



SIEBENQUELL

A Story Without a Future



I recently was sorting out some old papers in a box that I still had from the days when I moved to Germany from my native Canada. As I started tossing out the papers with vigor and determination, I came across a program from a conference I had attended over twenty years ago. On the cover was a picture of the keynote speaker, José Hobday. And before I could sit down, a story arose in my heart.

José Hobday was a remarkable woman. In her person many worlds were molded into one dynamic human life. She was a Native American member of the Seneca-Iroquois nation. She was an elder and a storyteller. She was also a Catholic sister of the Franciscan Order.

I had read her book »Stories of Awe and Abundance«. In it she tells many simple stories about discovering God in everyday life. She tells stories about growing up as a Native American woman in the Catholic Church and how her parents taught her how to pray from the deep heart. She tells stories about how she grew into God, and family and community. Now I sat there and listened to her and was utterly entranced. I could have listened to her for hours. During the question and answer period,

one woman rose who obviously felt as I did. She stated that she knew that everyone has a story to tell. What she wondered, was why it was so difficult at times to listen to people tell their stories, when she was now able to listen for over ninety minutes and never once glance at her watch.

Sr. José laughed and then gave a wonderful response. »Everyone has a story to tell, but not everyone knows how to tell a story. There are people who struggle to tell their story. But if they do not find their way, they will get lost in one moment. When they retell the same incident or moment, over and over, and there is no progress, they are lost. The story does not go on. And in the end, no story can stake a claim to our spirit, if it does not go on.«

Since that day, I have listened to thousands of people tell me their stories. It is hard work, because not everyone is a gifted storyteller. Some stories were long winded, some were confusingly vague. There were stories that meandered and yet others took long detours before coming to the point. But the ones that made me sad, were the stories that did not go on. These stories were mere repetitions of one or two episodes out of a much grander and richer story, none of which I ever heard. And there was no progress. It was like reading a book up to chapter 5 and then discovering that the final twenty chapters were all a repeat of chapter 5.

If the storyteller does not care about the ending, what claim can be made on the soul of the listener? No story-listener will make the effort to care and love about something that the storyteller care about and love enough to grant it the gift of progress, development and continuation. A story that does not unfold, has no future.

I have listened to those stories, often for years at a time. Perhaps I hoped a day would come when the story would go on. I recently realised that I had listened to one person's story for over three years, but it had not progressed. Every chapter is the same as the last. Like a mantra, she tells me her life is an endless rollercoaster ride. I gently suggested that she write a chapter about getting off the rollercoaster. The next time we spoke, she has purchased yet another ticket for a roller coaster ride. These are among the saddest moments of a storyteller's life, for we know only too painfully, that where there is no future for the story, there is no future for the heart of the person telling that story.

I finished the job of sorting out the old papers. But this program, I carefully placed back in the box. Everyone has a story to tell, but not everyone knows how to tell a story. All the more reason to cherish the presence and the memory of those who are the grand storytellers of our lives.

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