



Joanna Sell - Who could empower with your story? Beyond Storytelling.

Dear Joanna what is your story? Better said, what are your stories? You, as a trainer, human being, mother and woman? We will appreciate if you share with us the essential moments of your life.

I grew up in Poland in two contradictory stories – the one of the value of freedom, value of learning foreign languages and value of getting to know different cultures versus the story of the communistic regime, focused on limiting the perception of the world to the reality behind the iron curtain. The first narrative dominated all discussions home, the second one – propaganda media, school and the outside world. I still remember my cousins and me sitting with our moms and grandmothers at a round table at one of the family reunions arguing that there was no point in learning any foreign languages as we did not host any guests from abroad and were not allowed to travel except for the Eastern European countries. All adults were desperate realizing how strong the impact of the brainwash in the schooling system and media was. My cousins and me grew up in these contradictory stories and struggled facing obvious lies, injustice and paranoid decisions made by the socialist government, even though back then we were young teenagers. Once during history lesson I managed to make my history teacher speechless when I commented the tense economic situation in my country: “If Poland had accepted the Marshall Plan after World War II we would not have such a miserable economy now.” I said. She replied with a frozen smile: “I am glad you know about the Marshall Plan, Joanna. Nevertheless, we are run out of time to discuss it, but come after the lesson, please.” When I approached her after the course, she said: “Do not share facts like that with your peers, please. You have got good luck that the system is changing now and your family does not get any troubles because of your comments.” It was 1989.

Now, 30 years later I am thrilled that my own kids do not have to deal with living in two contradictory stories. Learning foreign languages is obvious to them as we host guests from abroad often and travel whenever time permits. Facts in their history books at school and in the news do not vary from those they hear home and they enjoy the freedom of speech and the active engagement in discussions and political statements, for instance while participating in Fridays for Freedom demonstrations.

When I look back at the beginning of my activities as an intercultural trainer and coach I need to smile. Back in early 2000s, I moved to Strasbourg to complete an internship at the TV channel ARTE, as part of my “European Studies” master program. That was the beginning of my adventure with the intercultural communication in the working context. Prior, I was in the intercultural field due to my studies. Nevertheless, it is much different to communicate across cultures when you simply need to complete projects at the university, than when you need to deliver good results at work. I noticed that despite ARTE German and French employees spoke the same languages, they used completely different “cultural codes”. The worlds of obviousness in both countries varied a lot and I merged in those two “realities” with curiosity and passion to learn something new. Back then, the European Union was blossoming, planning the greatest enlargement in its history – accepting ten new members in 2004, among them my country, Poland. I still recall the enthusiasm and hope omnipresent in Western and Eastern European countries.

Now, 15 years later we are facing much different political atmosphere; BREXIT, rise of populist parties in different European countries, above all in the former Eastern Block and discussions regarding bringing back

borders between different countries to control refugee streams. It is not the same Europe we believed in. Currently we need new hope and faith that this tiny continent can be “reunited” and that Europeans can show hospitality, instead of hostility towards people in need. That is the reason why I decided to focus on storytelling. As only by sharing stories, we are able to better understand one another and practice meaning making in the world dominated by an overwhelming number of facts and data. Thanks to sharing stories, we can identify what we should do to initiate hope in better futures and take action.

Why did you decide to focus your main activities on storytelling? What can you tell us?

Focusing on storytelling in the intercultural field above all, should minimize the danger of a single story. We generalize and use stereotypes based on the “leading narrative” as long as we get to know a variety of new, sometimes contradictory stories told from different perspectives. It enriches our perception and minimizes the danger of sticking to stereotypes and, what is even more dangerous, forming prejudices.

Just to give you an example: I have just returned from a storytelling project in Kuala Lumpur. My dream of sharing my experiences in various places across the globe came true because of my dear friend who comes originally from Malaysia and who invited me to this beautiful corner of the world. I was told that Chinese learners are used to the “top-down teaching methods” and had many interesting chats with my friend on how to design our learning journey for Malaysian Chinese. We decided to apply many interactive methods and activities in small groups so that the participants of our program could exchange their experiences, listen to one another’s stories and co-create new stories for purposes of their company. To our surprise, our participants got immediately involved in vivid exchange of stories and truly enjoyed co-creating stories to be presented in the plenary in the afternoon. The stereotype of top-down teaching remained true only in one situation: when we were asked to give examples of stories to be used as a formula.

To avoid this “wish for copying the given pattern” we introduced the ABC of storytelling, I describe in a chapter on Storytelling in the book, and our Beyond Storytelling network published 2017:

“A – Stands for AUTHENTICITY and the wish to tune in with your audience. Authenticity in the intercultural context is a balance act between “autopilot behaviour” and adaptation to the expectations of the listeners.

B – Stands for BUILDING A RELATIONSHIP, as only this way we are able to establish an atmosphere of trust and respect. It is of crucial importance to identify the listeners’ emotional needs and meet them with integrity.

C – Stands for COURAGE, which lies at the beginning of every powerful story, because while sharing emotions and fears we make ourselves vulnerable.” (For more check Sell, J. (2017). Storytelling for Intercultural Understanding and Intercultural Sensitivity Development in: Chlopczyk, J. (ed.) Beyond Storytelling, Springer Berlin)

Our participants agreed that creating their own stories gives them a much better feeling than “repeating” “ready-made stories”. One of them wrote in the feedback: “It reminded me of doing the right thing”. More impressions from this project may be found on www.interculturalcompass.com/Learning-from-Learners-in-Malaysia

In which way has the storytelling changed you? What are your advices as regards the storytelling? Why trainers should use this tool in their professional and personal life?

Re-authoring my own story and stories of my German husband’s family and my Polish ancestors gave me a real boost to work with stories in the intercultural field. Going through this process of exchanging powerful, sometimes painful memories passed in our families from generation to generation, I realized that stories

could function as cultural bridges; they can reconcile and bring back hope in better futures. As for the professional use of stories in the business world, it is not so much about using certain storytelling tools in the intercultural programs. It is rather about promoting a narrative approach, rooted in the belief that the ethics of storytelling is crucial. Whenever people wish to work with stories, they should ask themselves what is their intention to tell a certain story. Does it add value? Does it initiate positive change? Does it feel like call for action to improve human lives? If yes, they definitely should gather all the courage and share their stories with others. If, however, they feel that they wish to manipulate, they should refrain from telling stories. The purpose is as important as the stories themselves.

Would you like to propose another webinar or in-person seminar with SIETAR Italia? If so, what would be the next topic you would discuss? Because, we know, you have many.

I would be happy to offer a workshop on “Storytelling for intercultural leaders”

If you wish to work with stories, I would like to invite you to check out storytelling activities I describe in detail in the book mentioned above. Moreover, I would be happy to work with you with stories at the SIETAR Europa Conference in Leuven at the pre-congress workshop on May 29th and at the workshop “How to facilitate an intercultural workshop with storytelling?”

For more details on storytelling, do not hesitate to listen to the recording of the webinar on storytelling for SIETAR Italia on February 13th, 2019:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=St-tDcPhFJg>

Moreover, if you wish to experiment with storytelling, join our Beyond Storytelling Camp in **June 26th - 29th 2019** in Lingenau, Austria. Details at: <https://www.beyondstorytelling.com>