

Amber Scorah: That's an interesting question. I think if I would speak from my former self, what has surprised me the most is that people out here in the real world are so loving, compassionate. I have friends who are just like family now, and we have to understand why I say this and that, not that the world doesn't have its flaws and problems, but when I was a Jehovah's Witness, I was taught that the world is evil and cold and will chew you up and spit you out.

And now I have this life where I'm surrounded by really good friends who do feel like family. I've been shown during a very terrible, tragic time in my life, so much love and support even from strangers, from people I know and people I didn't know. I've just come to see that there's so much beauty among all the suffering that is out here, but there's so much good. And I've learned that people can be good... Not being good for the sake of answering to a higher power. They're being good because they choose to be good. Because they want to be good.

Tanya Domi: Because they're intrinsically good people.

Amber Scorah: Yeah. And they want to make a difference in the world. And when you live in this sort of fundamentalist religion, you're very much of the time thinking you're so good and holy, but you're kind of checked out. You don't really care about the world's problems because you think God's going to fix everything.

So being in a place like New York where people are so involved and people care and they are active in the community, that for me has been really wonderful and a real revelation compared to the viewpoint that I was raised with.

Tanya Domi: Thank you so much for coming here today. But before we go, I want to remind listeners that Amber will be giving a book talk at CUNY BA on September 11th at 7:00 PM in the Elebash Hall at the Graduate Center at CUNY. Go to the CUNY BA website at cunyba.edu for more information. And I want you to come back when you write that second book.

This transcript was exported on Oct 11, 2019 - view latest version [here](#).

Amber Scorah: Thank you. I would love to.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning into The Thought Project, and thanks to today's guest, Amber Scorah, A CUNY BA student who is based at Hunter College.

The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering, and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman. I'm telling Tanya Domi, tune in next week.