

# Sophie Wadsworth

Sophie Wadsworth "Storytelling Deconstructed":

*Messaging on a Mission* Podcast

hosted by Douglas Spencer, 2021

[Storytelling Deconstructed with Sophie Wadsworth \(spencerbrenneman.com\)](http://spencerbrenneman.com)

**Sophie Wadsworth:** .... it's our own emotion and feeling and our ability to get close to that that helps us write a story that's compelling and engaging that's going to touch other people.

**Introduction:** What do thriving, mission driven organizations and people like Lady Gaga have in common? They're authentic. They're original. And their message connects with others. Building, sharing, and sticking to your organization's message isn't easy. But hey, not to worry. There's a whole universe of people ready to help. Welcome to Messaging on a Mission. We're here to deliberate and demonstrate the ways compelling messaging helps missions driven organizations thrive in any environment. Now here's your host Douglas Spencer.

**Douglas Spencer:** Hello! It's Douglas Spencer and this is another episode of Messaging on a Mission. Today's episode is a powerful one. Powerful, because the subject is one of the most potent tools any of us have at our disposal for well, any purpose. Storytelling. Here's a great quote about storytelling, "We're so complex. We're mysterious to ourselves. We're difficult to each other. And then storytelling reminds us we're all the same." That was Brad Pitt, clearly not just a "very pretty face".

In this episode we're going to deconstruct the power of storytelling with Sophie Wadsworth.

Sophie has been telling compelling, transformative stories for years and now coaches executives and others on how to make the most of stories they have to tell. After we talk to Sophie, I'll take a stab at telling a story of my own, a very personal one. But first, here's this message.

Sophie Wadsworth is an executive coach, writer, and non-profit consultant. She has a passion for helping mission focused leaders tell their personal and organizational stories. Sophie has worked as an adjunct professor for over fifteen years, served as a nonprofit executive and public speaker. Drawing on her leadership in storytelling experience, she coaches other leaders to develop their stories and craft inspiring communication for keynote audiences, community stakeholders, and prospective funders.

Sophie is the author of a collection of poems *Letters From Syberia* and was recently chosen as a storyteller for WGBH's *Stories from the Stage*, an award-winning world channel series. She has a Bachelor of Arts in history with honors from Trinity College Hartford and a Master of Arts in English from the University of New Mexico.

Well, Sophie, welcome. I am so excited about this conversation.

**Sophie:** Thank you so much for having me, Doug.

**Doug:** Well, before we start to deconstruct the whole art of storytelling, tell us a little story about your journey to being a storyteller.

Sophie: Well, my journey really began as a kid, reading. I was given lots of books about women who are leaders and have adventures off in the wilderness. And I just developed a love of stepping into those other worlds with people and going on their adventures. And then, in my twenties, I learned that a whole lot of my great-grandmother's letters had been saved and she was a great storyteller. So, that captivated me, I ended up writing a collection of poems in her voice telling her stories. By the way, she was from Maine, and immigrated with her husband to Vladivostok, East Siberia, and so the letters are from 30 years, in Siberia.

**Doug:** Wow.

**Sophie:** Yeah, and then as a nonprofit leader I had a chance to tell stories about amazing missions that I've served. Eventually, as I grew as a leader, I figured out how to bring a little more of my own personal experience with our mission and even personal stories into that, storytelling and public speaking.

**Doug:** Tell me more about that evolution. How did you realize or when did you realize that you needed to add more of yourself?

**Sophie:** Well, I think it came about really organically as I longed to get better and better at sharing what the work that we did. I found myself pulling in more detail about the experiences that we had with people who live with disabilities. And I saw the energy

that passes between us and the person we're working with and I said, "Oh, we need to do more of this in our newsletters," and when I'm speaking at conferences and so on. So it was organic and it was fun, because I got to relive the story as I was telling it.

**Doug:** You used a phrase that I thought was really interesting. You said that "Caught the energy between you and the people you were helping." Is that what makes a good story so potent?

**Sophie:** Certainly. It's about an experience the listener shares with the person who's telling the story, that there's something they can relate to there, something about what it is to be human, with all of our failings and our foibles and our joys. That's one of the, I think important starting points for a good story, is that we can relate to it, even if it takes place in another time and place, it's relatable.

**Doug:** So in addition to relatable, what are some of the other important elements of a good story?

**Sophie:** Oh, conflict. There's gotta be a problem, or some desire that pulls people in, so that we are curious about how things unfold. We want to hear the story, what happens next.

**Doug:** Right, it builds some momentum and excitement.

**Sophie:** And I would say one other thing, if I could, Doug, it's important that change happens, and it need not be, you know, radical, drastic, dramatic change, although that is wonderful. It can be that there's an acceptance on the part of someone in the story, but there's a change from the beginning. I think that's important for a story to really have power, is that something evolves, something transforms. They're not the same people at the end.

**Doug:** So a conflict, a change, a resolution, and relatability.

**Sophie:** Yes.

**Doug:** Do you need all three?

**Sophie:** I think you need some element of all three. If the listener can't relate as a storyteller, you're in trouble.

**Doug:** Right.

**Sophie:** If there's no tension or conflict, like a friend of mine says, "I just don't care if the characters live or die." I put the book down. And if there's no change or transformation by the end, it can't be a great story. It can certainly be a story and we can have a philosophical discussion of what a story is, but I think it can't be a great story unless there's transformation and change and it can be in small ways, as I said, it doesn't need to be a grand, epic narrative.

**Doug:** What do people get wrong about storytelling?

**Sophie:** I think one of the things they get wrong in telling a story is they don't give enough detail for us to really feel it and experience it that they speak in these general information terms, but not enough of getting us into the action. Cause we've had the story, so let me say from my own experience, I've experienced the story. So it's very alive to me.

I've felt it in my body I've witnessed it, so it plays in my head like a movie, and yet if I don't share enough with the listeners about how it feels and smells and sounds, they don't get to have that experience. And that's where we get into trouble, I think as storytellers is, it's playing out for us, but we haven't given the listeners enough so they get to have that experience.

**Doug:** Amen. It's, we forget what people don't know. We forget that what goes on in our own heads, not everybody else is privy to, and that's where we get into trouble. Not only in storytelling, but pretty much everywhere in life. We forget that not everybody's in our heads, which for the most part is a good thing.

So we talked before we started, before we, our previous conversation, we talked a little bit about the role of emotion and vulnerability. And you come across a lot of folks that feel uncomfortable, understandably, sharing emotion or sharing a vulnerability in their stories. How do you encourage people to get past that?

**Sophie:** Well, certainly I create a safe space for people to explore, so this is in my work with an individual. We have fun and we're talking as, almost as if we've known each other, just, I say, "Tell me more. Wow. What was that like?" You know, and I think that space, having a listener who's nonjudgmental and curious and enjoying the story, is a big part of it actually, that you need it. It's about audience. You need a listener who cares and is with you. And then I think the next step is honoring what comes up.

I remember working with someone, and for him, it was unfamiliar to go into emotional terrain in thinking about stories of people. He served at his nonprofit and he almost teared up a little bit and stayed with it with me and said, "Oh, well, my partner says, I

don't really go there with emotions, you know. So you're really kind of stretching me a little here, Sophie." And I said, "Let me share a quote with you from a famous poet, from Hearing New England, Robert Frost. 'No tears for the writer, no tears for the reader.'"

And I hold fast to that because it's our own emotion and feeling and our ability to get close to that that helps us write a story that's compelling and engaging and is going to touch other people. And so when he told that story, I got to be at the event, he did move people. I could see the tears in their eyes and that was because he had done the work and been able to be vulnerable.

**Doug:** Yeah, emotion is so, so powerful, and yet, maybe that's one of the reasons we're all kind of scared to death of it, is because it is so powerful. How do you align when you work with an individual like an executive director at an organization, how do you help them align their story with the messaging strategy that their organization has?

**Sophie:** That's a big question. How long do we have here on this podcast? Well, I think all of us are drawn to work that's mission centered out of a personal place. There's something in our life experience in who we are and in the world that we want to live in that's pulling us like a magnet into the work that we do. And so I think the alignment comes partly from knowing your own story and having awareness of what it is that makes you excited about your mission from that personal thread. And I'll speak from my experience that I found as I grew as a leader, I was able to weave in more and more personal stories in staff meetings, in conference keynotes, in presentations, because they gave it that dimension, right?

Some of it is just practice, to just speak tactically. For those of you listening, think about a little baby step, you can take, just drop in a little anecdote. It could be really brief. It doesn't need to be a big fleshed out story. I once described how, as a teacher, I taught high school and just had a crazy situation. I was a coach in the afternoons and driving these kids and I was totally stressed out, a new teacher. I don't know, I was like 22, and I shared this story of how I began a practice of offering food. This was way before COVID, and way before we thought about such things, but we literally started passing an apple around, because I felt funny. I was just eating it alone and it created this kind of little community in the van, with the kids on the team.

I told a version of that, it was actually a couple minutes long, and then I tied it with the work of the organization and said, "That's what we are doing. We are creating this community, these people who take care of each other, and this culture of generosity. So that is this a personal example of how I brought something in from my crazy days teaching high school to say, This is what the work is about. This everyday stuff of our

lives is connected to this mission.” And it seemed to really resonate. That gave me fuel for the journey to include more personal anecdotes and I have lots of crazy anecdotes and failures and adventures. So I'm on the journey. I still have more to learn, myself.

**Doug:** As do we all. But you bring up a really interesting point though, because when you start telling a story for a specific purpose, like for example, trying to advance the work of an organization, you're not limited to stories just in that context. You can bring stories from many years ago or yesterday, or you can bring in stories, and then make them connect, a that's part of how you get to a relatability, isn't it?

**Sophie:** Yes, it is. And then knowing who I am and what drew me to the work. One nonprofit I started unwittingly as a volunteer. And then I'm executive director before I know it in a few years. So that's a warning to you all in your volunteer endeavors, you just don't know where it'll lead.

**Doug:** Well, the other thing that occurs to me, that what you're doing when you share these stories is, you're establishing credibility for your audience. Your audience is hearing you and because you've shared parts of yourself that makes you more relatable, right? What we talked about earlier. So credibility has a huge part of telling the story, don't think?

**Sophie:** It does. I mean, credibility is in the eye of the beholder, so I think that has been true for me that people have just gotten to know me more and I think it builds trust to hear me as a real person in three dimensions. I also want to mention someone who has helped me think about this question that you're asking Doug. His name is Marshall Ganz. A friend of mine introduced me to his work. He talks about how important that personal story, that personal narrative is to political and social movements and how, without that we're not fully engaged in the work and we're able to move people more and inspire them and bring them into the community and the team and the effort, which is a long effort, by sharing some of that personal.

I recommend him and that credibility piece is in that I think, when people realize, “Wow, you played tackle football on an all-boys’ team when you were nine and were bullied? Like, wow, yeah, no wonder you get youth who've had some rough times. It's more than just saying I'm passionate about working with youth.

**Doug:** It makes it real for people because we're so jaded or suspect, with all of the prevalence of fake news, and the propaganda that we're all consuming on a daily basis, we're just now inherently suspect of stories. And so it's this ability to tell a story in a way that is relatable and, you know, show some conflict and has some resolution. That's

how we can let down our guard about suspicion around suspicion and really engage in the story.

**Sophie:** That's right, and I would add on that note, since I just mentioned the reference about tackle football, an all-boys' team back in the seventies, like I couldn't really make that up, could I? I mean, you know that's real.

**Doug:** Right.

**Sophie:** Think of, each of you who are listening, think about this story for you. That is one like, you wouldn't have made that up. That's just so you, and maybe then unique to you somewhat that has some of that specificity and detail. That's what we long for. That's what I long, if I could talk to all of you, that's what I would long to hear is those stories that are really personal about something that you experienced that isn't necessarily something I've experienced or that, "Oh, everybody's gone to the high school prom or something, but what was your prom? You know, or your first job? I want to know that the detail around that and how you felt."

We haven't talked a lot about emotion yet, but stories that capture how you feel, are gonna really connect with the listener, with the reader. So that getting into that detail, just going to that emotional territory that we were referencing earlier is so important. Thinking about the stories where you were super joyful or super confused, or your life was a mess and thinking what part of that might be a fit, what part might build credibility.

**Doug:** What part is most relatable to your audience that will get them to really walk in your shoes?

**Sophie:** Yeah, that's right. It's finding that freedom to know that the thing that could be eccentric and seems strange, might be very relatable. Don't be afraid of the stuff that's really unique and eccentric, if you have a hunch it's relatable.

**Doug:** What do you say to someone who says, "Oh, there's nothing interesting about me or my experience. I don't have a story to tell."

**Sophie:** Hmm, well first I would say, "You're not alone. I hear you," and be present with them because that's very real is a sense of, "Yeah, what have I got? I'm just, you know, a regular person." And then I might go so far as to share that's how it was for me when I was in my twenties. I mentioned that I learned my great grandmother had written all these amazing letters and I was writing poetry. That's what I had fallen in love with, in terms of my writing. I thought, "Yeah, I don't have any stories to tell. I have nothing to

write about, and look, here's this great grandmother who's lived this unbelievable adventure." So I would share that I very much had that experience. I didn't think I had any stories to tell.

And now I know better. I've had quite a few adventures and lots of stories, and it's just a matter of looking differently, like looking through a different lens. It might help them to hear what some of those were for me and what can constitute a story. I would also share that I know storytellers and writers who really keep a running list of stories, or maybe not whole stories, but anecdotes or pieces of the story and they just jot them down, kind of as they go through their days, that anything has potential to be a story. So I would ask all of you, "What's something that happened today, or maybe yesterday that had some sweetness to it? Maybe a connection with someone, or was a mishap, a little moment of disaster."

Maybe it was getting out of the house this morning, or maybe you don't leave your house for work, and so it was maybe some other little falling down moment of like, we all have. Think about that now. Take a moment and that's the beginning of a story that you could share with a friend later or share with your kid tonight, or a colleague at work, and help them know you better and give them that sort of detail. And that's what I would say to someone who said, "I don't have any stories."

Let's just say, "Well, let's look at the last few hours. We've got a story there."

**Doug:** Right. Like this morning I spilled a hanging plant for the third time. And the first time I might've lost my temper, but I managed to keep it together on the third time, because I figured this is not just a part of my life and this is going to happen every morning for a while.

**Sophie:** I love that and what a great way to start the day.

**Doug:** So, what is it you like best about helping individuals find their stories? Why do you do this? Why, what makes you excited about it?

**Sophie:** Well, a lot of it is because it's just a joy to step into other people's worlds, and walk with them while they're uncovering their own stories. And reliving their own stories. Sometimes it's things they haven't even thought about before or thought about in a long time. I love accompanying people on that journey, that work of uncovering and exploring one's own stories is transformative. I get to witness people and support people becoming more of who they are and feeling more alive because they've discovered these stories, both in the telling and the sharing of the story. There's a connection built between us, but also that they're understanding their past in new ways,



and they're crafting something to share out with the larger world and bring their mission forward.

**Doug:** They're being a change agent just by being themselves.

**Sophie:** Yes. And so, it's like I'm in the wings, you know, and they're preparing to be on the stage as the actor, and I am just saying, "Keep going, it's beautiful. You're, you're making a world for me that I can step into with your words. Tell me more words like this. Tell me more about that moment. "I want to share with you," I say sometimes as I'm working with people, "I want to share with you, that's the part where my heart was in my throat." And they say, "Oh, it was?" And I say, "Yes, that moment." And then they can dwell in that. That's the fun of it. They can give that to other people exactly and motivate and inspire people who are making change, people who are devoted to creating the world we want to live in.

**Doug:** All right, I'm going to give you a chance to tell a story of your own, what is a crazy expectation someone's had with you about telling a story or some just kind of wacky anecdote about storytelling?

**Sophie:** So it's a few minutes before I am about to speak to an audience of about 200 people. Not only am I about to speak, but then I'm going to introduce a best-selling author, the featured speaker at this gala. And my boss freaks out and saying, "This whole event," which is underway, "is way too ambitious. We are out of our league here." At that point, my brain started melting down because they were so charged. I don't really remember what they said next or how they got more specific about the way we were overreaching or being too ambitious. I just kept thinking, "I am about to speak to 200 people and my boss is freaking out and telling me that this event is like, totally ill-conceived."

And I just said, "I hear you. And all will be well." I'm just thinking like we're in this event and we are doing it and yes, we're reaching, and I've got 200 people and they're taking their seats right now and all will be well. I just kept nodding and just thinking, "I hope we can wrap this conversation up, so I can try to remember what I was going to say to all these people who are such great supporters for this nonprofit." And then also remember how to introduce this amazing author.

**Doug:** And I assume you pulled it all together and did a brilliant job.

**Sophie:** Well, I did just fine. I don't think I was fully present that day, so that would be, I guess the takeaway, is it's hard to be fully present and embodied after you've had your boss freaking out. But I think I did just fine.

**Doug:** Well, you're far more patient than I, because I probably would've said, "Now? This is when you're saying this to me? Go away."

**Sophie:** Well, that's the thing, a week before, it would have been okay, even the day before we could have made a few course corrections, but not while the people are taking their seats. That was, yeah. That was memorable. That's a story.

**Doug:** It is. It is. All right. So how- thank you. Thank you for being here. How can people find you?

**Sophie:** They can find me by reaching out by email. It's just my first initial, S for Sophie, Wadsworth, O-N-E at Gmail. And I'm also on LinkedIn.

**Doug:** Great. We'll get that URL and put those in the show notes too. Thank you for this time. I've enjoyed it. It's great to talk to you. I love talking about storytelling and I love talking to someone that has a passion for it like yours.

**Sophie:** Doug, can I ask a quick question before we sign off?

**Doug:** Of course.

**Sophie:** Having talked a bit about storytelling and I've shared a bit about how I work with people, can you tell me about how you work with folks and how this fits with the work that you do?

**Doug:** Sure, sure. We help folks really step back and focus or refocus on what it is they're doing in this moment, because a lot of times organizations lose, they kind of drift in their focus, and we help them step back and think about, "Okay, is this what we should be doing right now? What is it we're doing right now? Is it what we do best and is needed most?"

So we help them figure that out and then we give them the ways, the framework in which to talk about that. So, here are the three to four ways that we help so-and-so do such and such. And then within those three or four ways is where the stories come in and that's the service proof points for the assertions the organization is making about who they are and why what they do matters.

**Sophie:** Wonderful. It's great work. Thanks again for having me, Doug.

**Doug:** We're very lucky to do what we do, aren't we?

**Sophie:** Yes, we are. Very blessed.

**Doug:** All right. Thanks and have a great day.

**Sophie:** You too.

*You can view this episode and learn more about Sophie Wadsworth's coaching and consulting services at: [sophiewadsworth.com](http://sophiewadsworth.com)*