



**Norma Johnson:** I have a meeting of intentions. Uh, one is to touch the heart. The other is to encourage feeling. And another is to not do harm, because to me, anything we resolve has to have a connection to love.

**Sam Fuqua:** That's Norma Johnson, and this is Well, That Went Sideways! A podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy, respectful communication. We present a diversity of ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds. On this episode, we talk with Norma Johnson about how she uses creativity and art to respond to conflict and to promote dialogue. She is a poet and writer, a teacher, a healer, performer, facilitator, and consultant, and Norma Johnson is also a member of the production team here at the Sideways Podcast.

I'm Sam Fuqua, co-host of the program, and I'm so happy to be joined for this episode by two other members of the Sideways team, folks you haven't heard on the program yet, but who have been part of making this podcast happen. Mary Zinn is our co-host for this episode. Hi Mary.

**Mary Zinn:** Hi Sam. Glad to be with you today.

**Sam Fuqua:** Great to have you here. And as our featured guest and interviewee, another member of the Sideways team, Norma Johnson. Hi Norma.

**Norma Johnson:** Hi Sam. Hi Mary. This is great. So glad we're doing this.

**Sam Fuqua:** We really are looking forward to talking to you about your work, Norma, and, you know, your bio includes, uh, so many different hats that you wear. Poet, writer, performer, teacher, facilitator, healer. There's probably a few others that I'm leaving out. Uh, could we start by just asking you to talk a little bit about how all those different things come together for you, and how it connects to, to your work with this program?

**Norma Johnson:** Sure. At the very foundation for me, uh, is, uh, creativity. And I've been involved in performing arts forever. You know, I was the, the kid that, um, made up a play and gave everybody parts and directed and made the costumes and just did everything like that, you know, when I was growing up, and, and then on into the professional life. The arts, I think, are at my soul, really, because it's taught me that we can express aspects of humanity that often aren't even allowed in the normal societal framework. We can touch hearts. We can deliver messages. And we have a lot of fun doing it. And the arts in general, all the arts, have that kind of aspect. It's a, it's a very special part of being human is creating in those ways. So that's always intrigued me and always been a part of what I do. So then everything else I do has to have a lean of, of creativity, and that's generally what takes me in the different directions that I go, and which ultimately led me here where there's a, a diversity of creativity in resolving conflict.

**Mary Zinn:** Well, we certainly do hope, Norma, that all of our guests bring some information about getting along, and when things go sideways, especially. So we are so glad you're here with us today and sharing your creativity with our audience. I appreciate you being here. And what inspires you, Norma, to create something new? What does that feel like when that happens?

**Norma Johnson:** Oh, it's always as a result of life. Uh, something I experienced either, um, as a, an event, a life event, or something I saw or heard, something I was witness to, and it's also an accumulation of things.



Sometimes my writings come after a long time of wanting to express about something, and I have to just leave it until it's got its own momentum and, and shows itself to me. For instance, during all the, uh, the murders, the police murders of unarmed black men, women, and children, that came to the forefront of our nation, uh, which has been going on forever and still does, but the precipice that that took me to finally some words came 'cause it, it, uh, no, we kind of look at the, the, the year of 2020 as a huge accumulation, a huge outpouring from everybody in all different kinds of ways for and against, but it's been happening so long that it's been building inside of me, and I wanted words, there were, so much wanted words, but they weren't coming. And then one day they just came and it was only a few words. I was kind of surprised. But it said what I needed to say, so I'll share that one with you. It's called, *I Can't Believe it*. In response to the series of police murders of black unarmed men, women and youth, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Eric Garner, Philando Castile, George Floyd, Brianna Taylor, and, and, and, and... may you rest in peace. I can't believe it! That's what some of my white friends are saying. But what if you did? Would that begin to change things or might it change you? Your disbelief cost us.

**Mary Zinn:** Norma. That is so powerful. Thank you for sharing both how ideas come to you and when the words do come, how beautifully you are able to put it together so it resonates with a broad audience. And when you'll perform something like this beautiful poem that you just performed, what are you hoping people will take away? I heard, I heard you say you're hoping it will change them. And can you put into words what you hope people take away from an experience like this?

**Norma Johnson:** Um, it's not up to me to change anybody. That's something we each have to do ourselves. So I don't get involved in that part actually. Even though I do diversity work, that's not my intention. But it is my intention, one, to touch hearts. That's, I think, my primary, uh, intention because we live in a society, I mean, when we, when we talk about things like white supremacy, some of the things we don't talk about, about it, is that it's forced us to shut down our humanity. That's how it thrives. And so touching hearts is a big deal because then we have a different way to feel about something, and then we have a different way to think about something. So that's really all I seek to do is to, um, is to touch and to see what that brings.

**Sam Fuqua:** If you think, as I sometimes do, of art, as a form of communication, is it a one way communication? The artist puts it out there and people receive what they can from it, or is there a way for, in your experience, for art to create dialogue?

**Norma Johnson:** Both, Sam. I mean, when I first, actually that poem and, and, uh, a large amount of poems that I do, uh, are all part of a collection I call *Poems For My White Friends*. And each of those poems came out of, um, incidents, if you will, either that I experienced myself or that, um, I've been witnessing. And, I can't speak for artists in general because art is so personal, but once we decide to share it, then something else comes with it. And I, I'm always learning what that is, to tell you the truth. I've learned to trust it. Uh, in the beginning when these poems first started coming, I, I did, I, I trusted it to an extent, but was apprehensive about sharing, 'cause this was, you know, like a decade ago, and these conversations were not at the forefront. And when I did share it, the reactions were, ooh, kind of very, kind of dramatic, actually. So, um, I've had to trust that my intentions being fulfilled just through the writing of it, and then what happens to it after that, I can't say. Every, it's kind of like, um, raising a child, I think, and then, um, birthing a child, you know, and you raise it and then once you put it out in the, once they go out into the world, it, it's their life. That's kind of the way I see my poems.

**Sam Fuqua:** Well, right, and you can't know every reader of your poetry because it's just not possible. But, but I am interested in something you said a second ago about the reaction you got, and I'm assuming this, maybe you're referring to white friends who, who read your work and, did that open a conversation, a



conversation that maybe was too difficult for them to have without it, or did it shut them down? That's another possibility I suppose, because we're uncomfortable talking about, uh, a variety of issues, including racial issues, in many cases.

**Norma Johnson:** Oh yeah. Um, yeah, and it continues to happen with my work. I've gotten accustomed to it, actually. Um, but that took some time for me to be okay with the types of responses that they bring. And, in the beginning when I started sharing this, and I, and I, it's interesting too because I'm learning along the way as well. So I've learned, you know, especially through doing diversity work that, uh, that people have, uh, quite a journey with this. White people, in particular, have quite a journey with something that I'm intimate with. And so, to allow for that. But the types of reactions that I got in the beginning were sh, kind of shock, and I think, I can only suppose, but I think that some of what that had to do with was my white friends living in their white world and thinking that my world was like theirs because they were comfortable with me, because we hung out, and because I know how to code switch because I, I move around in the white world. And I think it was actually a shock to learn that, oh, you mean you're black? You mean these things? Wow. Um, because they don't associate me, I think they associated me with the kinds of images that have been promoted about who black people are. The criminality and you know, just that, that we're the bad ones. Um, and that's, you know, that's been portrayed throughout our lives in so many ways, and that's why people are afraid of us.

So I think they had to navigate that because I, I have to admit I hadn't been talking about it, you know, because it reaps too much stuff that I have to deal with then. And so I think the poetry came as a result of all of those things. That I didn't wanna really get into these conversations with my white friends because I know that they just don't know so much. And then, and then I end up either, um, having to be some kind of teacher, or having to deal with all the, the stuff that I deal with every day. And so, in a lot of ways this collection of poems for my white friends really came from, from those premises. It was a way to speak that was succinct and that came through in way more ways than I think I know how to articulate in just a conversation where I'm still navigating whiteness.

**Mary Zinn:** Thank you, Norma. That's, um, it is perhaps not alright for white people to expect people of color to educate us about their experience. And at the same time, having seen you perform and having had your story told through these beautiful poems, it does inform us. And so I can relate to what you were saying about wanting to get the information to people who have grown up in white bubbles, and yet not have to be their teacher. So it's a very passionate and powerful way for people to get information. And when you use the word shocking, it does feel shocking and surprising that I didn't know so much of person of color, a black person's experience. And it's your story. So I, I would ask you to talk a little bit about how important storytelling is, sharing experiences that other people don't know about.

**Norma Johnson:** Yeah. Whew. You know, the more, the more I do around story, the, the deeper it gets for me. Just yesterday, um, I was facilitating, um, about implicit bias and stereotypes, and we talked about the brain, you know, how it works. And, uh, the brain's a lot to keep up with because it just goes. And, um, our conscious level is probably pretty minimal compared to the unconscious level, and that's fine. It's kind of like a computer in a lot of ways. What's downloaded into it is now its database, and so that's, it uses that database to perform all the other functions. So it's kind of like in the, it's in the air. And the fascinating part to me is that for whatever reasons, it seems like humans create stories around everything. It's almost like it's our form of validation for what we're seeing or witnessing or experiencing. We put it to story. It, that's, that's how you know, you hear about, uh, you know, three people all witness the same thing, you know, an accident or an incident in a family or whatever, and everybody's got a different story about, how does that happen? The incident is just what it is, but it's almost like it doesn't exist until we put a story to it. So our



storytelling is phenomenal. It's phenomenal. And I mean, if you look at the origins of, uh, people's origin stories globally, everybody's got 'em because people create stories around, what's around them, what they see, what they experience, how they engage with each other. So I think that's at the, the core of story for me.

I'm fascinated by how we story. I find that, uh, you know, I have a particular lean into it. And it has to do with all of those parts of me that, that I bring to it, you know, everything from being a healer to, uh, performing, the performance arts. Um, which is another thing. I mean, I, growing up in performing arts, that's everything it is, is stories. We're tasked with telling a story in the most phenomenal way we can. Every single department, no matter what. I used to be a costumer, and so, you know, everything we do about that costume has to do with supporting the characters to support the story. So it's always intrigued me, and I think that when we talk about things like change, if we wanna change anything, what we have to change is the narrative. That's how things change. We change with our own narratives as if, if they change, we change.

**Mary Zinn:** And you talked about shutting down our humanity, Norma. So if we are able to change our narratives, are people able to open up their humanity, and what would that look like?

**Norma Johnson:** Well, it depends on what they're changing it to. I think just the nature of being, I think we're evolving all the time, so there's always some kind of change going on. It could be slight or subtle. It could be dramatic. And I think you, probably all people have experienced that kind, that, a range of that. But what it looks like is only what we decide it looks like. Sometimes I think we're, we get stuck in problems. When I look at history and when, uh, shifts have happened, change has happened, whether it's something we like or something we don't like, I, I feel it's because of the momentum of a narrative. Of a story. And I think, when I talk, when I think about diversity, I think about there's a, there's a full spectrum of that and seems like it probably always have been, has been, and maybe there always will be. So I think it's worth considering what we want things to change to, because then that starts a whole nother story.

**Sam Fuqua:** Norma, do you have another poem you'd like to share with us?

**Norma Johnson:** Yeah, I do have one I'll share with you and, uh, it's called *The Secret*.

*Shhhhhh! We're not supposed to say it. It's a secret. A code. A warning.  
It's a happenstance of birth and a deciding factor in the lay of the land.  
It generates discomfort, and tension, and confusion.  
So the preferred default is not to mention it at all.  
One has to lay low and cautiously calculate how to bring it up and what the stakes will be for having  
it enter the protected space.  
It's a long shot, a gamble, a disruptor of glass ceilings and houses.  
It's as clear as day yet obscured in the darkness.  
Throats tighten, lips purse, heartbeat rises because it may change everything.  
How we speak to each other, how we enter each other's space, how we perceive ourselves, and the  
thoughts that direct our lives.  
It's a trembling idea, waiting to be acknowledged, to be brought out into the open, revealed.  
It's a dare that can be taken as a threat.  
Unnerving, hostile.  
Not everyone can tolerate it.  
It takes courage and a willingness to change for the better, what has been held in pain.*



*It's simple, really, but encompassing a complicated past that holds the space to this day.*

*Shhhhhh, we're not supposed to say it. It's a secret. A code. A warning.*

*It's a happenstance of birth and a deciding factor in the lay of the land.*

*A disruptor of glass ceilings and houses.*

*It's simple, really, when we dare to say, WHITE.*

**Mary Zinn:** Thank you again, Norma, for holding us on the edge of our seats, at the same time, letting our minds think about what the secret might be and then having the answer at the end not be an answer, but really a question of what does this mean in my life and how do I relate to that? Did you know you would be a disruptor?

**Norma Johnson:** Maybe a little bit because I, I have a meeting of intentions. Uh, one is to touch the heart. The other is to encourage feeling. And another is to not do harm, because to me, anything we resolve has to have a connection to love. And I'm not out to punish people or even to put people on the spot, although I probably do that, but, um, it's more to just bring awareness. So, um, so I've crafted my own form of disruption and it has to do with storytelling. It has to do with, uh, history, and it has to do with, um, today.

**Mary Zinn:** Norma, you talked about people creating their own stories, and I would like to know when things go sideways and people do create their own stories, how can they manage that? What's your hope that people would know about storytelling? Their own storytelling.

**Norma Johnson:** What I've come to know, just within my own body that, uh, telling my stories has been a tremendous healing piece, uh, for me, and, um, also it's informed other people. We have so many assumptions about, um, who we are, you know, with each other. And I think really at the source of, uh, conflict resolution, mediation, uh, it relies tremendously on people's stories. Once that's shared, we have a whole nother way to take people in that really includes so much more of their humanity. Because up until that point, up until we have people's stories, they are who we assume they are. And um, and we're using our own filter to make those assumptions. And that's based on our experience, our lives, our stories. The part I love about the concept of diversity is, uh, all the stories that we bring. That's what makes us, not only the human part of us, but that's what makes us community. That's what gives us an exchange of that humanity. And I think it empowers us. It empowers, especially the one who's sharing their story. And I think it's a tremendous asset for resolving things because so much of conflict is about assumptions, often inaccurate, um, or incomplete. You know, uh, there's a, amazing Nigerian storyteller, author, Chimamanda Adichie, and, uh, she has a very famous piece, uh, on Ted Talk called *The Danger of a Single Story*. And, um, it's got millions and millions and millions of hits, and there's a reason for that.

**Sam Fuqua:** Norma, it's been such a treat for me to talk with you, a member of the Sideways team, who hasn't been on the program yet. And Mary, to have you co-host, another team member. This has been really great. Uh, what do you hope that people get from, from listening to this program? From listening to what we hope are diverse stories and perspectives?

**Norma Johnson:** Well, I think first of all, in, in all the, the different wonderful stories that we share with people, I think finding ones that they resonate with, ones that they're curious about, ones that they've never even heard of. I think all of that is about enriching our, our human experience. Um, reaching across the boundaries of, uh, the bubbles that we live in, to learn more about each other and to help us see different perspectives so we have better tools to resolve those conflicts in our lives.



**Sam Fuqua:** Well, as we come near the end of the program, do you have one more poem you can share with us?

**Norma Johnson:** I do, Sam. And this one, uh, you know, all my poems do come out of, uh, situations and things that happen, and to resolve them for myself on the inside. First of all, for my own healing, but also, uh, to help extend another understanding of maybe what took place or, um, the kind of effect that situation or statement might have had. I create these pieces, and this one is really a reminder of how incredible each of us is and that when there's not inclusivity or when there's not room for us to, uh, bring our full selves, then we all miss out. So this one is called *Best Parts*.

*I am so vast, so luminous, so incredibly expansive that I am astounded on a continual basis that I can even fit into this body. Into this mind. Into this room.*

*The vastness of my lusciousness extends before me like a red carpet welcoming the world to perch upon my wings, to take flight to soar, to celebrate this gift we have of each other.*

*And yet when I come into those rooms where there is no space for my vastness, my luminosity, my lusciousness, where my wings fold in, and my breath is left behind me.*

*The best parts of me are left out, and they didn't even notice that I was not there.*

**Sam Fuqua:** *Best Parts*, a poem written and performed by Norma Johnson.

**Mary Zinn:** Norma, I want to say thank you to you for being our guest on the podcast today and for giving us something to think about our humanity and the way we see things, and knowing how important other people's stories are to our future. Thank you.

**Norma Johnson:** Thank you, Mary. Thank you, Sam. This has been great. A little turn of tables being on the show, but I loved it. Thank you so much for inviting me.

**Sam Fuqua:** Poet, teacher, healer, performer, facilitator, and consultant, Norma Johnson. You can find out more about her work at [allinspirit.com](http://allinspirit.com). That website, again, is [allinspirit.com](http://allinspirit.com). And she's also a member of the production team here at Well, That Went Sideways!

Thanks for listening to our podcast. We produce new episodes twice a month. You can find them wherever you get your podcasts, and on our website, [sidewayspod.org](http://sidewayspod.org). We also have information on our guests and links to more conflict resolution resources at the website. That's [sidewayspod.org](http://sidewayspod.org). Our program is produced by Mary Zinn, Jes Rau, Norma Johnson, Alexis Miles, and me, Sam Fuqua. Our theme music is by Mike Stewart. And this podcast is a partnership with the Conflict Center, a Denver-based nonprofit that provides practical skills and training for addressing everyday conflicts. Find out more at [conflictcenter.org](http://conflictcenter.org).